



TRAVEL 2015

BY GEORGE KEEGAN



HOTELS WITH CHARACTER

This is the time of year to plan a Spring/Easter break and it is most important to ensure good accommodation. Writing this column I have been lucky enough to experience many different types of hotels and most have been impressive and excellent. It is important to point out that a large number of establishments whether family owned or part of a chain cannot be faulted for comfort, excellent facilities, especially when travelling with children, plus good food. However occasionally it's nice to discover places that have real character.

TAKE 9 Hotels At Top Holiday Destinations (in alphabetical order). All highly recommended.

ANTOINE HOTEL LES SABLES d'OLONNE - FRANCE

The Antoine hotel can be found on a narrow one-way street in the pretty seaside town of Les Sables d'Olonne in the Western Loire. Small and family run with lots of character it is just 150m from either port or beach. Owners Isabelle & Philippe Robin ensure guests are made comfortable and welcome. When the hotel is full the option is given to stay at a small villa with just 8 rooms further down the street, which can also be recommended. www.antoinehotel.com

BIO TAGUNGSHOTEL WICHERNHAUS - GERMANY

Very different from most modern hotels and stands out because of its simplicity and location. Situated in a peaceful rural setting surrounded by meadows and woodland just 20km from the picturesque town of Greifswald (birth place of famous Germany painter Caspar David Friedrich). No frills here but a very pleasant 3* hotel with 23 cheerful, spotlessly clean, bedrooms. Food is organic with a diet menu on request. Seating is in the dining room or outside terrace. Bicycles available to rent. www.tagungshotel-wichernhaus.de

ENNISKILLEN HOTEL - ENNISKILLEN

A warm welcome awaits guests at this excellent modern hotel within walking distance of the town centre. It is also ideal for theatre enthusiasts because the impressive Ardhoven Theatre is just a 10 minute walk away, and for golfers there is a course within 3km. The Enniskillen has 35 bedrooms and guests can choose from standard, superior, family rooms or the Bronte Suite. This hotel succeeds in being different from most modern hotels both in décor and ambiance. Meals are served in the slightly more formal surroundings of Becketts restaurant while the busy and popular Wildes bar/restaurant serves lunches and snacks. Be sure to check out also the whisky tasting room. During summer months a combined 4 nights break staying here and at the sister property, award winning Lusty Beg Island Resort can be booked. Offers and bookings at info@enniskillenhotel.com

FITZPATRICK CASTLE HOTEL - KILLINEY

From the outside this hotel could look a little misleading but on entering the front door you will find a charming family owned 4* Superior Hotel situated on Killiney Hill with wonderful panoramic views of Dublin Bay. The original house dates from the mid 1700s and current owners the Fitzpatrick family acquired the property in the 1970s. Guests enjoy modern comforts in an opulent but traditional setting. The log burning open fire in the reception area set the tone on my arrival and friendly staff ensured relaxation throughout my stay. There are 113 comfortable bedrooms individually designed and furnished and the décor in all areas of the hotel constantly surprises. The Fitzpatrick Castle Hotel has excellent family packages and during autumn time special Golden Years rates are available. Bookings www.fitzpatrickcastle.com

KIRROUGHTREE HOTEL - SCOTLAND

Just on the south side of Belfast to Cairnryan and head for Newton Stewart to find this beautiful Country House Hotel with 17 luxurious bedrooms, a grand staircase, oak panelled

rooms, period oil paintings throughout and comfy sofas and armchairs to sit in and chill out. All rooms have large sitting areas and tea/coffee is produced on arrival. The Kirroughtree is one of a number of hotels in the area owned by the McMillan family. Check www.mcmillanhotels.co.uk.

KNOCKRANNY HOUSE HOTEL - WESPORT

This really excellent privately owned hotel has been recommended many times in this column, so further description is not needed. Guests staying here are guaranteed exceptional facilities, wonderful ambiance, friendly staff and food prepared by an award winning chef. Knockranny House Hotel also happens to be situated on the outskirts of Westport – need I say more. There are currently several special Spring packages available including 2 B&B plus 1 dinner, 2 B&B evening meal & complimentary Spa treatment, or a week-end dinner plus B&B. Upgrades to a superior room can also be booked at a very reasonable charge. Contact info@khh.ie

PALAZZO di VARIGNANA RESORT & SPA - ITALY

This newly opened and excellent resort and Spa is a tranquil place ideal for switching off from the 'hurdy gurdy' of modern living. The beautifully landscaped parkland is set among olive trees and a rolling hillside. The complex has outdoor swimming pools of various sizes, children's play area and tracks around the grounds for walking or cycling. The two restaurants offer local and International cuisine. In summertime a Classical Music Festival takes place in the purpose built concert hall attracting guests and locals. The main building was formerly a typical Tuscan styled residence. Palazzo di Varignana is an impressive resort unlike many similar developments which are pretentious and little more than functional. Close by is the lovely city of Bologna and the fascinating medieval village of Dozza. Check www.palazzodivarignana.it

QUEENSBERRY HOTEL - ENGLAND

Located in the wonderful historic city of Bath in Russell Street close to the world famous Royal Crescent and a short walk from the city centre this small and superb boutique hotel was originally four Georgian

terrace buildings. Guests can become confused and sometimes unsure because of the maze of small passages and short staircases – all part of the fun staying here. The Queensberry has 29 individually designed and furnished bedrooms with a mix of original antiques and modern art adorning the walls. Opening on to the street is their acclaimed restaurant the 3* Olive Tree, where breakfast is served, (it is also open to non-residents for lunch and dinner). Owners Laurence & Helen Beere set out "determined that a stay at the Queensberry shouldn't feel like a night in another hotel. It should feel like a fabulous rest in a friend's very smart spare room". This they have achieved. Without doubt a hotel of real character and a place to completely relax. The

hotel offers 2 night breaks with complimentary bottle of Prosecco, breakfast and late check out. Charge for valet parking. Bookings www.thequeensberry.co.uk.

RELAIS MONCEAU - FRANCE

On a visit to Paris in 2013 I had the pleasure of staying in the 4* Hotel Relais Monceau in the 8th Arrondissement. Originally a 19th century town house now converted into a 51 bedroom hotel while retaining the ambiance of bygone days. There are all the modern amenities required for the 21st century mixed with colourful old fashioned tiled floors, an old style French lift, wooden interior shutters and a tiny garden. Popular with business people and holidaymakers. Some adjoining rooms ideal for guests

with young children. The Relais Monceau is 'very French' and very comfortable. Check www.relais-monceau.com

CUTTINGS

Springtime In France: When it comes to finding the perfect spring destination it is difficult to beat France. From scenic mountain resorts to a charming seaside retreat or a romantic visit to Paris this country has something to suit everyone. Here are a few suggestions;

Lake Annecy: This lake is considered the cleanest and purest in Europe and a perfect location for outdoor activities. The town itself is charming with lots to see and do. Known as the 'Venice of the Alps' because of the lovely canals winding their way through it.

Normandy: Easy to reach from Ireland a region with pleasant weather throughout the year. However visiting during springtime means avoiding the crowds and many festivals take place then, including the Tulip Festival in the grounds of the beautiful Chateau de Vendeuvre.

Loire Valley: One of my favourite areas to visit and known as the Garden of France. Holidaymakers interested in history will revel in seeing some of the 100 or so largest castles in the country dating back to the 15th century. At this time of year average high temperatures are 20c – perfect for exploring.

Travel options to France are many and varied. The following companies offer a direct service;

Flights – Aer Lingus, Ryanair, Air France, Cityjet.

By Sea – Stena Line, Irish Ferries, Brittany Ferries.

TOUR OPERATOR OFFERS

CaminoWays.Com add Irish Routes: CaminoWays.com is a cycling and walking holiday specialist company with a particular emphasis on the Camino de Santiago routes through France, Portugal and Spain. Now the company has launched a new website called IrelandWays.com focusing on both cycling and walking routes across this country, including the Wild Atlantic Way. Commenting, Roland Monsegu director of the company said "IrelandWays.com is the latest arrival to the CaminoWays.com family featuring some of the best walking trails across Ireland and the Wild Atlantic way - our team of specialists are available to talk to walking fans about it and our Camino de Santiago routes and the Camino to Rome". A 4 night holiday cycling along the Great Western Greenway costs from €475pps. Experts on routes organised by CaminoWays.com regularly hold free talks in major cities around Ireland but booking is essential as places may be limited. Information on Irish and overseas holiday options at www.caminoways.com

TOURISM NORTH

Irish Open Attracts Top Golfers: The 2015 Irish Open to be played at Royal County Down from 28th-31st May and hosted by the Rory Foundation is attracting a star studded field. Former World No1 and 23 times European Tour winner Lee Westwood is making a long awaited return to these shores to join reigning champion Mikko Ilonen, Rory McIlroy, Darren Clarke, Ernie Els and Sergio Garcia among others. Some 80,000 spectators are expected to attend this event which is supported by Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI). Tickets are available on www.irishopen.ie. Accommodation details on www.discovernorthernireland.com/irish-open-2015.

AIRSIDE UPDATES

Road shows To Encourage British To Use Dublin Airport: Dublin Airport and Aer Lingus recently joined forces to promote flying from Britain to North America through Dublin. The two companies are set to host roadshows in 9 major cities over the next couple of months highlighting the ease of transferring through the capital's airport. Currently Aer Lingus offer connecting services from 19 British airports to it's transatlantic network at Dublin airport with 7 North American destinations this summer. A major plus for the airport is the US pre-clearance facility enabling passengers to save a considerable amount of time on arrival in the USA.

New Aer Lingus CEO: The airline has appointed Stephen Kavanagh as CEO. Mr.Kavanagh joined Aer Lingus in 1988 and will take over the position from the current CEO and Executive Director Christoph Mueller who steps down at the end of this week.

CRUISE AND FERRY NEWS

Stena Easter Family Offers: Stena Line has launched an Easter offer giving Irish holidaymakers the chance to enjoy a family self-catering break (2 adults & up to 4 children) from €455 when booked by 9th March. T&C apply. The company also has 3, 4 and 7 night options to include return ferry travel with car from Dublin Port- Holyhead or Rosslare- Fishguard staying at a range of Haven Holiday Parks. Details from travel agents or www.stenaline.ie/havenoffers.



Dining room in Kirroughtree Hotel. Pic by G. Keegan



Queensberry Bath. Pic by G. Keegan