

Travel KILDARE

Ideal location for a

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

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TAKING my mother away for the weekend to Kildare was unforgettable in more ways than one.

After just a two-hour drive from Droimore, Co Down, to the K Club the home of last year's Ryder cup where Ulsterman Darren Clarke famously broke down in tears, mum and I reckoned we could soon get used to the creature comforts that surrounded us.

Our two-day trip had four purposes - to shop at Kildare Village, sightsee, to eat good food and most importantly relax.

By the end of our weekend break, hosted by Kildare Village, all these boxes had been ticked.

We arrived in Kildare on a Friday evening, thankfully avoiding the rush hour traffic. Once there we were met on arrival by some jovial portering staff who attempted to convince us that the skies above the hotel were haunted.

"Look, there's a ghost," one man said pointing to the sky, before Mum innocently added: "Maybe it's a UFO."

In reality it was two helicopters, circling around behind some clouds.

Mum and I were booked into an extremely comfortable twin suite with impressive views of the K Club's gardens and its expansive golf course.

After settling ourselves in we headed to a restaurant in the hotel's grounds which we were ferried to in a bus and shared with two people from Northern Ireland.

After the meal we had the good fortune to meet four young men from the Isle of Man in the carpark who escorted us back to the hotel and treated us to a nightcap in the bar.

The following morning after a hearty breakfast mum and I headed to Kildare Village, a shopping retail outlet just off the primary M7 route between Dublin and Cork. The perfect place to go in the run up to Christmas to do a spot of shopping, and ideally situated close to a number of popular tourist attractions.

After a light tapas style lunch we headed to the Irish National Stud, Japanese Gardens and St. Flachra's Garden where we were shown around by Frieda O'Connell, whose late father worked as a farmer there.

"The Irish National Stud is currently the only stud farm giving guided tours to the



PURE INDULGENCE: the luxury surroundings of the K Club

general public in Ireland. The two gardens, the horse museum, the restaurant and shopping facilities all add to its attraction," Frieda told us.

She said that approximately 3,500 tourists from Northern Ireland visit the place each year.

"Ulsterbus tours come down on a day trip. The ladies who come like the shopping and to walk around the gardens. In the summer we have a lot of families travelling down from the North."

Importantly mum and I noted that the Irish National Stud, the gardens, and horse museum were child and wheelchair friendly though it would be advisable for parents to keep a firm eye on their children given all the water features, and horses on site.

Interestingly Frieda also gave us an insight into how horse breeding takes place and we were given a tour of a covering shed where stallions go to woo their mares and so on. An expensive occupation sometimes costing more than €40,000 a time.

After our cultural tour, mum and I headed back to the K Club to get ready for what was to be the most glorious evening out at The

Village At Lyons. After arriving we were offered a drink in its beautifully designed bar area before being taken through to Café LaSerre situated in a unique Turner-designed conservatory. Mum opted for oysters, followed by the evening's special which was lobster linguine with bacon. She finished off her meal with fruit salad and sorbet.

I chose the same main course, but started with a crab, avocado, and tomato medley washed down with a glass or two of white wine and finally an Irish coffee.

We both agreed on our way back to the hotel that our evening at The Village At Lyons had been an artistic experience. Rustic sculptures, the most amazing ambience and mouth watering delicious food all added to the experience. As mum said "it was a feast on the eye and a feast on the palate." The service was also great - to the extent of them allowing us to watch the latter part of the Rugby World Cup final. They did this by removing a wooden panel in their bar area which disclosed a small flat screen tv. Once back at the K Club we had time for a nightcap with our newly acquired Manx



PERFECT LANDSCAPE: Japanese Garden

friends before retiring to our rooms.

The following morning after breakfast Mum and I decided to wander round the hotel and take a look at its famous collection of Jack B Yeats' paintings before chilling out in the K Club's award-winning KSpa. Mum managed several lengths of the pool but after such a hearty breakfast - fruit salad, smoked salmon, and scrambled eggs - I opted to relax in the jacuzzi.

After checking out of the hotel at midday we headed to historic Castletown House considered the most important example in Ireland of a Palladian mansion. Our tour guide showed us round the house, which is currently the Georgian Society's headquarters, leaving us feeling satisfied by what we'd seen and learnt. The grounds of the house, which are not landscaped, offer the public the ideal place to walk, and spend time with their family.

After popping into nearby Carton House, a spot of lunch mum and I headed back home to Northern Ireland, thoroughly satisfied by a truly relaxing weekend in Kildare.



REST AND RELAXATION: Kate and her mum Elisabeth

Must see attractions in Co Kildare

The K Club

The 5 red star resort was the centre of the golfing world last year when it hosted the 2006 Ryder Cup Matches on its legendary Palmer Course. The Smurfit, an inland links style course, offers serious golfers a choice of challenge. The luxurious hotel in historic Straffan House has lots to offer the non golfer, with its collection of Jack B Yeats paintings, well-stocked wine cellar and range of restaurants. The award-winning KSpa is available for residents to ease away golf-related muscle aches or to provide a welcome day of pampering. Tel: 00 353 (0) 16017200, www.kclub.ie

The Irish National Stud, Gardens and Horse Museum

See the top quality thoroughbreds, mares and foals for which County Kildare is famous on a fascinating guided tour of the Irish national stud farm. Then discover

the Japanese garden, created between 1906 and 1910 by Japanese gardener Tassa Elda and his son. An Irish garden was created in 1999 dedicated to the patron saint of gardeners, St Flachra. This water and rock garden has hand-crafted Waterford Crystal flowers embedded in the floor of its centre piece, a monastic cell. The refurbished Horse Museum brings the sport of kings to life. Tel: 00 353 (0) 45521251, www.irish-national-stud.ie

The Village At Lyons

This is celebrity chef Richard Corrigan's Irish project, a unique gastronomic destination created from the ruins of a canal-side village deep in the countryside and just a thirty minute drive from Dublin. The Mill restaurant, with executive chef Fred Cordonnier at the helm, offers fine dining in the restored mill house. With its

panelled walls, rich tapestries, and extraordinary fireplace, you would be forgiven for imagining that you're in a French chateau. Café LaSerre with its oyster bar and splendid Turner-designed conservatory, provides a more informal and relaxed setting, the glorious courtyard allows for open air dining in the summertime. Tel: 00353 (0) 16303500, www.villageatlyons.com

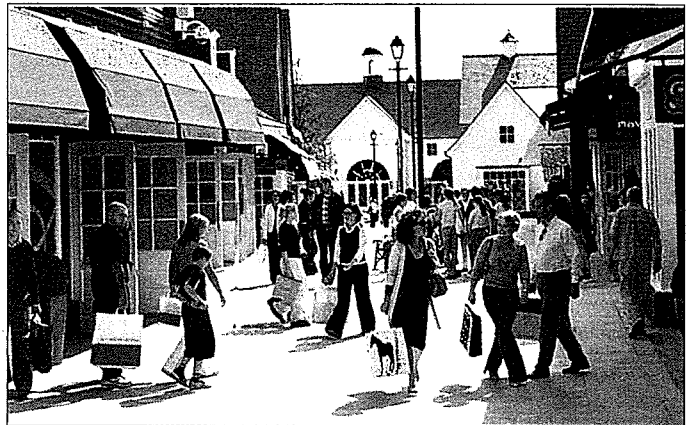
Castletown

The most important example in Ireland of a Palladian mansion, Castletown was begun in 1722 by William Conolly. Staring in its scale and situation, no expense was spared in the building and decoration of the house. The print room, decorated by Lady Louisa Conolly, is the only remaining example in Ireland. Just reopened following extensive refurbishment and conservation, the house is ready to show off its glory to visitors once more. Tel: 00353 (0) 16268252, www.visitkildare.ie

girls' weekend away



PASSION FOR HORSES: Elisabeth and Kate enjoy a visit to The Irish National Stud



RETAIL HEAVEN: Kildare Village is one of nine Chic Outlet Shopping Villages in Europe

Discover outlet shopping at its best at chic Village

SHE was so taken by the place that my mother was already planning a return trip to Kildare with her friends on the first morning of our weekend visit to the county.

No wonder really because as we sipped our coffees in Kildare Village, a shopping outlet offering collections in fashion and homeware at a fraction of their original price, we were both in retail heaven.

Situated just two hours from home in Co Down and on the primary M7 route between Dublin and Cork, Kildare Village is one of nine Chic Outlet Shopping Villages in Europe offering discounts of up to 60 per cent on the previous seasons collection.

The village opened in July 2006, but differs from the two shopping outlets in Northern Ireland in that its architecture is inspired by the design of the region's stud farms and it offers international brands that can be found nowhere else in Ireland.

It is also the only shopping outlet of its kind in the Republic. A tourism office on site also offers shoppers the opportunity to learn more

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about what Kildare has to offer, while there is an exhibition space and a number of other attractions which provide an alternative to shopping.

Eilish Rafferty, Tourism Manager of Kildare Retail Services Ltd said one of the company's main priorities is to make the shopping experience fit in with other tourist attractions in the area.

"What makes us different to other outlets is the shopping environment lends us to a really pleasant day out," she said.

The village is clean, well laid out with locally crafted sculptures adorning the place. One such piece is of Bran and Sceolan, two favourite hounds of the legendary Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhail.

"The children love them and are always climbing on them," Eilish said.

There is also a beautifully designed play ground for children.

Aside from the prestigious designer brands it offers for the home and wardrobe it is its beautiful architecture which makes Kildare Village so enticing.

Open seven-days-a-week its selection of designs include a minimum of 30 per cent and maximum of 60 per cent off at any given time. A few examples of its 42 brands are Café Coton, Calvin Klein Jeans, Calvin Klein underwear, Coast, Karen Millen, Kenneth Turner, Le Creuset, Molton Brown, Myla, Tog 24, LK Bennett, Orshof and Polo.

"Kildare Village is very much a domestic retail outlet. Irish people love shopping. Ireland has its own retail mecca. You don't have to go to the States - you can do your shopping right here," said Eilish.

My mother couldn't resist going into Petit Bateau where she left with four outfits for her grand-daughters. Meanwhile I was drawn into Reiss where I left with a snug coat to keep me warm in the autumn and winter.

Kildare village is the perfect place to add a bit of dimension to a visit to the county.

As Maureen Bergin, the senior Retail Manager at Kildare Village said:

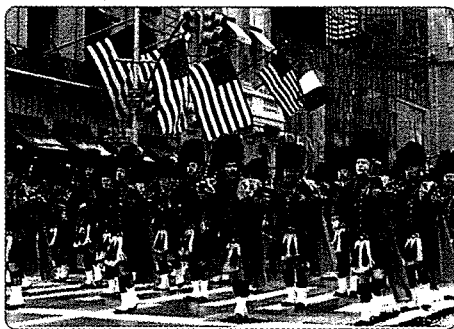
"It's a stone's throw away from other local attractions such as the Irish National Stud and Japanese Garden, St. Brigid's Cathedral and the Round Tower in Kildare."

While other attractions nearby include The Curragh, home of flat racing in Ireland, Punchestown Racecourse and the K Club, where we were lucky enough to stay.

During our visit to the village mum and I had a delicious lunch in L'Officina, a chic 120-seater restaurant conceived and owned by an Irish woman and her Italian husband. It was the perfect place to relax before heading off to the Irish National Stud, where we had the opportunity to explore the Japanese Gardens, St. Flachra's Garden and the Horse Museum.

■ Kildare Village is situated on the Nurney road outside Kildare Town. Visit www.kildarevillage.com or www.chicoutletshopping.com up or telephone +353 (0) 45 520501 for more information.

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