

Ireland's emerald green meadows and rolling pastures are studded with imposing historical castles – many of which were home to noble families centuries ago but have now been converted into world-class hotels. Amongst them, Ashford Castle Hotel stands out for its rich history, warm Irish hospitality and exclusive location by the spectacular River Cong.

Set against the backdrop of thick pine forests and mystical fjords, the Ashford Castle is located in the quiet countryside of County Mayo. Just three hours away from the hustle and bustle of Dublin, this region is best known for archaeological sites, Norman history and outstanding natural landscapes.

Meandering past endless rows of Redwoods and sprawling sparkling greens, my husband and I manoeuvred our vehicle across an ancient stone bridge before arriving at the stately Ashford Castle building. The last ebb of sun shimmered against the sparkling waters of the Lough Corrib, a lake that weaved its way around the castle complex. Upon entering the castle lobby, we were greeted by an air of warmth and elegance. In the company of good-humoured and genuinely friendly staff, we eased into the casual ambiance.

"Most of Ashford's staff has been around for several decades," T.J. Mulcahy, the hotel's Deputy General Manager shared. It was no wonder we felt like we were guests at a family home, despite the hotel's grandeur and sheer size. We were even greeted by our first names; a detail that is extremely rare in today's hospitality industry.

As we took a tour around the majestic edifice, we found ourselves walking back in time. Tracing its roots back to 700 years ago, Ashford Castle has withstood the test of time and now stands proudly to tell its story. Since its construction in 1228 by the de Burgos family, it has had its fair share of fame – it became the summer residence of the Guinness family in 1852 and was later on used as a film setting in John Ford's movie classic *The Quiet Man* in 1951.

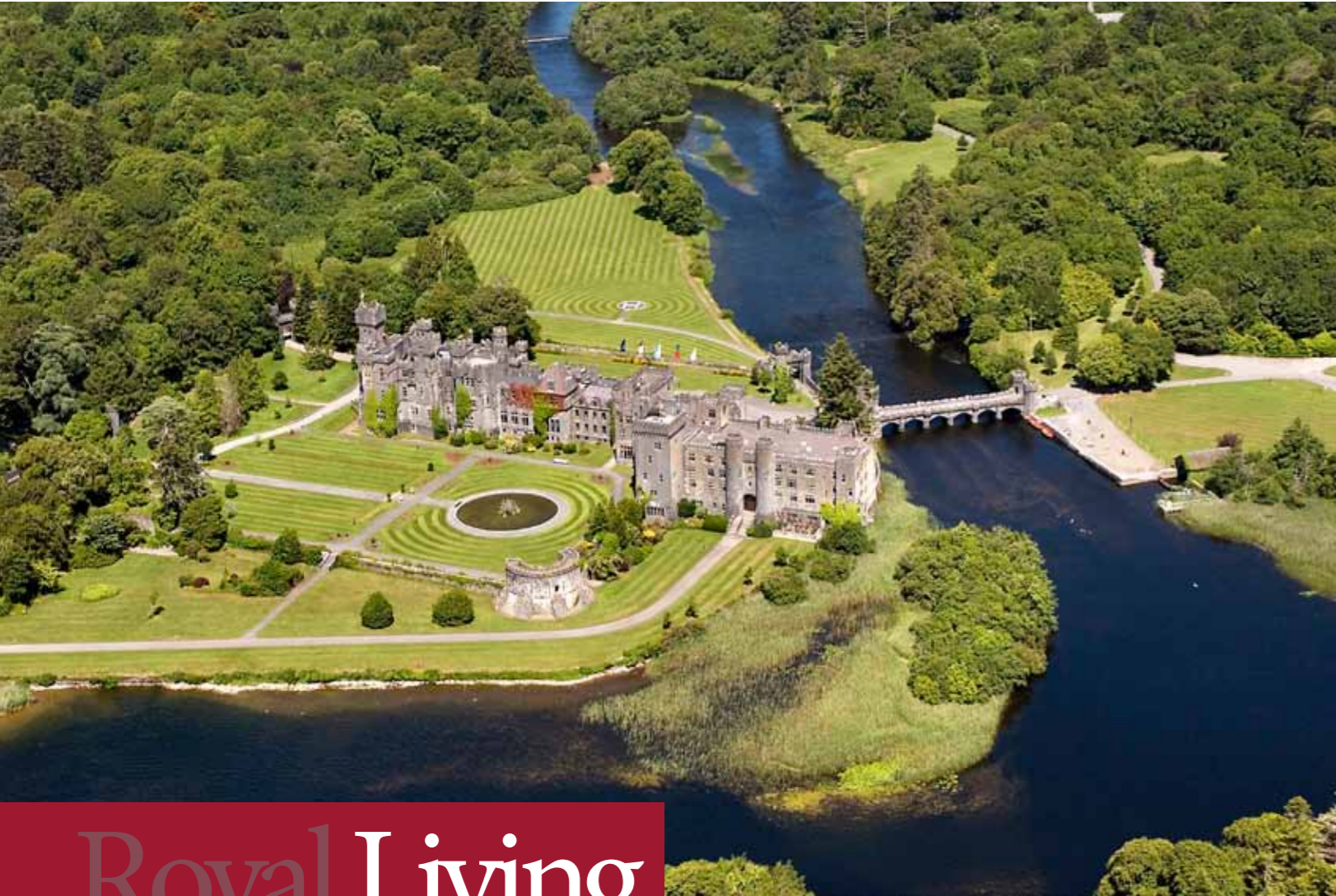
In the 1980s, the castle underwent a transformation to become one of the most luxurious resort hotels in the world. It comes as no surprise that its guest list includes many famous individuals such as Pierce Brosnan, Brad Pitt, John Wayne and former US President Ronald Reagan.

Ashford Castle's main lobby is tastefully embellished with framed artworks as well as paintings and furniture dating back to the 13th century. The intricately-crafted roof panelling and exquisite wooden furnishing are all original, dating back to the 1200s. Although the main castle building was extended in the 1700s and later in the 1900s, designs and layout were kept to fit the castle's overall aesthetics.

Royal Living

Follow the footsteps of ancient royalties and get a taste of their lavish lifestyle in the beautiful back country of Ireland.

By Nellie Huang



Royal Living



One of the most striking features of the hotel is the lavish Connaught Room. During its days as the Guinness family's summer residence, this room was where they used to dine. Decked out in elaborate chandeliers, invaluable portrait paintings and porcelain, the room features floor-to-ceiling windows that look out into the gardens and river. These days, it is used as a private function room for anniversaries and weddings thanks to its intimate setting and stunning location.

Back in my suite, I was astounded to find an inviting view of the River Cong before me. The living room and sleeping area are separated, with both rooms equipped with TV and plush furnishing. Spotting velvet upholstery, floral-patterned wall papers and carpeted flooring, the suite exudes a level of sophistication fit for royalty. Our bathroom, as big as a normal-sized hotel bedroom, is a classic example of indulgence. The hotel's best rooms are the State Rooms, featuring four-poster beds blanketed in burgundy beddings and white linen, with views of the expansive lake and fountain. After watching the sun set before us, it was time to sample the special dinner menu at the hotel's in-house restaurant, George V Dining Room. As a highly-acclaimed restaurant in Ireland, George V is one of the most visited culinary establishments in the area reputed

for its innovative flavours. Having recently nabbed the Best Chef Award 2010, resident chef Stephen Matz specializes in traditional Irish cuisine with a modern twist. First dish on the menu: crisp local lamb fillet dipped in sun-dried tomatoes. The dish was an explosion of flavours, with an immaculate combination of sweet, salty and roasted crunchiness. The second dish, chicken consommé, warmed my stomach in preparation for the main course. The protagonist emerged to exceed all of my expectations: the thick but tender beef medallion wrapped in a flurry of soft mashed potato and drenched in savoury gravy, was a magical concoction for the carnivorous. At the George V Dining Room, the experienced supervisor, Martin Gibbons shared with me his life story. "My grandfather worked for the Guinness family for over 50 years, so did my father." Having worked here for 36 years, Gibbon's passion for the hotel and its cuisine shines through the sparkles in his eyes. Like its staff, Ashford Castle Hotel is deeply rooted to its past and strives to make it blend with the future. The next day, we ventured through the castle's gardens to explore more of Ashford's 350-acre estate. Beyond the main hotel building and the gardens lie a sprawling Redwoods forest with three jogging trails and six scenic walking routes.

These routes vary in length and level of difficulty, with hikes lasting from 20 minutes to two hours. We joined the free guided walk offered by the hotel and wandered through the woods, soaking up nature while listening to the stories that had taken place here. Beside these walks, the hotel also offers free bicycle tours and boat rides on the River Cong. For golf enthusiast, Ashford's nine-hole course is complimentary to guests. The golf course was recently voted by Condé Nast Traveller's readers as the fourth best in Ireland. Other activities worth checking out are the Ireland's School of Falconry and the equestrian centre. While the sprawling castle grounds offers plenty of activities to keep us busy, there is no shortage of towns and places of interest nearby for the curious traveller. To get out and about, the Stone Age monument of Céide Fields and the stunning Aran Islands make excellent day-trip opportunities; while those seeking culture and urban life can head over to Galway, which is just a short drive away. Ashford proved to be an excellent base for us as we explored the region and the surrounding attractions of Ireland. With an excellent combination of history, culture and nature, Ashford Castle gave us a perfect travel experience and left us wanting for more.