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Maria Moynihan

Choose Cork for Christmas Shopping

Choose Cork for your Christmas shopping weekend and win a luxury break at the five star Hayfield Manor, writes Maria Moynihan.

How does a Cork Hotel win a Kerry woman's heart? Deliver a two- tiered silver platter of handmade chocolates and strawberries to her room and she's anybody's. But, in all honesty, Hayfield Manor had me hooked from the moment we pulled into the drive way. Decked in fairy lights, it was literally like something from a storybook. And the perfect location for a pre- Christmas, girlie shopping break is Cork City.

Owned by Joe and Margaret Scally, Hayfield is a multi award- winning, five- star establishment with bags of charm and character. Recent guests might have included Lionel Richie and Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe, but there is nothing stuffy or pretentious about this hotel. This is mostly to do with the exceptional level of service from check- in to check- out: friendly and personal, yet immediate and effective. While Hayfield Manor might boast 88 bedrooms and suites, it often feels like you are the most important guest. That's the mark of a good hotel.

Dinner at Orchids restaurant is an experience to be savoured. My appetite was whetted by sous chef Conor Mullane from Cobh, whose obvious enthusiasm for top- quality local produce and exciting flavours spills into the menu. "Hayfield is by far the best place to eat in Cork" he proclaims, without a whiff of PR. "People just relax into it and spend hours over dinner". Indeed, from the first sip of champagne to the last melt in your mouth chocolate, this is a genuine five-star, silver –service production. The duo of Irish Angus Beef- pan- fried 4 oz fillet and 4 oz Sirloin with shallot mousseline, wild mushrooms and root vegetables drizzled with red wine jus- was contemporary Irish cuisine at its best. But perhaps the nicest thing about dining at Hayfield is that it's exclusive without being excluding. Most people seemed to be treating themselves to a special evening. We all need to do that once in a while. Of course, if you wish to atone for your indulgence, you can always hit the hotel gym. However, I'd advise a leisurely swim in the indoor pool before a Champagne breakfast and short stroll into Cork City for some calorie- busting retail therapy. Blarney, Kinsale and Cobh are also within day- tripping distance, and Hayfields friendly and attentive staff, such as concierge Bart Bambury, is on hand with directions and recommendations. Not that you'll want to know the way home when it comes to checking out. It was quite a land to return to a cold apartment and nothing but a bowl of soup and a crust of bread. But, as my father would say: you have to come home to go away again. And whether it's for a girlie weekend, a romantic proposal or a special family get-together, Hayfield Manor is a boutique bolthole to return to again and again.