

Vale Life Magazine

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Pop to Cork

Cork is Ireland's second largest city and fiercely proud locals like to claim it is the real capital of Ireland.

Set on an island in the River Lee, Cork's streets expand up the river banks on either side to the ornate French gothic spires of St. Fin Barres Cathedral and the soaring tower of St. Anne's where you can ring the famous Shandon Bells

The city itself has a long and fascinating history, and many fine buildings line its streets from the imposing City Hall to its poignant 19th Century City Gaol. To say Cork is a pretty city wouldn't be accurate but it does have plenty of character. The city is currently receiving a makeover, with busy cranes dotted around- a good sign when you consider there's supposed to be a global slowdown. The streets are definitely in need of investment but already Cork has a good selection of small boutiques, gourmet food shops, top-notch restaurants and the obligatory pubs and clubs. Cork is changing for the better- you can feel the promise in the air.

Where we stayed

Just fifteen minutes from Cork International Airport and five minutes from the city centre is Hayfield Manor, Cork's first five star hotel. The popular description "the jewel in the crown" really is well deserved for this beautiful hotel. Set back from College Road, a few minutes from the campus, owners Joe and Margaret Scally have restored the Victorian house with meticulous care and attention.

The building's incarnation as a hotel is relatively recent. The owner's daughter, Anne-Marie, designed the interior in grand old country house style, no doubt influenced by the numerous Anglo-Irish mansions across the country, and has included some surprisingly modern and luxurious features. Each one of the 88 rooms is different. Antique furniture and artefacts acquired from various manor houses around Cork have been incorporated into large bedrooms with spacious marble bathrooms.

Our visit

We arrived very late (10.30pm is late for me) on our first night's stay but were greeted with genuine warmth by the staff. We were shown to our room by a lovely young man who enthused about the ethos behind the hotel. It wasn't just the lovely lilt of his accent that made us believe his patter, the hotel really is gorgeous. We found this attitude permeates through all the staff, including those who weren't native to Cork or the UK for that matter. Our room was huge, spotlessly clean and exuded class. There was everything we needed and more. Mr Roberts particularly appreciated the complimentary hand made chocolates, whilst I, even at that late hour (it was 11pm by the time), couldn't resist a glass of the complimentary house wine.

After we'd oh'd and ah'd at our room and en-suite bathroom, we decided on a nightcap. We had read in the fact sheet that there was a bar and headed downstairs to sample its delights. This was not the hotel bar that we've come to expect. You may know the type... four bar stools, and as many optics.

This was like walking into a trendy city bar on a Friday or Saturday night, fully staffed, fully loaded and packed to the rafters. A couple of cocktails later we felt completely de-stressed and made our way to our room. No sooner than our heads hit our pillows, we were fast asleep in a wonderfully comfortable bed.

The following morning, we made our way to breakfast in a room overlooking pretty gardens. I must say that I've never seen such a fully laden table of meats, cheeses, cereals, fruit and pastries in my life. That was before the full Irish. Once again the staff were attentive and friendly.

After the magnificent breakfast we made our way to reception to get information on places of interest. This is when we met Bart. What a character! There wasn't much about Cork this man didn't know. He even threw in a couple of ditties to send us on our way.

We then decided to pay Kinsale a visit. Known as the gastronomic capital of Ireland, this harbour town has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Cork. It's famed for its abundance of award-winning restaurants and stunning harbour views. We dined at the very popular Fishy Fishy restaurant in the harbour front and enjoyed seafood at its best.

A leisurely couple of hours later we hopped on the local bus back to the city for a spot of shopping before making our way to Hayfield Manor. The sea air had given us quite an appetite so we changed for the evening and made our way down to the bar for aperitifs.

We had booked a table at one of the Manors restaurants, Perrotts, the hotels exciting new contemporary styled bistro. Perrotts is very popular with the locals and we could see why as the food and service were impeccable. The Manor also has a more formal dining room, Orchids. Had our stay been longer, we would have very much liked to give it a try.

After a very impressive meal, we made our way back to the bar for a nightcap before retiring to our room for another night of restful sleep. On our last day, we decided to pay the relaxation suite a visit. After a dip in the indoor heated pool, we chatted happily to fellow guests in the steam room and continued the conversation in the outdoor Jacuzzi.

Hayfield Manor also benefits from The Beautique, beautifully designed by daughter Anne Marie, which has nine superb treatment rooms offering guests Elemis spa therapies.

Unfortunately, our time was up and we were truly sad to be leaving this little haven of tranquillity. We thoroughly enjoyed our stay and were impressed to hear that previous guests included such luminaries as Prince Andrew, Duke of York, Sir Henry Kissinger, the King of Malaysia, the prime Minister of Canada, Bono and family... the list goes on! We loved southern Ireland and will certainly return to explore as a family in the not too distant future.