

A CASTLE IN THE SKY...

...that's not just a fantasy. From fine dining to a picnic on a boat, this Irish castle has everything you need for medieval romance

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romoland Castle, the five-star luxury estate in Co Clare, doesn't do conventional check-in. As we sweep up the winding driveway, a concierge welcomes us, takes our car key and ushers us into

the drawing room for scones and dainty cups of tea. Some 20 minutes later, our twinkle-eyed

porter arrives and leads us up a twisty staircase into the old tower for a tour of the castle's State Suite. 'This is the room with the view,' he tells me.

A €20 million renovation in 2017 has transformed Dromoland from a mediocre castle into a luxury hotel. Medieval architecture doesn't get much better than this magnificent fortress, nestled in a quiet nook of the River Shannon.

It's aesthetically grand – think exposed stone walls, suits of armour standing sentry, gilt-framed

portraits and hanging tapestries along with acres of plush carpets, all played down by the supremely low-key, relaxed atmosphere.

A quiet wander through the meandering corridors into the gallery and on to the library and you'll find roaring fires, endless coffee table book offerings and guests snuggled into armchairs.

The staff remain the heart and soul of Dromoland – pleasant but not overbearing and

so inviting that it sometimes feel like you are in your friend's fancy home in the country.

The castle was once home to the O'Brien clan, who were descendants of King Brian Boru. William O'Brien is said to be the longest standing owner of the property passed down to him in the 18th century. Since his reign it's been bought by Bernard McDonough, who initiated the first refurbishment and today it's owned by a group of Irish-American investors who have enhanced its thriving US clientele.

There's 98 rooms, an octagonal-shaped library, a cocktail bar, drawing room, two restaurants, a spa and sport facilities aplenty, especially if you love golf or rowing.

The most expensive suite starts at €1,600 but goes the full medieval hog – four-poster bed, lavish swags and window seats. We stayed in a deluxe room, which was dark but richly atmospheric with plush carpet, velvet armchairs, and sweeping views of the grounds and lake.

Dinner at the castle is a fine affair – my other half forgot a dinner jacket and was kindly loaned one to eat in The Earl of Thomond restaurant, the hotel's award-winning eatery where the taster menu starts from €75 and boasts all locally sourced ingredients. Swish castles usually provide slim pickings for vegetarians so I was pleasantly surprised at a stand-alone menu – a notable exception from other luxury hotels.

Classic dishes are inventively thought out, such as roast monkfish with courgette and tomato confit or Irish beef served with ox cheek roulade, savoy cabbage and lentils. Portions are slight but hearty and filling.

We also shared a lunch in The Gallery – a wholesome crab sandwich (€18) washed down with coffee but there is an option of afternoon tea too which costs €29 per person and a generous albeit exclusive drinks menu that features everything from wine to signature cocktails and fancy teas.

No task ever seems too great for staff in the hotel and breakfast is the *crème de la crème*. Our waiter was bubbly and chipper, emerging with gluten-free options for muffins and an extra helping of fluffy scrambled eggs. If you indulge in anything, make it the pancakes that come drenched in raspberries, blueberries, maple syrup and chocolate chips (on request).

There is plenty to do around the grounds apart from dining – the reception can organise daily historical tours, falconry, archery, clay shooting and boat trips. The spa facilities are on the ground floor of the hotel while there is a pool in the golf and leisure club, a short walk away. We swapped a swim for a lounge in the outdoor hot tub, nestled in a secluded alcove of the spa – it's a much more serene atmosphere than the pool, which is largely used by locals and golf members.

The weather was unexpectedly mild for February – we had notions of having a picnic on one of the estate's rickety wooden boats and took the plunge after checking the forecast for the day.



GRACE BRAVING THE WEATHER ON THE RIVER AND, BELOW, ONE OF THE CASTLE'S BEDROOMS

Reception in the leisure club took you up with life jackets and blankets. We ended up savouring cheese, crackers and a flask of lukewarm tea, as the sun went down. It could have been a recipe for disaster but turned out to be special and intimate – our spontaneous highlight of the weekend.

For those in need of further cheer, there's pony-trekking trips in the estate's grand carriage along with a history tour of the estate – complete with flowers, champagne and a picnic hamper if you're celebrating. We caught a glimpse of a couple, from our towering state room windows, tangled up in early morning romance – always an uplifting sight to wake to.

Dromoland has a memorable charm. It's regal, yet down to earth with a certain relaxed pizzazz that makes people, even A-listers, feel right at home. Did I mention Russell Crowe, Jack Nicholson and Johnny Cash have all stayed here...



Prices at Dromoland Castle start from €450 per night peak season for the Queen Anne classic room, which includes a full Irish breakfast. See dromoland.ie

'IT FEELS LIKE YOU'RE IN YOUR FRIEND'S FANCY HOME'