

LIVING LIKE ROYALTY IN IRELAND'S COUNTY CLARE

Cliffs of Moher



Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards

Do you dream of living like a “royal” in an ancient and luxurious castle? Dromoland, just a few miles from Ireland’s Shannon Airport, will provide that experience and fills the bill for a Briefcase Excursion. Dromoland Castle offers the impeccable atmosphere and service of the five-star resort that it is, along with an atmosphere of relaxed friendliness and humor that are typical of the Irish people.

Dromoland Castle is a great Briefcase Excursion from places of business such as London or Dublin, or a get-away location before or after business in other parts of Europe. Located in the west of the country about midway between the north and south, it is a perfect base for exploring many parts of the Emerald Isle.

Beginning in 1014, for nine hundred years Dromoland was home to multiple generations of the O’Brien family. At least three houses have been built on the site including a castle in 1643 and another in the early 1700s. The present main building was rebuilt in 1836 and the Queen Anne Court building a century earlier. The O’Brien family sold the castle and almost 500 acres of the surrounding grounds for conversion to a hotel in 1962.

An incredible variety of stately trees sur-

round the castle, offering interesting vistas and woods to explore. Look for the Temple of Mercury not far from the castle. Seems that in 1730, the earl bet the estate on a horse race. The horse won and the owner was so grateful that he built an edifice over the burial ground of the horse. Soldiers stationed in the castle in World War II didn’t have the same respect and used the bronze statue of Mercury for target practice.

In a charming walled garden, flowers bloom much of the year in this temperate climate and a hothouse provides many of the fresh flowers that are found throughout the castle. Curl up with a good book by the fire in one of the nooks and crannies of the castle on a slightly damp day or in the stunning walled garden on a warm and sunny day.

Although Ireland is known for its pubs featuring Guinness, comfort food, and traditional Irish music, Dromoland offers a very different cuisine. The castle’s chef writes, “The notion of foods being ‘in season’ seems antiquated in today’s world; however, our philosophy is to source local produce and producers.” Following that comment, he lists the “in season” local fruits and vegetables, which range from apples from September to May to mushrooms from April to September and concludes with tomatoes from March to November.



Briefcase Excursions are quick explorations of out-of-the-ordinary areas near cities you might travel to for business. Designed to cover the highlights, they present interesting activities and provide lodging and dining suggestions that are worthy of note.



Dromoland Castle

These estate and locally produced fruits and vegetables are served in three restaurants on the property. The Earl of Thomond restaurant serves breakfast and dinner in the elegant former drawing and dining rooms of the castle. The flicker of candles at each dinner table reflects in the prisms in the massive Waterford chandeliers and bathes the rooms in a warm glow.

There is nothing like a proper high tea service in The Drawing Room to drive away the late afternoon hunger. Served in an elegant fire-lit sitting room on overstuffed couches and a view of the massive trees surrounding the castle, high tea at Dromoland may have you actually coming to believe that you are part of the O'Brien family—and, perhaps you are. Check out the resemblance to the family members in the portraits hanging above you.

The Fig Tree Restaurant is located in the Leisure Centre and offers a more informal atmosphere with the same high quality ingredients and attention to detail.

ACTIVITIES FILE

The estate provides enough activity options to fill several days. The 6,845-yard championship golf course is enhanced with a Golf Academy and ten fully auto-

mated driving bays. A practice bunker is designed to replicate the “Road Hole” bunker at the seventeenth hole at St. Andrews. In addition to tennis and a leisure center with a workout facility and swimming pool, there are other activities reflective of living in a castle in the countryside. These include horseback riding, clay shooting, and fishing. The castle’s spa offers the full range of treatments and an outdoor covered hydro spa.

A recent addition to the lineup of activities is the School of Falconry. Guests are introduced to birds of prey including falcons and hawks and often have the opportunity to “fly” these large birds.

DAY TRIPS

Many of the most beautiful parts of the country are within easy range of Dromoland Castle. If you are staying on the back roads to enjoy the countryside and atmosphere of the small towns and villages, plan to average about thirty-five to forty miles per hour. Ireland is less than a hundred fifty miles across at its widest point and less than three hundred miles from north to south, so many places are reachable in a comfortable day trip.



Poul nabrone Dolmen in Burren

The famous Cliffs of Moher on Ireland's rugged west coast are about an hour's drive northwest of Dromoland. These imposing cliffs of sandstone rise up to seven hundred feet from the Atlantic Ocean. On clear days, the view from the cliffs includes the Aran Islands and Galway Bay. The cliffs can be viewed from below by boats from the quaint village of Doolin, a few miles north on the coast. Doolin is also well known for its pubs, where traditional Irish music flourishes.

After experiencing the "Forty Shades of Green" that Johnny Cash claimed for Ireland, the stark limestone plateau of the Burren will come as a shock. This limestone plateau covers a large part of northern Clare and makes for another interesting day trip from Dromoland. Every guidebook and a lot of souvenirs contain a quote from a Cromwellian surveyor of the 1650s, describing the Burren as "a savage land, yielding neither water enough to drown a man, nor a tree to hang him, not soil enough to bury him."

This desolate landscape hides a surprisingly large variety of Alpine, Arctic, and Mediterranean plants. Maybe even more unlikely are the more than two thousand prehistoric and early Christian sites scattered across the region. The most famous of these is the Poul nabrone

Dolmen, a portal tomb where the remains of thirty-three people were discovered, some dating to 3000 BC.

A third day-trip option is to travel north through Galway into the valleys and hills of Connemara where the landscape once again changes dramatically. Fields of peat bogs dot the land, sheep graze across the horizon, old castles and abbeys conjure up Ireland's ancient history, and the dramatic rugged coastline is mesmerizing.

We've included these day trips just in case you actually find that you want to leave the glorious grounds of Dromoland Castle. You may not. You may just find, as we did, that Dromoland Castle is the perfect place to relax and treat yourself after a hectic trip or a place to nurse your jet lag before you jump into your business in Ireland or beyond.

Business partners Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards developed Briefcase Excursions after too many airport to hotel to conference center to hotel to airport trips. They decided to break the cycle and add a day or two of exploring for their mental and physical well being.

Photos by Pam Ellis and Peggy Edwards