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Go West!

Stunning: A view of Mt Croagh Patrick and the town of Westport from the hotel

PIP LARKHAM was lucky to find an escape from the wet winter weather in an Irish coastal town

AS winter plods on, you're never sure if there's another big freeze around the corner or if the days are going to be simply dull, grey and damp.

I've always been a great believer in taking some time out for yourself in the early part of the year when you're constantly cold and spring still seems a long way off. So that's exactly what my husband, Ian, and I decided to as we headed to Westport on the West coast of Ireland for a weekend break.

Despite the distance, this small town in County Mayo is surprisingly easy to get to, with Ryanair currently operating daily flights from Bristol International to Knock, which is the closest airport to Westport.

We set off on a very wet and soggy Friday morning, taking the cross-country route from our home in Bath to the airport. Our lunchtime flight was on time – something Ryanair prides itself on – and after just 50 minutes in the air (enough time to eat a sandwich and have a drink), we began to land in a surprisingly dry and beautifully sunny Ireland.

"You came on the right day," said our driver, who was transferring us to our hotel. "The weather was terrible yesterday." Apparently, it hadn't stopped raining the day before and I felt quite smug to know that the downpour had obviously blown over and was now languishing over the West of England.

As we drove along, our driver pointed out Mt Croagh Patrick as it loomed in to view. This stunning part of the landscape attracts about one million people each year as they trek to the top to pray or just to enjoy the views.

It took about 45 minutes to reach our destination – Knockranny House Hotel and Spa. It may have opened only 13 years ago, but the gorgeous building looks settled and perfectly

suited to its surroundings. There are 97 rooms, which includes 13 suites. The hotel has a 4-star deluxe rating but you'd be forgiven for thinking it was 5.

The staff were all extremely welcoming and attentive, and this was an attitude that seemed to extend through the town of Westport as we were to find out.

We were shown to our room (sorry... suite) and blown away by how fabulous it was. We had the Master Suite which consisted of its own hallway (almost as big as the room we honeymooned in just a year before in Mexico), a huge lounge/dining area, an equally big bedroom with sofas, armchairs, desks etc, a kitchen – mainly for making tea/coffee, a bathroom with a fantastic shower, double basin and (the best bit) a spa bath with a TV built into the wall. This was actually one of three TVs in the suite, while there was a second loo, too. There were also great views of Westport and Croagh Patrick from our windows. We worked out that the square footage of the suite was bigger than our entire house. In fact, we'd have been happy to move in.

We walked into Westport on our first evening – freezing cold but very refreshing. It only takes about 10 minutes, but walk for another 25 minutes or so and you'll find yourself by the bay. Here, we had a pint of Guinness and an Irish coffee in a



Splash: The pool at the hotel's spa



Luxury: The bedroom in the Master Suite

thought I'd have a quick splash about in the spa pool before dinner. Surrounded by Romanesque pottery and dim lighting, the pool is obviously going for an old spa feel and, living in Bath, I felt quite at home.

For our final evening we dined in the hotel's restaurant La Fougère. Here we ate some really fine food. Ian's Killary scallops for starter were soft and packed full of flavour, while the house smoked Irish venison was equally tasty. Ian's main of Ballinrobe venison was rich and delicious, while my pork fillet with parsnip cream was juicy and perfectly cooked. I just about managed a warm pear and almond tart for dessert but Ian was far too full (too much afternoon Guinness, I reckon).

As we packed our bags the next day (sunny again), we reflected on what a friendly place Westport is and (perhaps because of the remoteness of the location), you could stay in a luxurious place without paying sky-high prices.

If you fancy blowing the cobwebs away, Knockranny and Westport gets my whole-hearted recommendation.

friendly pub called The Towers and then ate in The Helm – another pub which certainly doesn't skimp on portion sizes. Great food and a varied menu – but we would have been fine with just a one-course meal.

Taking a taxi back to the hotel, we tried to give the chatty driver a 10-euro note for our 8-euro journey but he insisted on giving us change. Now how often does that happen?

The next day, breakfast at the hotel was spot-on. There was a buffet choice of pastries, cereal and fruit, while you could also order from the kitchen. Ian went for the tasty and filling Irish breakfast with black and white pudding, while I had pancakes with confit berries. On day two, Ian opted for smoked salmon and scrambled egg, while I went for scrambled egg and mushrooms. Four great breakfasts served in fine surroundings with the same gorgeous views that our room afforded.

It was Saturday morning and I was booked in for a spa treatment. It was a long walk through the hotel to Spa Salveo and it would be easy to get lost, but at least you can get changed at the spa – I've never been a fan of wandering round a hotel in your robe.

My hour-long treatment consisted of a neck, back and shoulder massage, followed by a refreshing facial. It was a great way to start the

day – why couldn't I do this every weekend?

Then it was back to the room to grab my coat, scarf, gloves and husband, and head into Westport for a wander round the shops and a bit of a pub crawl. It was another freezing day but, again, it was all clear blue skies and sunshine – perfect. The majority of the shops here are independent and, of course, all the pubs are. We stopped at Matt Malloy's and Cosy Joe's and, after working up an appetite, indulged in a late lunch of fish n chips. Back at the hotel, I

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Knockranny House Hotel & Spa, Westport, Co. Mayo; website: www.khh.ie

The master suite can be booked for about 140 per person per night (depending on the night of the week).

To book with Ryanair, go to: www.ryanair.com/en

Special offers:

Three nights B&B including dinner on two of the three nights from 249 per person sharing (available throughout February

and March). Girls' spa break (available February & March) one night B&B with dinner in La Fougere restaurant, two hours of pampering in Spa Salveo and complimentary access to the Spa Salveo's Vitality Pool & Thermal Suites – 159 per person sharing or 219 per person sharing for two nights B&B with dinner in La Fougere restaurant, two hours of pampering in Spa Salveo and complimentary access to the Spa Salveo's vitality pool and thermal suites.