



Luxurious living

Claire Drony spends the weekend pampering herself at a Connemara getaway

THE N17 from Galway to Westport is tough. Driving on a Friday night after work, on a road full of twists and turns, I've never met so many cars with only one headlight. Luckily, **Knockranny House Hotel and Spa** is on the main road into Westport, so there was no 20-minute search for a hotel off the beaten track.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Real log fires, old-fashioned tiles, antique furniture — despite being built at the start of the building boom, **Knockranny** has all the charm of an old hotel. As well as a few award plaques tacked to the heavy entrance doorway. In the foyer, two wing-backed chairs sit on either side of the fireplace, and through the glass doors of the library I see a couple drinking tea.

Unusually, the bar and restaurant are upstairs. A chef's tasting plate (€5.50) with a square of lightly battered cod, a ball of black pudding and a rough paté, and a glass of Prosecco (€6) were manna from heaven. But I can't wait to get back to my giant bedroom and leave just as the guitarist is playing Black is the Colour to a smiling group of women.

THE ROOM

You could fit a family of four into a grand deluxe room. High ceilinged, with enough space for a king-size and double bed, a couch, a chaise longue, a 32-inch TV/DVD player, and the longest writing desk in the world. There is also a dressing room and cavernous bathroom.

AMENITIES

I breakfast early at a bay window overlooking Westport, and a spiky-looking Croagh Patrick. There is fresh fish for breakfast and the raspberry jam pastry was so good I wanted to lick my knife.

At **spa salveo**, a therapist bathes my feet while chatting about the kerstin florian

advanced aromatherapy facial I have booked. Lasting 90 minutes, it involves cold gel being painted onto my face, foot massages, hand exfoliation, a mud mask, massage rollers, and a neck and head massage.

At the end, the therapist peels off the masque and tells me that all the wrinkles show up inside the mask, if I care to see — I don't. Two weeks later, my skin is soft as a baby, and I'm a new convert to facials.

Even if you're not a fan of spa treatments, the Roman villa-esque, shimmering blue mosaic-tiled pool area and surrounds are enough. On Sunday morning, I have the place to myself, and meander around the various relaxation rooms leading off the pool area, including a monsoon shower, a scented steam room, a herbal sauna and a salt brine inhalation room.

WHAT TO SEE

In a place this relaxing, who wants to climb Croagh Patrick barefoot, or even hop in the car to visit Clew Bay. Instead, I walk the 10 minutes to Westport town and spend a happy afternoon browsing the myriad shops and cafes on the



main street. Westport is the perfect toy-town. There are real butcher shops, greengrocers, ironmongers, tea rooms, an old post office, health stores and tourist offices.

My favourite shop, Interesting Books, has recently closed, and the American woman in a curio shop tells me that Westport has changed so much in the past few years, that every time she goes back



Left, **Knockranny House** hotel and Spa in Co Mayo; Above, the interior of the hotel's spa and the spacious rooms.

to the US on a two-month holiday, there is a new café, restaurant or shop opened by the time she comes home.

THE RESTAURANT

Having won the award for Best Hotel Restaurant at the 2010 Irish Restaurant Awards, I am curious about **La Fougere** restaurant. Headed by the Best Chef in Connaught (according to the Restaurant Association of Ireland 2010), Seamus Commons, the menu is part-traditional (beef, pork) and part fun (peanut butter parfait, apple sorbet).

The table d'hôte menu lasts for hours, but the portions are perfectly-sized. There are pre-starters (tiny balls of black pudding) and pre-desserts (a shot of white chocolate and strawberry mousse), as well as petit fours and coffee. The main course of sea-bass and sugar snaps cooked in butter and bacon is excellent, and the peanut-butter parfait and pistachio ice cream dessert is heavenly.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Two nights bed and breakfast with one dinner in **La Fougere** costs from €269 per person.

The 90-minute kerstin florian advanced aromatherapy facial costs €120.

The table d'hôte menu costs €54 per person.

ANYTHING TO ADD

Visiting Westport in one weekend initially seemed like too much hard work. But with the new Limerick-Galway road,

the journey from Cork only took four hours. There is also a direct train from Dublin to Westport which takes three-and-a-half hours.

Besides the restaurant, spa and fabulous accommodation,

one other reason why I'll return to **Knockranny House** hotel and Spa is the friendly staff. At breakfast, the waiters greet you as if they know you. **AW**

