



Travel

Inchiquin house, Co Clare

With an Aga range to keep it toasty morning and night, this paradise at the heart of the Burren, is a stylish mix of old and new.

A roaring turf fire greets us in the drawing room at Inchiquin house on a cold, dark November evening. The driveway from the road to the house is half a mile long and bumpy - giving us a clue to the Georgian seclusion ahead, even as our driver grumbles about his suspension. The housekeeper Kathleen pours chilled glasses of Prosecco, then disappears leaving us free to explore. The prospect of having free run of a country house for a couple of days produces nearly as much giddiness as the bubbly.

A quick wander reveals no shortage of sumptuous bedrooms to choose from - five in all - two with en suite bathrooms, and all furnished with period pieces that are beautifully restored. There are two other bathrooms, one wheelchair accessible and the second with a gorgeous free-standing bath. The dining room - which doubles as a boardroom - is quite formal, dominated by an antique mahogany table that seats 10. Warm red walls are hung with paintings of pastoral scenes, and an imposing marble fireplace calls to mind gout-ridden gentlemen with fat cigars.

But the heart of this home is, it turns out, the kitchen. An Aga range keeps it toasty at night, and in the morning we discover it's a stylish mix of old and new. A spacious dining area overlooks the garden at the back, and French windows open onto a patio area, letting in lots of light. Bracken the pony cuts

a solitary figure in the orchard, and proves popular with two-year-old Daniel - when he's not busy watching cartoons on the flat-screen TV.

The kitchen, with its oak units and granite worktops, is well equipped - in addition to the original Aga, there's a double Waterford range; twin Siemens fridge-freezers; pretty tea sets; coffee makers and gadgets galore - so it comes as no surprise to hear that plans for a cookery school are under way.

It's difficult to leave this snug kitchen when there's a nip in the air, but the house stands in its own wooded private estate of more than 100 acres, so it's no hardship to take a walk. We don't meet a soul on our travels, but Kathleen can be seen feeding livestock in the distance - reminding us that we're on a working farm. Although Inchiquin is just a 10-minute drive from the village of Corofin, it feels like the middle of nowhere. The silence at night alone was worth the trip, and one of our group maintained the birds had a Clare accent.

The house is rented on a self-catering basis, which adds to the sense of casual relaxation. Knowing you don't have to be anywhere takes the pressure off - so much so you find yourself staying put. Inchiquin is, however, in the heart of the Burren, a perfect base from which to explore that landscape, so it would seem a pity not to venture off the property at least once.

Armed with directions from a 'things to do'

list at the house, we set out and followed a series of hairpin turns up a hill until we emerged on the moon - or so it seemed at the time. It's hard to describe the stark beauty of the Burren to someone who has never seen it, but if you can picture vast deserted slopes of rock as far as the eye can see, you're half way there. The grass grows in tufts between the limestone slabs, dotted with ruins that hint at the resourcefulness of the people who survived there for centuries. Everywhere the fields are bordered by amazing stone walls, similar to the ones in Connemara but tightly packed like reeks of turf. Our map forgotten in the face of such a vista, it was no surprise that we got hopelessly lost and ended up in the village of Boston, proving it really is closer than Berlin.

The area is rich in history - megalithic tombs, dolmens, a Celtic high cross, and any number of stone ring forts - but so too is Inchiquin house. And the more recent story of its refurbishment is every bit as interesting as that of the various pieces of furniture brought home from the colonies by illustrious owners past. A photo album on top of the Steinweg piano in the drawing room shows 'before and after' shots of the house at various stages of renovation, and leafing through scenes of near-derelection, it's clear this was not a job for the faint-hearted. The house is the star attraction but owners, the Harbisons - all hardy-looking with thick wavy hair - deserve kudos for its transformation.

And speaking of hardy, anyone who has grown up in an old house - and mastered the art of getting dressed in bed - will know that modern heating systems only go so far in making up for the shortcomings of 19th century insulation. So although there is ample heating in Inchiquin, it is advisable to bring a warm jumper or two. Also, the mobile signal can be hit-and-miss but relocation to another part of the house generally produced a result. Everything was seamlessly organised, and the housekeeper was helpful without cramping our style.

Inchiquin would be ideal for a chichi summer wedding, a family reunion or a Peter's Friends-type weekend. It would also be a perfect setting for a business conference or team building event. There's no shortage of golf courses in the area, including Doonbeg and the popular Lahinch. And Shannon airport and the Cliffs of Moher are just 30 minutes away. As we packed up the car and made our way out the gravel drive, we all felt we had been to the manor born.

For availability and rates, see:

www.inchiquinhouse.com/bookings.html ■