

The estate we're in



The Johnstown Estate offers elegant four-star accommodation and a friendly welcome for guests of all ages, as HELEN MCGURK discovered

In an era of head-spinning choice, what makes a particular hotel stand out?

Often it's the little touches that make the biggest impression, and this is where The Johnstown Estate, Co Meath, truly excels.

Situated on Ireland's ancient east, overlooking the river Blackwater and nestled between the villages of Johnstownbridge and Enfield, this listed 1750s rural residence is a perfect blend of Georgian splendour and modern day luxury.

The drive from Belfast took us around two and a half hours, however more well-heeled readers may wish to hop in their helicopter and avail of the helipad.

The hotel is approached by a sweeping drive surrounded by lush parkland and fronted by a stunning water feature.

On arrival we were greeted with a warm, authentic welcome from the attentive staff and after a swift check-in we were able to appreciate our beautiful surroundings; a crackling fire in the lobby with cosy chairs for sedate pleasures such as reading, the dramatic double height, light-filled atrium, where we envied the guests tucking into scrumptious-looking afternoon teas, and were dazzled by a magnificent contemporary chandelier, "dangling giant ice cubes", my son declared.

Throughout there are plenty of modern twists to the 18th century allure of this beautiful hotel; should he ever visit, Grand Designs presenter Kevin McCloud would surely feel compelled to utter some over-annunciated adjectives.

The Johnstown Estate has 127



The Fire & Salt restaurant and, below, one of the luxurious bedrooms

bedrooms and 40 self-catering luxury lodges; we were staying in a family suite, a palatial pad with two bedrooms and a lounge area.

My daughter made a beeline for the beautiful panelled bathroom, and discovered pillow mist alongside the other Elemis toiletries... "pillow mist, can you believe it?" she said, and proceeded to douse all the pillows with the lavender-scented spray (yes, we all slept like babies).

Like I said, it's the little touches, like pillow mist, the quirky tap on the bathroom sink, the Dyson hairdryer, the glorious bath and super power shower, the swanky coffee maker, the complimentary bottled water, which was replenished each day.

Our suite of rooms were decorated throughout in muted grey and blue tones with covetable modern artworks and ornaments.

The focal point of our lounge was the original tall, arched window and there were couches, a smart television, and even a table and chairs for relaxing.

The children had two single beds, and felt just so-grown up with their own wall-mounted flatscreen television and ensuite bathroom.

Our elegant room was luxurious, with a vast bed and, again, a wall-mounted flatscreen TV. All rooms enjoy complimentary wi-fi.

Unlike other grand hotels, which can sometimes have a tendency to be stuffy, Johnstown Estate is both luxurious and homely.

The current owners have pulled off a masterstroke, creating a child-friendly hotel that isn't a chic-free zone.

During our stay I did not spot any lino or wipe-down Formica, but I did

spot plenty of little people happily trotting off to the kids' club, splashing in the pool and enjoying the tree swing on the front lawns.

My two were particularly taken with the forested area where a magical fairy trail walk leads through light-dappled trees.

They were also more than happy with the food offering, as were we.

On our first evening we dined in The Coach House, which is located in the original north wing of the property and housed horse boxes and accommodation for the grooms and coachmen.

The style is rustic and cosy, the food hearty and unpretentious; beside a roaring fire, we enjoyed beer battered cod fillet, fish cakes and scrummy desserts.

Breakfast is served in Fire & Salt, which in the evening morphs into an exquisite fine dining restaurant.

Cocooned in a cosy booth, the staff were once again helpful and friendly, without being intrusive.

Our dinner was nothing short of outstanding. The chef has created a delicious menu, demonstrating his skill and commitment to using the freshest local produce. The flavours of our food, sea bass and a vegetarian tagine, were superlative.

The name of the restaurant is a nod to its speciality - grass-fed native Irish-bred beef, which is dry aged for 28-36 days, then sprinkled with ground Himalayan Rock Salt, then

chargrilled.

Because it was her 11th birthday, as a treat, my daughter had the beef off the grown-up menu. She devoured it. And the lovely staff on hearing it was her special day, had the jazz duet play 'Happy Birthday', brought her a dessert with candles and even sent over a delicious mocktail. She was chuffed to bits.

A bountiful breakfast is served in Fire & Salt, with lots on offer from cooked breakfasts to continental options; there's even a pancake maker.

The Johnstown Estate has its own spa and leisure club with a 20-metre pool, sauna and steam room, outdoor Canadian hot tub and state-of-the-art gym facility.

There are a myriad of delectable-sounding treatments on offer at the spa, and after much deliberation I opted for the lava shell massage.

With more knots than a boy scout's repertoire, this massage, which uses Tiger-striped clam shells filled with lava gel, melted my tension into submission. A truly blissful experience, which I followed up with a visit to the steam room and caldarium, before nodding off in the dimly-lit relaxation area.

The Johnstown Estate is a fab hotel for those who seek solid home comforts in stunning surrounds. It's a very special place.

*For more information Tel: +353 (0) 46 954 0000 or email: info@the-johnstownestate.com

