

Paranormal activity at a feast for the senses

Castle Leslie in Ireland also has a levitating bed. No wonder Sir Paul McCartney and Heather Mills chose to get married there.

By Kalpana Sunder

I feel I have walked onto the set of a period film. A world packed with antiques and anecdotes. A perfect setting for staging murder mysteries or exploring the paranormal. In the hands of the Leslie family (who can trace their lineage to Attila the Hun) since the 1600s, Castle Leslie in Glaslough village, County Monaghan in Ireland, sprawls over a thousand acres.

The large antique key that I receive for my room sets the tone for the next few days. The decor is quirky and filled with family history. There are no distractions like television sets, phones, wifi, clocks or mini-bars. The furnishings are a bit worn out, like in someone's home — well lived and comfortable. There are three gleaming lakes, ancient woodlands and forests of ash, yew and sycamore, even an integrated wetlands system. The castle also boasts of a top-class equestrian centre with more than 30 horses, a riding school, and miles of bridle paths. For foodies, Castle Leslie has a full-fledged cooking school with some unusual courses like Men-Only and Irish cooking by seasons.

My 'Leslie experience' starts with a facial at the Organic spa with orange and rhubarb extracts. We get the grand tour from Sir John Leslie, the 93-year-old eccentric owner of the castle who has lived there since 1994. Sammy Leslie, Sir John's niece, is the person responsible for turning the castle into a viable proposition. The family has famous connections. Sir John talks casually about the Duke of Wellington who was a first cousin and Sir Winston Churchill who was a close friend of the family. Over the years, famous celebrities and royalty have stayed here. Paul Mc Cartney's ill-fated marriage to Heather Mills took place here.

Each of the rooms is named after a member of the Leslie family and decorated in an eclectic pastiche of styles. My room is called Desmond's room, named after

Sammy's father, a dashing pilot who wrote several books including the classic *Flying Saucers Have Just Landed*. There's a flamboyant mural of a ghostly scene on the walls of the bathroom and coloured lights cast an eerie glow.

The Red Room was Sir John's mother's room — is an ornate four poster bed, furniture from Perugia (in Italy) and diffused lighting. But it's the bathroom which has us stunned: a unique wood-panelled throne toilet with even the coat of arms, and the first plumbing bath to be installed in Ireland. Norman's Room was named after a member of the family who was destined to inherit the castle but was killed prematurely in World War I. Apparently his ghost (reputed to be a friendly one) still inhabits his room and is known to levitate the bed! Sir John shows us with

ghoulish delight the picture of Brede House, the most haunted house in England from where this bed came.

War medals, a quill pen used by a former Pope, a bullet extracted from the thigh of Tom Leslie who was injured in the Battle of the Light Brigade, Sir Winston Churchill's christening dress and old letters are on display in the living room. There are family portraits, photos of dignitaries, and an elaborate mantel from the Santa Maria Novella church in Florence. Sir John plays a Chopin melody effortlessly on the grand piano, which is centuries old. He is remarkable for his age: his sprightly gait and command of history would put a young man to shame. This nonagenarian has had an interesting past: he's been a German POW in the war and lived in an

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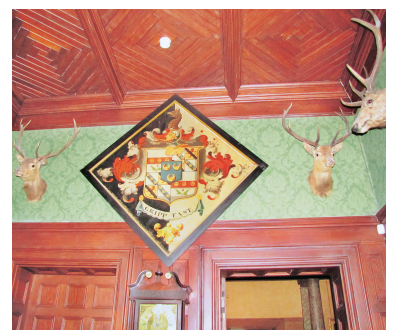
NATURE'S ESSENCE: The area has three gleaming lakes, forests of ash, yew and sycamore, and even an integrated wetlands system

Italian monastery.

Today the *joi-de-vivre* sparkles in his eyes and he is known to frequent discos over the weekend. He shows us a portrait of his uncle, grandmother, and father saying in the excited voice of a boy, "That's my daddy!"

In the hallway is the coat of arms bearing the family motto "Gripp fast", indicating the clan's never-say-die attitude perhaps? Sir John tells us the origins of the motto. The Scottish member of the clan, Bartholomew Leslie, was rescuing Queen Margaret of Scotland and fording a river. He was riding the horse sitting behind her and when the horse almost sank in the river he shouted, "Grip fast, my buckle". She held on to his buckle and was saved. The queen told him to adopt the buckle as his coat of arms and 'grip fast' became the motto.

We walk through the haunted gallery where people have seen a



lady in a long dress walk even in broad daylight! Dinner is an elaborate six-course gourmet meal in the atmospheric family dining room lit only with candles. I go to bed that night with the lights on, just in case Norman decides to communicate with me!

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Chasing waterfalls in Karnataka is



GUSHING BEAUTY: The road from Hogenakkal to the Jog Falls in Shimoga, Karnataka, is hemmed in by forests and craggy hills

FROM Hogenakkal to Jog Falls in Shimoga, Karnataka and its neighbouring states make for a fascinating Waterfall Trail. This part of the land is blessed with dense forests, mountains, lush vegetation and some of the best falls in the country. The itinerary I share with you is not easy. But if you have the drive, it will make for some lifelong memories.

Day 1: Start early from Bangalore and head to Hogenakkal Falls via Pearl Valley (130 km). Hogenakkal is located 750 feet above sea level amidst the Melagiri Hills. The route is scenic, laced with lush rice fields and giant terracotta village guardian deities (Aiyanars). The roar of the Cau-



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very river resounds in your ears long after you get away. You must hire a *coracle*, which is a circular basket boat covered with buffalo hide or black plastic sheets to cross the river to reach the foot the majestic waterfalls. Later try the oil massage in the

village and do taste the fried fish sold in little shacks all around. Head back to Bangalore.

Day 2: Drive to Shivanasamudra (125 km) where the Cauvery splits to form a pair of waterfalls. Head to Mysore for a delicious vegetarian meal — *akki roti*, *raagi dosa* and *avalakki*. Drive on to Madikeri (150 km). Reach Raja Seat in time to catch the sunset and a breathtaking view of the valley with the road that descends into Mangalore. Must sample the iconic *pandi* (pork) curry for dinner.

Day 3: Head to Abbey falls (10 km). A pedestrian bridge offers a taste of its majesty, with the spray drenching visitors. Post