



Meet Helen & Brian Heaton of Castlewood House Dingle



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Everywhere I go in Ireland, I meet hoteliers who say that they've been having a great year.

I have tremendous time for these people who, through good times and bad, have had to keep the best front out, maintain their premises and try and keep their staff employed, in what have, for the past few years, been very changed times. As a group, I find them unfailingly courteous and always endeavouring to ensure their guests enjoy the level of comforts expected in their establishments.

Helen and Brian Heaton personify all that is great in Irish hospitality. They are a couple of very highly trained hoteliers who, some eight years ago, decided to go it alone and opened their four-star Castlewood House in Dingle, on the shores of Dingle Bay.

It has continuously received the highest ratings and awards including in 2012 TripAdvisor travellers' choice gong for best hotel in Ireland. Castlewood is not just the Rolls Royce of guesthouses, it is in fact more boutique hotel in its design, comforts and service. Nothing is ever too much trouble for Helen and Brian and I marvel at how they are always there attending to their guests.

The entrance hall is wide and gracious whilst an elegant and inviting drawingroom makes people feel at home. It's the little details that make Castlewood special. Coffee to go is available all the time just inside the hall door in case you want to grab a cup ("for the car"), while a Nespresso machine sits in the drawingroom. Bedrooms are individually designed, luxurious and spacious with all facilities to hand – but when it comes to breakfast I don't know where to start. You wouldn't get this choice in a five-star hotel. On our recent visit, there were nine different fruits on offer, prunes and plums poached in star anise and cinnamon, stuffed apricots, nectarines poached with vanilla.

Brian is the chef and master of all of this. People praised his freshly baked raspberry scones; whilst I watched grown men fall apart with excitement at his daily dish of bread and butter pudding. Naturally there are cereals and yoghurts to beat the band, not to mention cheese and salami, fruit breads, various croissants and artisan jams and honeys, but their hot selection is amazing. You can, of course, have the traditional Irish breakfast including Ashes award winning sausages, bacon and black and white puddings, but you can also have Dingle Bay kippers with scrambled egg, eggs benedict or eggs benedict supreme with Ted Browne's Dingle organic smoked salmon. Dingle organic smoked salmon also features on the divine bagel supreme of cream cheese and smoked salmon which comes, would you believe, with scrambled eggs and chives. Helen's porridge treat is topped with a choice



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of Cooley Distillery Irish Whiskey, Irish Mist or Baileys, while omelettes feature a choice of smoked salmon, Cashel Blue Cheese, or Brian's favourite omelette with grilled bacon, baby spinach leaves and melted Swiss cheese. I haven't had that one yet, nor have I had the mushroom and chorizo frittata, which was winking at me. You can wash all of this down with copious pots of tea, coffee or turn your breakfast into a celebration with Bucks Fizz or a snipe of champagne. All of this is served in the conservatory style breakfast room with immaculate white napery by formally attired staff.

"Having grown up on a sheep farm on the Cooley Peninsula, I have seen how hard work and determination pays off and that running your own business brings its share of headaches along with a lot of joy and a huge sense of achievement," says Helen.

"My parents instilled in all of us that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. Ever since I was a little girl I loved hotels – the whole ceremony of going on that special occasion such as a communion or confirmation treat to the local hotel was always something to look forward to. I suppose that's why the whole hospitality industry had such an appeal for me always.

"When I left school there was only one avenue I wanted to pursue and I got my place in DIT Cathal Brugha Street. I even worked for free at one of the local hotels to get experience first hand.

"As part of the degree course we had to spend six months working in the industry and I was lucky enough to be chosen for Ashford Castle in Cong, which is one of the finest hotels in the country and where real old-fashioned service values and methods are a must. "That's where I met Brian, who was also there on work experience from college – the rest is history," she explains with a smile. After their time in Ashford Castle both Helen and Brian worked in various hotels in Ireland "learning from the masters".

In 2003 they decided to really go for it and approached the bank for a loan to build their own place, on a site, which had become available next door to where Brian's parents, Cameron and Nuala Heaton, had already developed the superb Heaton's Guest House. After two years of planning applications, fire officer approval and builders, they became the proud owners of Castlewood House and opened in May 2005.

"We had very definite ideas of how the house should look and knew what we wanted. We spent a long time planning the room layouts and making sure that the available space was used to maximum effect. We wanted a mix of new and older pieces so the best part was definitely shopping for all the furniture, antiques and collectable pieces. My Mum and I were in shopping heaven, going to auctions all over the country. I'm a magpie and I'll hoard something until I find the right place for it. Week by week we watched our hoard of furniture and 'stuff' grow until it was time to put it together, like one huge doll's house. We had just one week before our first guests arrived – I remember washing delph at 4am because I couldn't sleep. We were nervous as to whether we had done the right thing but then the great day came and we haven't looked back."

Helen says it was a little strange for the first few weeks as they had both been used to going out to work separately and coming home and chatting about their respective days and now they were together every day. They had also both been managers in their old jobs and now "we were manager of each other. It was a change



to say the least but over time we each settled into our own roles and I have to say that we work very well together. Each decision we take we take together."

Brian and Helen have seen their business grow and flourish over the years and felt honoured in 2012 to be chosen as TripAdvisor's best hotel in Ireland.

"We literally got telephone calls from people all over Ireland congratulating us – people calling just to say 'well done' and that it was great to hear a good luck story for once. We have a wonderful guest base and people from all over the world come to stay with us. We are really lucky to have a very strong repeat business from the US, Australia, the UK and Ireland – but then it doesn't hurt to be in one of the most beautiful places in Ireland.

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"Some of our guests have been with us more than 10 times so they are more like old friends at this stage and every day we make new friends," she says. When our guests come to stay we are conscious that they are having a break from their busy everyday lives and we just want to look after them. Our mission is to make sure they relax and enjoy their stay and we always try and anticipate their every need and want.

"I suppose those old-fashion hospitality lessons have really come to the fore, along with my other motto: 'At all times attention to detail'. Every winter when we close we are thinking how we can improve for the next season – complacency is not an option in this business – we are always upping our game. Guests are extremely well travelled and their expectations are very high and our aim is to exceed those expectations.

"All in all it is a great life here in Dingle, it is hard work but we love it. What's even better is that we built it up by ourselves so my advice to anyone thinking of opening their own business is to go for it and take that leap of faith!"

<http://www.castlewooddingle.com> or call (066) 915 2788

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