

Ireland's favourite family friendly stay

7 WINNER: KELLY'S RESORT HOTEL & SPA, ROSSLARE

What Irish hotel, guesthouse, farmhouse, B&B, campsite or self-catering stay goes the extra mile in caring for its family visitors?

Kelly's is "simply the best" you said. "It caters for everyone's needs." It's "the perfect place for a family getaway. Kids will be entertained and you will be dined!" It's got "the best kids' club", as well as "direct access to

Rosslare beach", "super customer service" and staff "who go out of their way to look after every member of the family... especially little ones." The Rosslare hotel offers "a warm welcome" and "really goes the extra mile".

Of course, Kelly's is about much more than happy kids. Its spa, wine lists, food, activity programmes (from cookery demos to golf clinics and ballroom dancing) and art collection would all sit happily in a five-star hotel, and the family that run it are the crème-de-la-crème of Irish hospitality. You ranked Bill Kelly highly in our 'Face of Irish Hospitality' category, and his daughter Laura is the latest generation to sparkle in a south-eastern gem that is at once an institution and a relentless innovator.

"It's a family run hotel, a family friendly hotel, and it's renowned for its food and facilities," you said. "It's a place families return to year after year."

DETAILS: 053 913-2114; kellys.ie. B&B from €88pp.



YOUR SAY:

"It's family run, and the atmosphere is relaxed, welcoming and special. Coupled with wonderful food and an array of activities to suit all ages, Kelly's is a jewel of the Sunny South East."

Ireland's favourite cruise line

WINNER: ROYAL CARIBBEAN

Cruise holidays are booming in popularity, as Irish holidaymakers realise the breadth and diversity of what's on offer. Royal Caribbean beat several contenders, including Celebrity Cruises and MSC, to take the title of Ireland's Favourite Cruise Line.

"An experience of a lifetime," was how one reader described their cruise. "You pay a bit more with Royal Caribbean, but you get what you pay for, as the saying goes," added another. "Staff are just amazing," we were told, and despite the mushrooming competition, "still the best I've been on."

Interestingly, both Irish Ferries and Stena Line scored highly in this category — so perhaps we'll have them face off in a ferry category next year! Our judges were also surprised to see River Shannon cruises get numerous mentions — a whole other kind of cruise holiday, but a hidden gem that we think could be due a revival in 2017. After all, no licence is required to drive the boats.

After launching Harmony of the Seas, the world's largest cruise ship, this year, Royal Caribbean's fourth Oasis class vessel will set sail in 2018.



YOUR SAY: "I've found Celebrity's ships well equipped for great holidays, with wonderfully appointed cabins, food that's unparalleled in variety and taste and entertainment all day and night for those who want it."

YOUR SAY: "Hurtigruten's smaller cruise liners manage to get into the smaller fjords, allowing you to absorb the magnificent scenery of Norway."

PHOTO: DON MACMONAGLE



Best breakfast in Ireland

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WINNER: CASTLEWOOD HOUSE, DINGLE, CO KERRY

It says a lot about the strength in depth of Irish food that a 12-room guesthouse on the Dingle Peninsula beat every five-star in the country to your best breakfast gong. But anyone who has woken up to the spread in Castlewood House won't bat an eyelid. Brian Heaton tells **ORLA NELIGAN** the secret to his most important meal of the day...

"I don't eat breakfast," laughs Brian Heaton, who runs Castlewood guesthouse in Dingle, Co Kerry with his wife Helen. "I start at 6am so I tend to eat later and when I do, I have a weakness for eggs Benedict, which also happens to be the most popular dish on the breakfast menu." That's along with the postcard-worthy pancakes, the full Irish and the poached fruits, which, I'm told, always come back empty from the buffet table. This is no ordinary breakfast spread.

First, there are the views of Dingle Bay. Staff, many of whom have been there since the guesthouse opened 11 years ago, are eager to please and happily engage guests throughout. Then there's the breakfast options themselves, a winning combination of cold meats and cheeses, pastries, breads, scones, porridge topped with Baileys or a dash of Cooley whiskey, mueslis, homemade bread and butter pudding, a table of cooked fruits — plums cooked in orange and honey, melon with pomegranate — a dedicated omelette menu or Dingle Bay kippers. Every dish is cooked from scratch.

Brian is not a trained chef, but always had an interest in food, inspired by his mother's love of baking and his grandmother, who was French. He and Helen, both hotel management graduates, met while working at Ashford Castle. They went on to work for various four and five-star hotels around Ireland before deciding to move to Dingle. "It was a risky move," admits Helen. "We were in our mid-30s and were giving up our jobs, borrowing money and moving to the other side of the country to build

a house. But, we always believed in it." They saw a niche in luxury amenities at affordable prices, and it paid off. This is not Castlewood's first award.

The house itself doesn't have history or rustic old-world beauty; rather the air of a boom-time build but with plenty of charm and comfort. A short stroll from Dingle town, it's thoughtfully decorated, with antiques and contemporary art interspersed with squishy sofas, flickering candles and crackling fires. All 12 rooms are ensuite with smart TVs, Jacuzzi baths and Egyptian cotton sheets, making for both a homely and elegant feel — what the couple would like themselves from a night away.

But back to the breakfast... Brian uses local suppliers like Thomas Ashe (sausages), Ted Brown (smoked salmon) and O'Connors (fruit and vegetables) wherever possible, taking quality Dingle Peninsula produce and turning it into a sensational spread, often with signature twists — a recent addition is a black pudding omelette, inspired by a black pudding, feta and goats cheese salad, for example. The full Irish remains the first choice of Irish guests (taking it off the menu would be "blasphemy", he laughs), but his ultimate favourite is the pancakes. For these, Brian separates the egg whites, whips them, and then folds them into the batter, creating auburn, pillowy pancakes as fluffy and light as air. Honest, tasty local Irish food is the mantra here, and Helen and Brian's personal attention to detail is the cream on the proverbial porridge.

DETAILS: 066 915 2788; castlewooddingle.com; B&B from €48pp.