

AS YOU recline on a stately couch within Castle Leslie Estate's sumptuous drawing room — exquisite antique furniture and period paintings cloistered all about, champagne in hand as a log fire crackles in the gargantuan fireplace — you could be forgiven for asking 'where did it all go wrong?'

Strictly in the George Best sense, of course.

This is not the foremost question on our 13-year-old's mind, however. 'Do they have wi-fi here?' he wonders, dying to get back to his gaming. I tell him to look instead out on through the large sash windows beside us, across the formal garden below, with the lake beyond, backdropped by the estate's woodland.

The 19th century Scottish baronial-style castle is a guilty pleasure to visit each afternoon for such a tippie, but the wider 1,000-acre, north Monaghan estate is a slice of heaven.

It's slowly dawned on me over the last decade that Monaghan must be Ireland's most undervalued county. It's a pure gem to visit, a little more than an hour north of Dublin.

It's spread out across drumlin-dotted landscapes, glistening little loughs and thick-hedged small fields angling over Humpty Dumpty hillsides.

It's Ulster, but not as we know it — a warmer, friendlier, easier Ulster that far too few ever visit.

So why not go all out and stay where the likes of Mick Jagger, WB Yeats and Paul McCartney stayed before you? What's more, the house is still home to the founding family — the Leslies — who have owned and farmed these lands for 400 hundred years.

These days, Samantha Leslie is the custodian but it's a shame I never made it here while 'Dancing Jack' was still with us. Jack Leslie died in 2016, aged 99, and was best known to guests for his heartfelt invites to join him clubbing each weekend.

Fit for a king, we stay in the snug and tastefully converted Old Stable Mews, in the east of the estate.

Over one fine weekend, we wander the multiple trails about the tree-dotted demesne dating to the 1600s, ambling up to memorable breakfasts each morning at The Lodge.

But there's also pike fishing on offer, not to mention falconry, archery and clay target shooting, or just soak in the spa all morning, if it's more your pleasure.

Then there's the OMG cuisine, as our son would put it. Our first night is at the 2 AA Rosette award-winning restaurant Snaffles, which lays on a five-course dinner (€75 per person). Our second night's meal is excellent country home cooking at Conor's Bar & Lounge (two-course dinner for €33 per person, or three courses for €38).



Estate of sheer bliss

Downton Abbey-like Castle Leslie is an exquisite guilty pleasure

BY **JAMIE BALL**

Regal: Castle Leslie. Below, horse riding on the grounds and some of the lavish interior

For a country so internationally renowned for its poets, it's striking how so few poetry lovers beyond these shores have ever heard of Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967). So, where better to learn about the man than in his nearby home village of Iniskeen, south Monaghan, less than 10km off the M1.

The excellent Patrick Kavanagh Centre (patrickkavanaghcentre.com, €10) is set within a former church which Kavanagh would attend as a child — he only moved away from Iniskeen aged 35.

Through multimedia, text, artefacts and film footage, the great man's life and

poetry are brought to life. Go visit, then tell the world about this self-taught, unsung genius of 20th century Irish literature. A true Monaghan man.

Also in south Monaghan, not 2km off the Dublin-Derry N2, is the must-see Carrickmacross Workhouse (carrickmacrossworkhouse.com, €6), which hosts highly-recommended one-hour guided tours each work day at 11.30am and 2.30pm (booking required).

Remarkably, while there were over 160 workhouses built from the 1840s onwards, less than five are accessible to the public today. Of these, Carrickmacross is arguably the best conserved and restored, bringing history to life through animated film, interpretative artworks, information panels, architectural features and historical artefacts.

To cap off our break, back at Castle Leslie we go horse riding about the estate on our final morning, traipsing through the bird-sung beech woodland, along the verdant laneways and tree-lined avenues, hacking past that glassy lake and those majestic heritage buildings, like some Downton Abbey tribute (one-hour hack for €60, two hours for €85).

'Do we really have to go home?' the wife wonders as we pack our bags following the morning's jaunt. 'Could we not stay here instead and hide?'

TRAVEL FACTS

Mid-week B&B rates starting at €250 per room, see castleleslie.com.

A SENSE OF ADVENTURE

CATHERINE MURPHY



ASPEN Snowmass is the name given to an iconic year-round Colorado destination consisting of four mountains.

The slope-side village of Snowmass was developed in 1967 and, just 14km away, offers a quieter, more family-focused vibe than the cultural and historic mining town of Aspen.

Snowmass fans joke that you 'go to Aspen to be seen' and 'go to Snowmass to do'.

Of course, both destinations offer a range of activities but there's some truth in the joke.

The experience I have staying in Snowmass is different to my days in Aspen but easy access between town and village means this mountain-loving townie can have the best of both worlds.

The Snowmass rodeo — which celebrates its 50th anniversary this summer — is the perfect antidote to Aspen's art galleries, expensive stores and nightlife. With an entry fee of \$20 for adults and \$10 for children, it's an event locals go to.

Even the toddlers are wearing cowboy boots while I have the audacity to turn up without double denim or a Stetson. Between rain showers and a double rainbow, I'm treated to a slice of Americana with bucking broncos and bull-riding galore.

It's a low-key affair at which adults eat hot dogs in the stands and kids clamber up fences in their cowboy boots to catch the action.

The best of that action is a thrilling barrel-racing event in which female riders display great speed and skill.

Perhaps the most unusual event is 'mutton bustin', which involves children trying to ride the length of the arena lying reverse on the backs of sheep. Whoever hangs on the longest wins, though most get dumped unceremoniously within yards of the start gate.

To my Irish eyes, it looks bizarre but I guess it's pretty normal if you've grown up on a ranch and must be good preparation for future bull-riding competitors.

Children from around the US take part and eventually, a kid from Texas holds on for the full length of the arena to win.

Following this evening of good-natured family fun, I head back to Snowmass, where I've checked into Crestwood Condominiums. Offering comfortable condos and an outdoor pool for post-activity relaxation, Crestwood is situated just a few minutes from the resort base and near the colourful 'skittle' gondola lifts which take you on a short ride up to Snowmass Mall and its mix of shops and bars.

The Aspen Snowmass summer season runs until the first week of October and when travelling to the moun-

tains, you have to be prepared for all weather. The high altitude also makes it vital to stay hydrated.

That joke about Snowmass being a place where you 'go to do' reveals its truth in mountain-biking terms. Aspen Snowmass offers 500km of single-track trails and is the first International Mountain Biking Association Gold Level ride centre in Colorado, and only the seventh in the world.

While the ride centre stretches from Aspen all the way to Glenwood Springs, Snowmass sits right in the middle of it and is therefore an ideal base from which to explore a range of trails that cater for everyone from families to experts.

The easy-to-cycle Rio Grande asphalted path passes through Snowmass but on the opening day of mountain-biking season, I opt to take a gondola up to Elk Camp and the Lost Forest, where a gaggle of excited kids wait for the lifts to open. Kitted out head to toe in mountain-biking safety gear, they look like mini-pros.

THE Lost Forest at Elk Camp is a mountain adventure centre for families with a climbing wall, zip line, ropes course, games and perhaps most popular of all, the Breathtaker alpine coaster, which whizzes you along an elevated track through the forest for an exhilarating eight-minute ride.

Older children can ride with parents or solo, navigating hairpin turns and curves at up to 45kph. Without exception, every rider that steps off the coaster raves about it and kids generally rejoin the queue to do it again.

Snowmass is proud of its bike park — and rightly so. It takes riders up to almost 3,000m and drops them 1,000m from the top of the Elk Camp chair lift to village base with 40km of diverse, purpose-built trails. Riding the chairlift up to go hiking, I see some fantastic skills from riders on their way down the trails.

Aspen Snowmass is home to a vast wilderness loved by real adventure fans but from the top of the Elk Camp lift, I can take an easy hiking route back down to the Lost Forest.

The Summit trail takes me past impressive views of the Maroon Bells peaks and right past the Alpine coaster before depositing me at a self-service restaurant for lunch.

Afterwards, I continue walking, this time taking the Vista trail down to Snowmass base village. Again this is an easy walk and takes me through Aspen forests.

I learn that Aspen trees are a single living organism and that on sunny days, if you've forgotten to apply sun screen, rubbing the bark of an Aspen tree will produce a

