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Ashford Castle

Ashford Castle's Irish Eyes Create Special Family Escape

ADVENTURE ENGAGES CHILDREN OF ALL AGES AT THIS LUXE DESTINATION,
WHERE **REAL WIZARDRY IS CAPTURED IN THE SMALLEST DETAILS**

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

When Ireland's westernmost shores of the Wild Atlantic Way call with their siren song, extraordinary family vacations are explicit in their promise.

Adventure greets families head on here, especially when hosted by County Mayo's majestic Ashford Castle, a splendid estate catering to lords, ladies, lads and lassies for centuries. The Castle captures the fancy of all who enter through its stone gates aweing the grandest of public spaces, traditional Irish dining, warm hospitality and specially curat-

ed experiences that delight and enchant.

Tampa Bay area residents can find Ireland's national carrier, Aer Lingus, flies direct to Dublin from Miami and Orlando if the first stop in the Emerald Isle is the Fair City.

Being met by Ashford's private transport means; starting the short ride with light and airy pastries, lovingly prepared in Ashford's bakeshop, hand-squeezed green juice and a short history lesson from your driver foretelling the many treats in store for visitors.

The castle shines as the brightest gem in

the crown of the Red Camation Hotels Collection, distinctive luxury properties known for the highest level of guest service. A recently completed \$75 million renovation left no corner of the Castle untouched and guests are pampered here, from sparkling afternoon teas, in Connaught Room, to the elegant meals, in the George V Dining Room, to the vast staterooms and salons, many with 30-foot-high ceilings.

Situated on more than 350 acres in County Mayo, the castle flanks the shores of Lough



Fishing is another recreation activity at Ashford Castle

Corrib (the second largest lake in Ireland) and the River Cong, with views of woodlands, lake, river and mountains to enjoy. The history of the castle extends back to the 13th century where the De Burgo family (fierce invading Normans) built several strongholds including what has now become Ashford, on their westward campaign.

While warring feudal battles are noticeably absent at present, today's families still enjoy exhilarating experiences none-the-less. Here's what not to miss:

- **Morning forest walks with Irish Wolfhounds.** Join sibling hounds, Cronin and Garvin, for an easy one-hour walk on the castle grounds and nearby enchanted forest. These kid-friendly creatures are a wonder to behold, not simply for their size and stature but the grace and how they carry themselves. Want to meet the hounds but not up for a walk? No problem. The handlers bring them into the drawing room each morning to greet the tiny-tot set and their parents.

- **Joyce Country Sheepdogs** reveal the intricacies and traditions of sheep herding for visitors to marvel at. Take a short ride out to Connemara where local herders demonstrate sheepdogs at work. Even the puppies get into the act and learn from their parents what they were bred to do. Enjoy a late lunch at Cullen's at the Cottage, the former Cong Cinema and first theater to show *The Quiet Man* (the John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara classic movie was filmed here), even before Hollywood.

- **Witchcraft and Wizardry.** Ashford has assembled a special Harry Potter-esque experience for the under-12 set that includes supervised castle exploration where youngsters discover the hiding place of Dingle the Owl, create special crafts at the Chamber of Art, assist the elves in Cookery School, attend Wizard classes and enjoy specially curated films at the castle's premier cinema room with oversized sumptuous red velvet seats, jars of sweets and freshly popped corn.

- **Falconry.** Hawk walks at Ashford Castle offer an up-close look at the special bond created between these glorious raptors, their trainers and visitors to Ireland's School of Falconry. This facility, the oldest in Ireland and located on the castle grounds, tours families, and small groups (3-5), engaging them in the splendor of falconry and letting everyone try their hand at this regal sport

- **Golf, archery, skeet shooting, cycling, birding, fishing, horseback riding, carriage rides and hiking** are among the myriad of outdoor recreational pursuits Ashford's staff happily arranges.

The Ashford team has spent more than a year curating special cultural excursions and privately guided day trips into the surrounding villages, towns and countryside where families can explore the likes of local artisans, oyster and mussel farmers, cheesemakers, traditional Irish musicians and cozy pubs where tall tales are often told. Families explore the real Connemara far from the tourist trail through its languages and music.

Film buffs revel in the newly created, Squire Danaher, experience where they enjoy an evening meal, traditional Irish song and dance performance by re-enactors performing from the Academy Award-winning film, *The Quiet Man*. Filmed in and around County Mayo, guests enjoy the evening in the actual cottage where O'Hara entertained Wayne in the film. This is a rousing evening where the whole family is welcomed to join along.

Lasting memories are among the most treasured keepsakes of family vacations, creating shared lore and bonding over experiences sure to last a lifetime.

With travel restrictions and COVID-19 guidelines, planning a trip anywhere might be a challenge. But this is certainly a bucket list travel adventure to be explored for days when we can once again see the world. ♦

More information: ashfordcastle.com



Horseride through Ashford Castle's grounds

