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Get treated like royalty

Hub developer turns old Irish castle into posh hotel

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'I'd like to go buy a castle.'

That's not the usual reaction to a visit to Ireland (at least not that most people can follow through on), but Boston construction mogul Jay Cashman took the idea he had in 1999 and turned it into reality — and then some.

It took some time, but Cashman and his wife, Christy, now own and operate Kilkea Castle in Castledermot, County Kildare. Kilkea Castle dates back to 1180 and was in the same family for nearly 800 years. While it has operated as an inn in the past, it had fallen on hard times after Ireland's financial crash, leaving it empty and cold, and the community around it missing their lively centerpiece.

This month, after five years of restoration work that totaled about 30 million euros, the castle is open for guests, offering a warm and inviting stay set among 180 acres of lush woodland, rose-filled gardens, a serene river and a world-class golf course and club.

Although one may assume Cashman brought a taste of Boston to the project, instead, he said, he and his wife focused on Irish heritage. Cashman, in recent years, became fascinated with genealogy and even hired a part-time genealogist (you can check out his family history at cashmanhistory.com).

"We were Irish peasants here," he said of his lineage. "We were working for the landlords."

The castle itself has a rich history, too. The family that owned it for several centuries (a rarity even in Europe) is connected to Boston's own Mayor John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald. With its history, setting and incredible design, Cashman said, "All I had to do was breathe life back into it. The bones were here, it just needed some work. You know, we all love a castle. We just don't want it drafty."

Kilkea Castle has been fully refurnished and the result is a melange of medieval decor and modern chic. Guests can meander the castle and find all kinds of spots to settle in, including the luxurious Drawing Room, perfect for afternoon

tea, and a grand dining room for sumptuous meals and gatherings. Of course, there is a beautiful Irish pub on site, as well as the Castle Bar, just the spot to relax while sipping an Irish whiskey or a Guinness next to the roaring fire.

Rooms feel royal as well. Eleven beautifully appointed bedrooms overlook the grounds, including the Fitzgerald Suite, which features sweeping vistas of the grounds that surround the estate. In the courtyard, the original carriage house and stables have been converted into 24 lovely bedrooms and suites, many of which showcase original features, including bespoke wrought iron and exposed wooden beams.

It's a golfer's dream as well. Kilkea Castle's new clubhouse overlooks the ninth hole of its private golf course with the castle visible just beyond. The 18-hole, par-70 parkway course features the River Greese as a natural hazard throughout, with two lakes included in the design. Additional offerings include a driving range, practice putting green, fully stocked golf shop and, overlooking the course, three-bedroom, self-catering lodges, perfect for families or a group of avid golfers.

In addition to golf, Kilkea Castle hosts a variety of pursuits, including tennis, archery, falconry, skeet shooting, horseback riding, hiking, swimming, tubing, cycling, fishing, birding and a variety of tailored spa treatments.

The Cashmans spend one week of each month there. Christy, an avid equestrian, can be found riding the grounds often, and Jay oversees things while keeping in touch with his business worldwide. The couple was married in Ireland, so it's special to them. Last winter, they spent Christmas in the castle with their family.

"We woke up with a feeling of gratitude and gratefulness that is nearly indescribable," he said.

Just an hour outside of Dublin, Kilkea Castle is nestled into a town that long looked to it as a vibrant centerpiece, and does again, thanks to the renewed influx of guests.

"I've been involved in a lot of controversial projects, so I'm just used to a kind of 'unwelcomeness' sometimes; it's just part of what I do," he said. "Here? I'm the most liked person in town. I've never done anything where the people have been so grateful."

That, no doubt, spills over to the guests, who are taken care of by a staff proud to be part of the castle team.

Learn more at kilkeacastle.ie

Caption:

GRAND: Kilkea Castle, opposite page, in Castledermont, County Kildare, Ireland, has been renovated to bring out its historic charm.

PHOTO, ABOVE, BY THOMAS SUNDERLAND PHOTOGRAPHY

FINE DINING: Guests can enjoy a lavish meal in the dining room at Kilkea Castle. Jay Cashman, far right, and wife Christy show off the castle's beautiful gardens.

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