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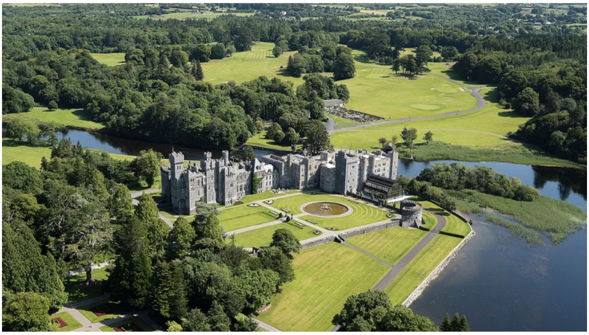
MARCH 19, 2024

# What It's Like to Stay at Ashford Castle, the Guinness Family's Former Country Retreat in Ireland

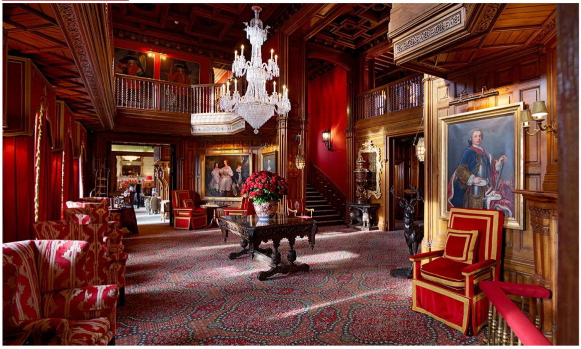
Built in the 13th century, Ashford Castle became the hunting estate of one of Ireland's most famous family before being rescued and renovated by Red Carnation Group.

*By* RACHEL DUBE


Courtesy of Ashford Castle

*Welcome to* Checking In*, a review series in which our editors and contributors rate the best new (and revamped) luxury hotels based on a rigorous—and occasionally tongue-in-cheek—10-point system: Each question answered "yes" gets one point. Will room service bring you caviar? Does your suite have its own butler? Does the bathroom have a bidet? Find out below.*

## Ashford Castle


The castle is still rich with original antiques.
COURTESY OF ASHFORD CASTLE

**Describe the hotel in three words:** Fit for royalty.

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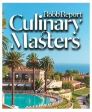

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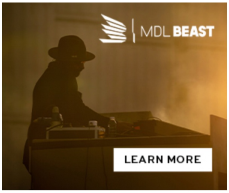
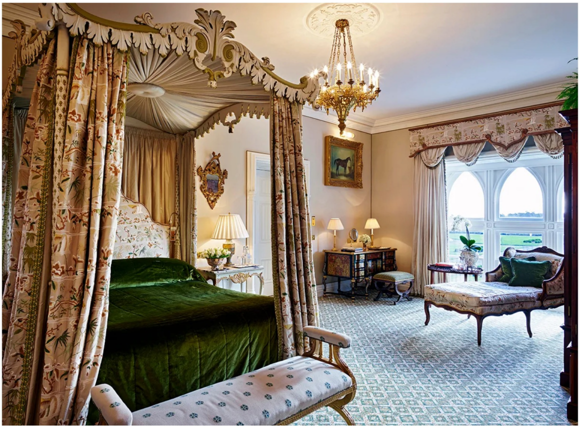


### What's the deal?

Ashford Castle, originally called Ashford Manor, has a long history. Most notably, it was owned by the Guinness family and used as their hunting estate before relaunching as a luxury hotel. After shuffling through a variety of owners over the years, it needed a complete refurbishment in order to survive. Thankfully, Red Carnation Group swooped in, purchased the property, and invested millions of dollars to bring it back to its former glory. The result? Impeccable service, unique rooms, and decor that plays an ode to the property's rich history.

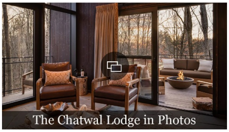
### The best room



The Reagan Suite is appropriately the castle's Presidential option.
COURTESY OF ASHFORD CASTLE

With a home in the oldest wing of the castle, the Reagan Presidential Suite is easily the most luxurious of all. It gets its name from President Ronald Reagan, who stayed in this room when he visited Ireland in 1984, and it lives up to its presidential name. The room is home to an antique George III-style poster bed, an original fireplace, antiques, and views of the Lough Corrib through its large, floor-to-ceiling windows. And while the property itself is spectacular, you could easily spend your entire stay in this room and be just fine. But if Reagan isn't your guy, opt for the Kennedy Suite, where a then-senator Ted Kennedy once stayed. From $2,308, bed and breakfast.

## The Rundown



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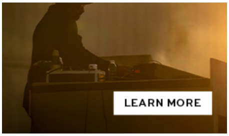

Ashford Castle has a one-to-three staff to guest ratio.
COURTESY OF ASHFORD CASTLE

**Did they greet you by name at check-in?**

Yes, I was greeted by name the moment I stepped out of the car from the airport. The staff was incredibly warm and engaging and handled everything.

**Welcome drink ready and waiting when you arrived?**

There was a bottle of house-made sherry waiting in the room—perfect for a nightcap spent sitting by the in-room fireplace—along with a dark chocolate statue of one of the estate's Irish Wolfhounds.

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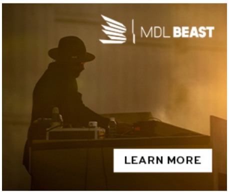

**Does the resort have a standout perk?**

During your visit, you should not sleep on the wide range of onsite experiences. Most of the staff has been at the hotel for generations, and many of these activities are hosted by individuals who have had the craft passed down through their families. The standout among the wide range of options was the on-site falconry experience. It allows you to bond with a hawk while it trails you through the woods, zooming through the forest above you before landing on the glove for a treat. Some other fantastic activities included horseback riding, daily morning walks with the estate's Irish Wolfhounds, clay shooting, and archery.

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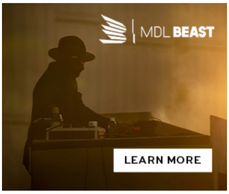

**Private butler for every room?**

While there wasn't a private butler for each room, with a three to one staff member-to-guest ratio it almost felt like there was. The staff was extremely attentive, taking notes of every personal single preference. For instance, one of the dinners at the property had an incredible pie that I raved about it. Somehow, the next evening, the recipe was left in my room for me as a surprise. Little thoughtful touches like this happened throughout my stay, and it made the experience truly stand out.

### Is the sheet thread count higher than 300?

Of course, all the beds are outfitted with 400-count Egyptian Cotton sheets that are embellished with the castle's crest.

### Is there a heated floor in the bathroom? What about a bidet?

The floors are heated—and it came in handy with Ireland's cold, unpredictable weather. There is also a bidet. The experience was made better by the massive marble bathtub and heated towel rack.

### Are the toiletries full-sized?

No, there were travel-sized Voya-branded toiletries by the sink and near the bath and shower. The hotel was generous though, and everything was always replenished whenever I needed.

### Is there a private pool for the room's exclusive use?

The pool is housed in glass conservatory.
COURTESY OF ASHFORD CASTLE

Nope (show us a castle that does!), and honestly it's not necessary. Onsite, the spa has a serene indoor pool along with Éalú, the resort's recently opened wellness center.

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### Are the restaurants worth their salt?

Chef Liam Finnegan runs all things culinary at the property but the fresh produce from the onsite gardens, along with locally-made products are the stars. Let's start with the George V. Dining Room, which is home to the daily breakfast and evening fine-dining experience. It serves up a wine selection that's carefully curated by the team of award-winning sommeliers, alongside dishes that highlight the estate's gardens. Equally as amazing is the afternoon tea in the Connaught Room. A large menu of specialty teas (with flavors like Irish whiskey cream and apple crumble) is offered alongside finger sandwiches, warm, homemade scones, and fresh handmade pastries. Every one of the seven onsite venues is fantastic. Other dining options include the casual, BBQ-themed food at the Dungeon, the seafood at Cullen's at the Cottage, the open-kitchen bites at Stanley's, or the light menu options available at the Drawing Room.

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**Is there caviar on the room service menu? If so, what kind?**

While it's not on the room service menu, it is offered on the Drawing Room menu. The staff would happily accommodate in-room requests and serve up the Ashford Castle Royal Ossetra Caviar, which has a Caspian Sea origin.

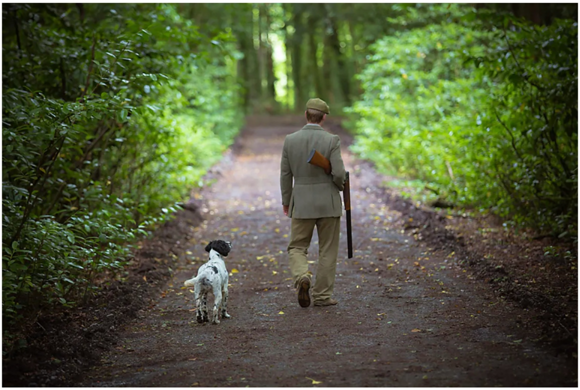
**Do you want to spend Friday night in the lobby bar?**

No question. The inviting atmosphere, homey fireplace, and delicious cocktails served up at the Prince of Wales bar make it the perfect spot for a nightcap.

**Would you buy the hotel if you could?**

Absolutely, if anything so I can live out my childhood princess dreams. As an adult, it would be the perfect escape. There would be cozy nights by the fireplaces, quiet morning walks through the gardens, and nights spent screening my favorite shows in the cinema.

## The Verdict



Outdoor activities are the primary emphasis of the castle.
COURTESY OF ASHFORD CASTLE

The owners of Red Carnation Group promised the staff at Ashford Castle that it would become one of the best hotels in the world. It did.

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**Rates:** from $509.

**Score:** 9

1-3: Fire your travel agent if they suggest you stay here.
4-6: Solid if you're in a pinch—but only if you're in a pinch.
7-8: Very good. We'd stay here again and recommend it without qualms.
9-10: Forget booking a week. When can we move in permanently?

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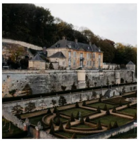

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