



GO OVERNIGHT

BERNICE HARRISON STAYS AT MULRANNY PARK HOTEL, IN CO MAYO

TWICE last year we tried to book into Mulranny Park Hotel, in Co Mayo, for a family weekend away. Both times it was full – surely the only recommendation you need in this time of huge hotel-room oversupply – and, as is the way of these things, being knocked back made us all the keener. What this hotel has in spades, and those empty new hotels most decidedly don't, is history.

Opened in 1897 as a railway hotel to serve travellers on the Midland Great Western Railway, it was given prime position high on a hill, with uninterrupted views of the Atlantic Ocean.

The tracks ran behind it, a few steps from the back door, and the remnants of some of the red-brick railway buildings are still there, awaiting restoration.

There's something about imagining the hotel's first guests: well-heeled Victorians chugging down from Dublin to spend a couple of weeks at the seaside, having afternoon tea in front of a blazing turf fire after returning from a bracing walk in the hills. My father remembers spending two summers there in the late 1930s, when it was a busy though slightly faded family hotel, staying in an attic room with a tiny round window overlooking the sea and passing the days fishing off the pier at the end of the causeway in front of the hotel.

There's also its location. If you want to explore Achill island, which we did, the other local options – mostly B&Bs – might not appeal, and Westport, a town with no shortage of family-friendly hotels, is too far away.

It was third-time lucky during last month's midterm break, because while the hotel itself was booked out (again!) we were offered a two-bedroom apartment in the grounds, for the same price as a hotel package.

It was ideal. When the children are just centimetres from being able to look you in the eye – ours are nine and 12 – the all-in-together, children-go-free option, with everyone piling into one bedroom, starts to get a bit claustrophobic, and connecting rooms are both rare and, often, expensive.

So we jumped at the apartment and were glad we did. It was modern, bright and very large, with sea views and a balcony to enjoy them from, plus a tiny kitchen with everything we would have needed – fridge, two electric rings, microwave – to rustle up a dinner.

Mulranny Park had been closed for a time when the present owners took over and reopened, about five years ago, after a big refurbishment. They did a stylish job while being faithful to the hotel's history: the reception area still has a fireplace, for example – with a turf fire blazing away throughout our stay – but it's also a free Wi-Fi zone.

As well as the apartments, the refurbishment included a small leisure centre with a 20m pool, sauna and steam room and outdoor hot tub.

The magnificent dining



Popular: Mulranny Park and, below, an apartment living area

room, home to the Nephin Restaurant, with its high ceilings, bay windows and views straight out of a Paul Henry painting, is a posh place to have dinner. It's not often on a family weekend that a meal starts with an amuse bouche – tiny and very delicious tuna cakes – and that set the tone for the rest of it.

The children's menu should be instantly copied by hotels everywhere. There was no sign of the dreaded chicken nuggets and plastic pizzas that feature on so many children's menus. Instead, our two ate grilled chicken with mash and spinach. It was included as part of the package, but we noticed that it would have cost €6.50 – good value for good food.

Breakfast was the usual

buffet affair – nothing special but good all the same – and as both mornings we managed to get a table in a bay window, before the ever-changing sky, we considered this one place where you could eat the scenery.

Our trip to Achill turned out to be a little dispiriting. As we were getting petrol along the way, the attendant advised us that "it's been ruined altogether, too much building", and he wasn't far wrong. The 40km Atlantic drive is still magnificent, and the island has an amazing five blue-flag beaches. But look back towards the villages of Keel, Dooega and Dugort and you'll see cluster after grim cluster of holiday homes, the vast majority empty and forlorn when we visited.

- **Where** Mulranny Park Hotel, near Westport, Co Mayo, 1850-336000, mulrannyparkhotel.ie.
- **What** Four-star hotel with apartments and leisure centre.
- **Rooms** 41, with 19 two-bedroom apartments.
- **Best rates** Two nights' B&B for two adults and two children, with dinner for four one night, cost us €399.
- **Restaurants and bars** The atmospheric Waterfront Bar has a good menu. (Excellent seafood chowder costs €6.) Nephin Restaurant has a

- three-course menu for €50.
- **Child-friendliness** Children welcome, family rooms (including children-stay-free-with-parents offers), seasonal kids' club.
- **Accessibility** Accessible rooms available. Apartments unsuitable if your mobility is compromised, as they involve an outdoor walk from the hotel, and steps up and down to the apartments.
- **Amenities** Spa, gym and leisure centre, free Wi-Fi. The railway has been paved over, so you can walk or cycle the 18km to Newport.

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