

SUNDAY Travel

SANTA BARBARA
NEWS-PRESS

PAGE D14

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IRELAND



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTO

At Roscrea castle in County Tipperary, the main guardhouse, or keep, a typical Norman structure, dates from 1280.

Castles and countryside



TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

History isn't difficult to find
on the Emerald Isle

By ANNE Z. COOKE
and STEVE HAGGERTY
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

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Our daughter, Andrea Kitay, admired the "trip steps" spiraling up to the top floors. Tilted and uneven, they were designed to thwart attackers storming the upper stories. But Katie, her 12-year-old daughter, looked bored, convinced we were taking her to another museum, the second that day. That is, until we reached the *garderobe* on the second floor, a windowless closet with a hole for a toilet.

"The toilet drains down to the courtyard," said Daphne Hastings, a guide in the castle, a Norman fortress built in 1280. "But the pipe is curved. Can anyone guess why?" We shook our heads. "To prevent an invader from shooting an arrow up into your bum!"

And why was it called a *garderobe*? "It's French for 'guarding the clothes,'" said Ms. Hastings, with a twinkle in her eye. "The Normans, who spoke French, stored their wool cloaks here. The ammonia smell kept the moths away."

When your family hails from the Emerald Isle, as half of ours does, it seems only natural to look for history. Ireland's landscapes — windblown cliffs, rolling hills and misty rivers — provide some of the clues. But seeing where people lived is a window



Glin Castle, hereditary home of Desmond FitzGerald, 29th Knight of Glin, overlooks the River Shannon in County Limerick.



Coopershill House in County Sligo, a restored Georgian country manor house, dates from 1774.

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Ancient castles lay out the welcome mat

IRELAND

Continued from Page D14

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"When restoration began in the early 1990s, archeologists found the moat," she said. "And right here, under our feet, they found an *oubliette*, a dungeon where they tossed the prisoners and forgot them. Think of how damp and dreadful it was when it rained."

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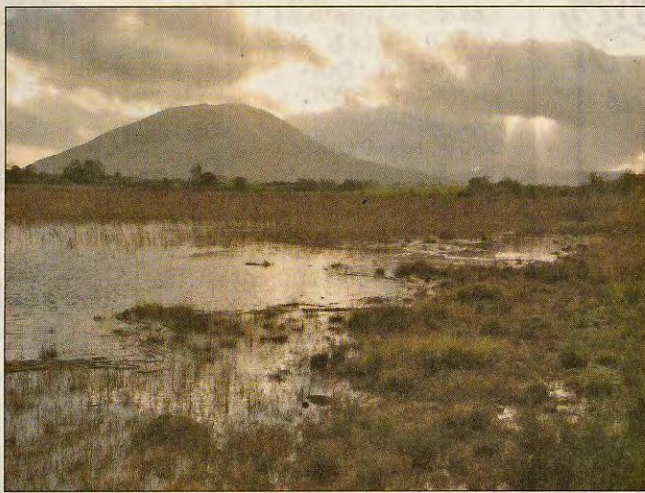
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"I suspect that they converted to Protestantism along time ago, probably to hang on to the house," said Ms. O'Hara, showing us to our rooms, each decorated with canopy beds, silky linens, flowery fabrics and private bath with 6-foot-long tubs. For 250 years, the O'Hara children had looked out these windows at green meadows and the blue-grey hills beyond.

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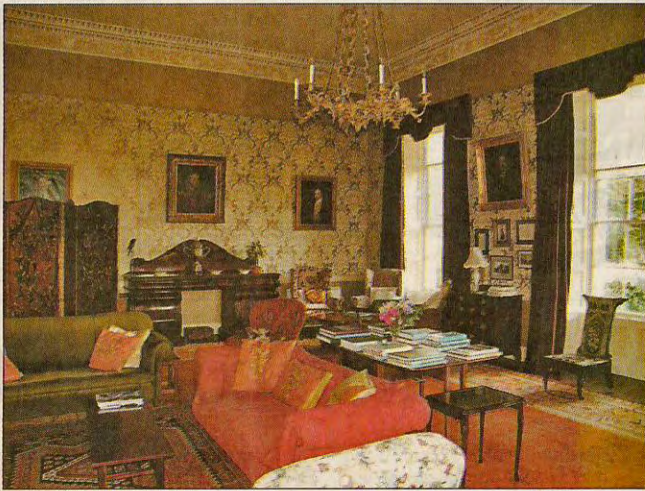
After washing up, we joined the other guests — an English and a German couple — in the living room, where Mr. O'Hara was serving cocktails. All around, the possessions of several centuries glowed in the firelight: Chippendale chests, Queen Anne cabinets, side tables, chairs, bookshelves, family photos, books and Ms. O'Hara's personal collection of African artifacts. Gold-framed mirrors and family portraits hung on the walls.

At 8:30, when we were ravenous and Katie was almost too tired to eat, Ms. O'Hara announced dinner,



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

The myth of the Emerald Isle is reflected in silvery clouds over Lough Conn at Ennisceoe House in County Mayo.



Ennisceoe House's living room offers guests a warm fire, comfortable chairs, books and games.

a five-course meal served under the gaze of the O'Hara elders, captured in oils. Candlesticks on two sideboards illuminated a gleaming collection of family silver. Katie perked up, we ate dinner and tumbled off to bed.

The next day we went walking, following country lanes through a few of the estate's 500 woodland acres. Katie ran next door to see the deer farm, run by Mr. O'Hara's brother. We could have played tennis or gone fishing, but we decided instead to tour Sligo town nearby.

Our next stop was at Ennisceoe House, near Crossmolina, in County Mayo. Hidden from the road, the house stands on a small rise overlooking the shimmering waters of Lough Conn, with Mount Nephin on the far shore.

The manor, a pinkish stucco house with a plain facade, dates from the mid-1700s, as does the original, and now restored walled garden, now ranked among Ireland's finest. Owners Susan and D.J. Kellett, the 12th generation to live here, are active supporters of historic preservation in Ireland, and knowledgeable about current projects.

"Do walk over and take a look at the garden," said Ms. Kellett, pointing us toward a gate in the wall. "There's a local culture museum, too, and the Heritage Centre, created

by the Irish Genealogical Project. If your ancestors came from Mayo, you'll find them in the records."

Like Coopershill, Ennisceoe has a room-sized entry hall, several huge living rooms and a formal dining room. But the graceful staircase to the upper floors, spiraling up in a perfect oval, is unique. We sat in front of the fire until late, talking to Ms. Kellett, and admiring her family heirlooms: polished chests, sideboards, bookcases, portraits, framed watercolors, candlesticks, maps, stacks of books on gardens and architecture, grandfather and mantel-piece clocks, china figures, vases and Delft ware. It felt like family.

Like most of the "Blue Book's" houses, breakfast is included, and dinner is served, but optional. We ate there, by candlelight, a delicious dinner with a fresh, locally-grown green salad. The Kelletts also have two- and three-bedroom apartments built over the converted stables, ideal if the trout fishing, horseback riding and golf course tempt you to stay longer.

Our last "Blue Book" choice was Glin Castle, owned by Desmond FitzGerald, the 29th (and last hereditary) Knight of Glin, a famous collector of 18th century decorative arts. The Castle, on the south bank of the Shannon River, built in stages from 1720 on, is surrounded by 500 acres

and an award-winning garden, open for guests to explore. But it was the interior, a showcase for Mr. FitzGerald's collection, we found so fabulous.

Nearly every table and chest displays antique china, figurines, precious boxes, bayonets, bowls, plate swords, antlers, letters, landscape paintings and family portraits. An immense collection of framed political cartoons hangs in the upstairs bedrooms. The formal dining room glitters with silver and crystal, and the meals are exceptional. If only our ancestors had lived like this.

Our last stay was at Ashford Castle in Cong, a 90-minute drive from Shannon Airport (SNN: www.shannonairport.com), our departure point. Ashford, now an 83-room hotel, was first built in the 13th century and enlarged and restored many times. Now palatial in size and appearance, it overlooks Lough Corrib, surrounded by rolling green sward. Eventually converted to a five-star hotel, it has two baronial dining rooms, wood-paneled lounges with lake views and 24-hour service.

But what caught our fancy was outdoors. Here, on 2,000 acres, are Ireland's historic pastimes: a golf course, riding stables, clay pigeon shooting and trout fishing on Lough Corrib, ranked second best in Europe. At the Falconry School, Katie took a two-hour lesson in the art and skill of handling one of the resident Harris hawks.

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Castles and countryside

ANNE Z. COOKE, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

May 14, 2006 7:43 AM

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