

spent my teenage years immersed in Pony Club and spent as much time as possible every day in the saddle. I've worked at barns in the U.S. and abroad, and I've done my share of riding cross-country. But these days, as a middle-aged mom of two living just outside New York City, my riding time is limited. I'm able to part-lease a nice dressage horse, and when I visit my parents on their farm near Tryon, North Carolina, I can ride to my heart's

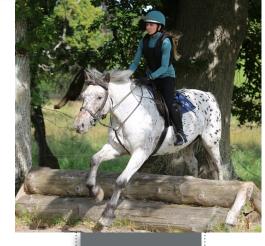
content. But my opportunities to school cross-country these days are few and far between. When I arranged a trip to Castle Leslie Estate in Ireland (EQLiving Gold List seven-time winner of favorite destination) in September that included a cross-country schooling session, it was with equal parts excitement and apprehension.

Castle Leslie Estate, located on 1,000-acres in Glaslough, County Monaghan, is a horse-lover's fairytale come true. The full-service equestrian facilities feature top-notch stables, miles of bridle paths and cross-country jumps, and an indoor arena.

I traveled with my friend George Barry, whom I've known since we were teenagers in Pony Club, and our families have remained close friends over the years. George and my brother were both on the International Tetrathlon exchange team in the late 1990s, and he's a very capable rider, but he now lives in Christchurch, New Zealand and works in the city. While he recently went on

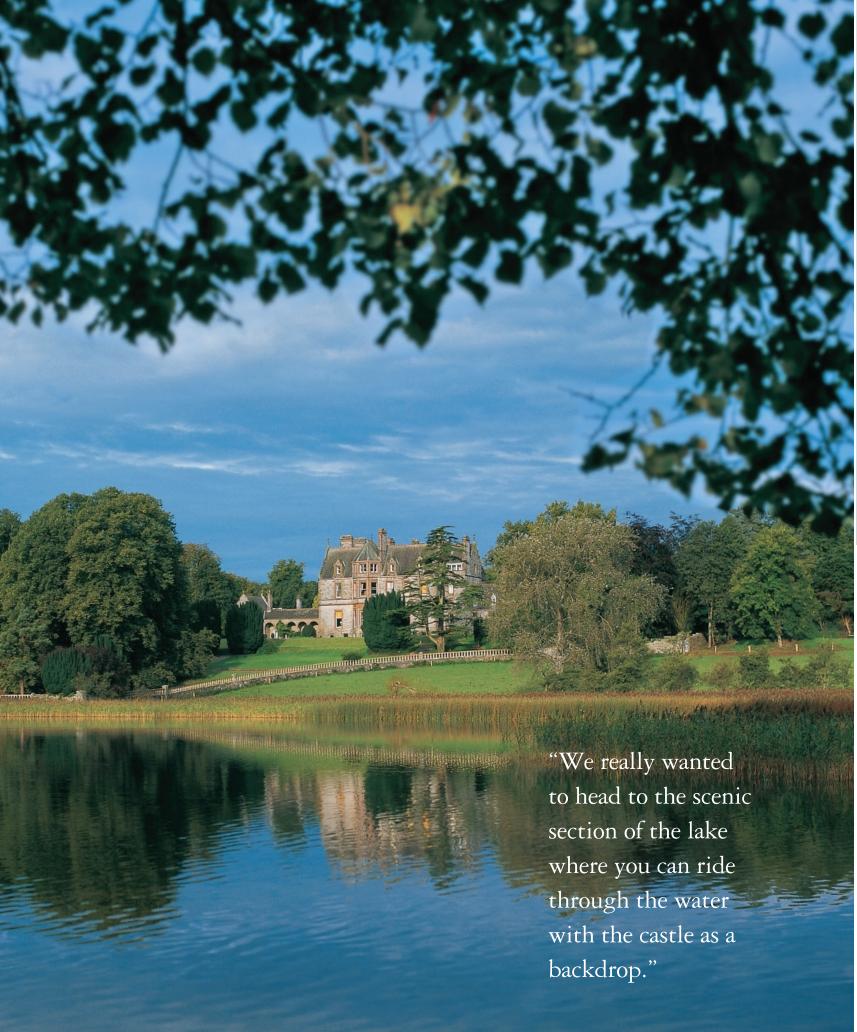
a riding trek, he is also out of practice and short on time in the saddle—though he competes in Ironman Triathlons these days, so he certainly has the fitness.

George was back in Ireland visiting family, and we met up at his childhood home near Kells, County Meath. He was able to scrounge up an old pair of riding breeches and his brother's old hunting boots that probably hadn't seen the light of day in a couple of decades. (Mark has lived in London for more than 20 years now.) The brown tops gave



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COME TRUE.







him some vintage, fashionable flair.

The person I'd emailed at the stables assured us that they stock a quality selection of certified helmets and body protectors. I am notorious for over-packing, so I decided to spare the space in my suitcase and leave mine at home. I did pack a pair of breeches in a performance material, lightweight and quick-drying waterproof paddock boots (Irish weather being unpredictable), lightweight half chaps, and a pair of woven gloves (which offer better grip than leather when they get wet). Thunderstorms had

been predicted, but the morning dawned sunny and warm, and a long-sleeved sun shirt completed the ensemble.

A night in the Lodge, where the rooms overlook the stables, with a gourmet six-course dinner in the evening and a full Irish breakfast the next morning in Snaffles restaurant left us refreshed, well-fueled, and eager to get in the saddle. Our session was booked for 11 a.m., and I checked with the front desk staff, who graciously allowed us to check out late so we could shower and change after riding since we were leaving that day for our next destination.



to the indoor arena for an introductory session.

The horses are well-trained and used to a variety of riders, and we put them through their paces at a walk, trot, and canter and schooled a small show jump at trot and canter so that Steven could assess our abilities. I've ridden mostly Thoroughbreds in eventing over the years, and their forward and light way of going that tends to require more support from the rider is strongly in contrast to the Irish horses, who tend to be heavier, strong, and independent-minded. You're better off giving them their head, keeping your leg on, and sitting back,



trusting that they know their job.

While Steven explained that there are a few different options for schooling, we really wanted to head to the scenic section of the lake, where you can ride through the water with the castle as a backdrop. We had scheduled a one-hour session, and began by crossing through a preserved conservation area, then hung a right up a hill past the Flying Five, a series of log jumps where we would end the schooling session later that morning.

At the top of the hill, we reached the front of the castle, which is also accessible by a road from the Lodge. We stopped well in front of the building and its manicured lawns for a quick photo opportunity and then proceeded along a dirt track lined with stately old trees and flanked by lush, green pastures where the horses are turned out daily. Beyond the pastures, we could see the glint of sunlight on the lake, our ultimate destination, but we had to loop out beyond the fields to get there. On the way, we hopped over a couple of small logs, Steven advising us to take it slow and get a feel for the horses. They were eager to jump, and Blueberry took the

lead with Arnie close behind. I began to feel confident that this would be a straightforward, positive experience.

Many years ago, when I was working at a show-jumping yard near Naas in County Kildare, and George was building cross-country jumps at Punchestown, the two of us embarked on another riding holiday. We schooled cross-country then and jumped massive stone walls, combinations, ditches, and banks. The horses were sure-footed and eager, making the jumps seem easy, but before this trip, it

was in the back of my mind that a repeat of that experience might be out of my current comfort zone. I needn't have worried as all of the jumps at Castle Leslie Estate are on the small side, maybe the equivalent of novice height here.

After going through a gate near the Old Stable Mews, which are also available as accommodations, we headed back towards the castle and jumped a few fences along the way. Steven advised that I sit back a bit and keep my leg on, and Blueberry sailed through without a care in the world. My lack of riding fitness frustrated me because my lower leg wasn't as secure as I'd have liked. But

overall, I was pleased that I was still able to maintain my position in the saddle, and, because the jumps were small, I felt like a kid on a big pony out for a lark in the fields.

t the lake, we let the horses splash around a bit, took some photos with the castle in the background, and met up with the larger group of American riders, who watched our schooling session for a few minutes before moving on. George and I

trotted through the water and out over a couple of steps up.

Steven gamely took my phone and recorded videos of us riding, which we enjoyed watching later. After jumping a couple more fences near the water, we walked the horses back across the field and then up the lane toward the castle, chatting amicably on the way. Steven shared stories about the estate and the horses that live there and talked about how he'd left the horse world for a while but was drawn back to riding and enjoys his days working at the stables.

At the castle, we turned right and came to our final

destination, the Flying Five. Steven gave us some advice for riding the line at a steady pace and suggested getting the horses to the base of the fourth fence, the largest of the five, and keeping our leg on. He waited at the top of the hill with the video rolling while we walked down to the bottom and then cantered back up, the eager Blueberry once again taking the lead with Arnie following close behind. By now, I felt like I was back in the groove and in sync with the mare, and the line rode perfectly. Steven took us on

a short walk through the woods to see the ice house that once served to keep food for the castle cold, and he continued chatting about the history of the estate. As the horses cooled down from their exertions, both George and I were grinning from ear to ear as we gave our horses lots of pats and praise and walked them back to the stables. We were both thrilled to be back in the saddle, enchanted by the fairytale setting and feeling on top of the world.

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