



Weekend Travel

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Christmas crackers

Looking for a festive hotel break in Ireland this year? Skip the seasonal stress and washing-up with Nicola Brady's round-up of 30 great residential packages...

Have you ever considered spending Christmas in a hotel?

At first glance, it may seem an impersonal step (and certainly an expensive one). But allow your thoughts to drift a bit. Picture someone else taking care of all the cooking, serving, entertaining and, crucially, the washing-up. Christmas in a hotel also brings lots of organised events, from carols to carriage rides, Santa visits or movie nights. It can allow a larger group of friends or family to get together while enjoying the escape hatch of their own rooms, or separate areas to lounge, chat or swim.

A hotel setting could also be the change of scenery a growing family needs — taking the pressure off the cook, the family home and, in some ways, the wallet (in a hotel, it may be easier to spread the cost of drinks, for example).

You'll make new memories, too.

Your eyes may water at some of the rates. But Christmas hotel breaks at Adare Manor, Cashel Palace, Ashford Castle and Ballynahinch have already sold out for 2024 — some at prices in the thousands of euro. "Many of our guests make their reservation for the following Christmas while spending Christmas at Ashford Castle," says director of marketing and revenue Regina O'Donoghue. "It's one of our most popular experiences, and by March each year, there are usually only a handful of rooms remaining."

It's only October, however, so there is still availability out there. Some Irish properties have kept their rates the same as last year, but a few have definitely snuck up — I noticed a 20pc increase in some cases. But it's important

to check what the price includes when weighing up the value. Christmas packages tend to bundle everything from mulled wine receptions to champagne breakfasts, Christmas dinner and an evening supper, to meals on the surrounding days. There are usually festive activities, too, and you will often be able to control costs by booking one-, two- or three-night stays.

Here are some ideas to get you started...

Budget (<€600pp)

Salthill Hotel, Co Galway

If you're a fan of the Christmas morning swim, this is the place to be. Set right on the prom, Salthill Hotel is just a few minutes' walk from the Blackrock diving board, where there'll be plenty of Santas taking a dip in the bracing waters in aid of the charity Cope. Afterwards, head back to the whirlpool, sauna and steam room at the hotel, where you can warm the cockles before a five-course Christmas lunch.

Details: Two-night package from €495pps; salthillhotel.com

Ocean Sands, Co Sligo

One of the best-priced packages we've seen, this break still includes all the usual offerings — mince pies on Christmas Eve, the full dinner and buffet on Christmas Day, and live music to boot. You've also got the beach right on your doorstep, so you can walk off all of that turkey and stuffing, and there are dog-friendly rooms, too.

Details: Two-night package from €325pps; theoceansandshotel.ie

Sheraton Athlone, Co Westmeath

While all of the main tourist attractions are closed over Christmas, there's plenty to keep you occupied in Athlone. You can take a Christmas morning walk on the Shannon Banks Nature Trail, or bring bikes to explore the Greenway. But if you'd rather stay in the hotel, you can make use of the pool or enjoy the live music, which takes place every night over Christmas. There are one- and three-night packages, too.

Details: Two-night package from €479pps; sheratonathlonehotel.com

Limerick Strand Hotel, Limerick

There's plenty of action here for families, as well as an indoor pool that will keep the kids happy. But the real selling point at Christmas? Children under the age of 12 stay free, with their meals charged on a consumption basis. There are also milk, carrots and cookies for Santa in each family room, and he'll make an appearance on the day itself. If you've been woken at dawn, the 7am breakfast start (complete with Buck's fizz) will be more than welcome.

Details: Two-night package from €535pps; strandlimerick.ie

Sligo Park Hotel, Sligo

While most packages are based on two people sharing or a family, it's great to see a well-priced single room. This one is perfect if you're bringing a solo grandparent or relative,

or if you just want to do Christmas on your own. There's a candlelit dinner on Christmas Eve with cocktails beforehand, and breakfast is served until noon on Christmas Day — ideal for the late sleepers.

Details: Two-night package from €559pps, €679 for a single room; sligoparkhotel.com

Hodson Bay Hotel, Co Roscommon

Hodson Bay is always a great shout for family breaks, but it comes into its own at Christmas. Santa makes his appearance on Christmas Day, and there are plenty of festive activities for kids. When you need to calm things down, a stroll around the lake will do the trick. The same is on offer over in sister hotel Galway Bay, too.

Details: Two-night package from

€479pps for adults, or from €214pps for kids; hodsonbayhotel.com

Redcastle Hotel, Co Donegal

If you have any fussy eaters in your family, the massive carvery selection at the Redcastle Hotel will make for an easy Christmas — there's plenty on offer alongside the usual turkey and ham, so you can go for lamb, pork or even a salmon with seaweed butter. There's a swimming pool and an onsite cinema that'll be showing Christmas movies, and if you did want to stay longer, the four-night package starts at €575pp.

Details: Two-night package from €429pps or €215pps for kids aged 5-12; redcastlehoteldonegal.com

Farnham Estate, Co Cavan

We all know that Christmas can be stressful. But it would be nigh-on impossible to feel stressed at Farn-

ham. On Christmas Day, you'll wake up to a feast of a breakfast, with the rest of the morning free to wander the estate or make use of the excellent indoor/outdoor pool, before the big meal in the afternoon (and an evening buffet, for good measure). If you want a low-key, calming Christmas, this is the one to beat.

Details: Two-night package from €449pps; farnhamestate.ie

The Galmont, Galway

Check in on Christmas Eve, and you'll be able to head down to the Galway Christmas Market in Eyre Square, which this year is open for an extended period until January 7. Back at The Galmont, you'll have plenty of festive treats on arrival, before an evening of food and entertainment. Be sure to sneak in a quick session in the outdoor hot tub, too.

Details: Two-night package from €570pps; thegalmont.com

Fitzwilliam, Belfast

Belfast is a cracker of a city at Christmas time, and while the main market shuts up shop on December 22, the dec-

orations and lights still give the whole town a festive vibe. This package at the Fitzwilliam offers great value — all the usual inclusions are still there, with a champagne reception and four-course meal (you can also swap the turkey for venison or sirloin, if you're feeling controversial). While kids are welcome, this one is better suited to couples, rather than families.

Details: Two-night package from €396pps; fitzwilliamhotelbelfast.com

The Clarence, Dublin

Dublin is magical at Christmas, and on the day itself, the city is pretty much empty, so you can stroll the streets and feel like you've got the whole town to yourself. The newly refurbished rooms in The Clarence are cosy and cool, but it might be worth upgrading to get more space — the lobby and bars are great, but city hotels don't have the lounging spaces that larger countryside spots have. This package includes breakfast and Christmas dinner.

Details: Two-night package from €539pps; theclarence.ie

The Metropole, Cork

The Metropole has been open for Christmas for 126 years, so they really know their stuff. "We work very hard to make

sure everyone has a good Christmas," says general manager Roger Russell. "We've a few regular guests who come alone and we sit them together, if they're happy to do so. Christmas can be a very lonely time for many people. That's the great thing about spending Christmas at The Metropole — you're not alone."

Details: Two-night package from €550pps, single from €827; themetropolehotel.ie

Mid-Range (<€1,000pp)

Lough Erne Resort, Co Fermanagh

On a cold, misty morning, the estate at Lough Erne is the perfect backdrop for Christmas. And inside, things are even cosier, with open fires, eggnog and bedtime stories by Mrs Claus on Christmas Eve. There's a caveat, though — unusually, this package doesn't include all of your meals, so if you want dinner on Christmas Eve or a nibble on Christmas evening, it's on an à la carte basis. A five-course Christmas dinner is included though, as is breakfast.

Details: Two-night package from €793pps; loughernereresort.com

Clontarf Castle, Dublin

They go all out with the decorations at Clontarf Castle, and

while the property combines medieval vibes with more modern areas, there's a quirky feel to the whole hotel. On Christmas Day, the big meal is served in the Great Hall, and if you opt for a three- or four-night break, then your dinner is up in the beautiful Fahrenheit restaurant. The Atrium Lobby is a lovely space to hang out in during the day, too.

Details: Two-night package from €699pps; clontarfcastle.ie

InterContinental Dublin

If you want to wake up in your own bed on Christmas morning, a stay at the InterContinental is a great shout —

with its two-night package, you can choose to arrive either on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. And it's a dreamily elegant spot in which to spend a couple of nights, with beautiful decorations and meals served in the swish Seasons restaurant. The in-house pool and thermal suite is a nice addition, and you can even get spa treatments on Christmas Day.

Details: Two-night package from €895pps; intercontinentaldublin.ie

Newpark Hotel, Kilkenny

If you want to make sure the kids are properly entertained, Newpark is always a safe bet. This Christmas, there will be carol singing, a visit from Santa, festive movies in the cinema and the swimming pool will be open on St Stephen's Day. Even better, the animatronic dinosaurs and adventure playground of Jurassic Newpark will be open on Christmas Day, as will the kids' club, with movies, crafts and games. Be warned, though, this one's booking up fast.

Details: Two-night package from €729pps; newparkhotelkilkenny.com

Glasson Lakehouse, Co Westmeath

There's a gorgeous country house feel to Glasson Lakehouse, with roaring fires, squishy sofas and the views of Lough Ree in the background. Even better, the activities don't shut down for Christmas, so you can take a dip in the outdoor pool or make use of the driving range. There are also dog-friendly rooms, and it's not just the kids who get a gift from Santa — your pooch gets festive treats and a Christmas present, too.

Details: Two-night package from €655pps; glassonlakehouse.ie

The Shelbourne, Dublin

Considering what some five-star properties charge, The Shelbourne is well-priced at Christmas time, and the setting is magical, with a giant Christmas tree and beautiful

festive displays. While the two-night package isn't all-inclusive, you can choose to have your Christmas feast at lunch or dinner time. And let's face it, after a massive breakfast and a huge Christmas dinner, you'll probably be too stuffed for anything else. You can also stay just for one night, from €530pps.

Details: Two-night package from €770pps; *theshelbourne.com*

Break the bank (€1,000pp+)

Glenlo Abbey, Co Galway

The spirit of cosiness is properly in the air at Glenlo Abbey come Christmas, with open fires, twinkly lights and a full roster of festive movies showing in the plush Abbey movie theatre. Meals are served in the swish River Room Restaurant with the Ffrench Room set up for pre-dinner drinks or nightcaps, and you can have your Christmas Eve dinner in the Pullman Restaurant, made up of two carriages from the Orient Express.

Details: Two-night package from €1,350pps, three nights from €1,650pps; *glenloabbeyhotel.ie*

Lough Eske Castle, Co Donegal

You'll have plenty of time to settle in with this package, which is four nights long as opposed to the usual two. It kicks off on December 23 (though no meals are included on this night), so you'll wake up there on Christmas Eve, with all the usual bells and whistles until you depart on December 27. It's well-priced for kids, with children aged 5-12 costing €389pps if they're sharing your room, or from €581pps if you want to kick them out into their own. Older kids are from €650pps.

Details: Four-night package from €1,121pps; *lougheske-castlehotel.com*

Powerscourt Hotel, Co Wicklow

Often, some of a hotel's amenities are closed on Christmas Day, even if the property itself is open. But at Powerscourt Hotel, you can make full use of the stylish swimming pool on Christmas morning, and you'll even be treated to a falconry display on the grounds on St Stephen's Day. If you're bringing kids, they get reindeer dust and carrots for Rudolph, and your treat will be a glass of bubbles with breakfast the next morning.

Details: Two-night package from €1,255pps; *powerscourt-hotel.com*

Mount Juliet, Co Kilkenny

They're sticking with tradition at Mount Juliet and offering a four-night package for Christmas, so while the price looks a little high, you're getting a solid break away. For that, the majority of meals are included, as well as an afternoon tea on St Stephen's Day and lunch on Christmas Eve. You also get an archery session and Segway tour of the estate, which you can take on December 23 or 26. Accommodation is slightly cheaper (€1,495pps) if you stay in Hunter's Yard, rather than the Manor House.

Details: Four-night package from €1,615pps; *mountjuliet.ie*

Center Parcs, Co Longford

We've steered away from self-catering packages for this piece, though there are some great options available. An exception was made for Center Parcs, where the prices are fairly decent for a three-bed cabin, which sleeps up to six. Sure, you don't get all the bells and whistles included, but you can book in for Christmas lunch in one of three restaurants (€90pp), explore Santa's Woodland Village and the Enchanted Light Garden (included), or book into the Aqua Sana spa, open every day bar Christmas.

Details: Four nights from €1,849; *centerparcs.ie*

Hayfield Manor, Cork

Hayfield Manor has been offering Christmas packages for more than 25 years now, and it has it down to a fine art. Every year, the team (some of whom have worked there for more than 20 years) welcome back families who have spent Christmas there time and time again, from when teenagers were babies. There's a specially themed drinks reception, a turndown gift every night and live entertainment, as well as all the usual meals and visits from Santa.

Details: Three-night package from €1,750pps; *hayfield-manor.ie*

Castlemartyr Resort, Co Cork

While Christmas dinner might not be served in the

36 IRISH INDEPENDENT **Weekend Magazine** 7 October 2023

Michelin-starred Terre, you'll still be in for a treat at Castlemartyr. A five-course dinner is served on Christmas Eve after a cocktail reception and carols from a local choir, and there'll be classic Christmas movies shown in the Living Room to give you that festive feeling. The grounds are ideal for an in-between-meal stroll, too.

Details: Two-night package from €1,200pps; *castlemartyrresort.ie*

Harvey's Point, Co Donegal

Christmas at Harvey's Point always sells out early, but there are a couple of rooms still available this year. It's a more immersive vibe, with guided walks, pub quizzes, a cooking demonstration and a horse-drawn carriage ride. "The one thing that we try to do is think about the details — a welcome Taste of Donegal hamper in the rooms, personalised gifts for the kids," says general manager Niall Coffey. "Whatever the guest needs, they get. We really thrive on that home-from-home experience."

Details: Three-night package from €1,100pps, with the option to stay for free on December 23; *harveyspoint.com*

Carton House, Co Kildare

Why should kids get all the fun? At Carton House, you'll wake up on Christmas morning to a stocking at your door, before heading down for a feast of a breakfast. You can take a stroll around the grounds to the giant Christmas tree before a champagne reception that precedes a five-course feast, with a relaxed supper in the evening.

Details: Two-night package from €1,125pps; *cartonhouse.com*

The K Club, Co Kildare

There are plenty of little details at The K Club that make for an extra-special Christmas. As well as all the usual inclusions, there are golf swing lessons for adults and kids, magic shows, archery demonstrations and yoga classes. You can get a family portrait taken, check out the Irish dancing display or enjoy carols sung by the Dublin Gospel Choir. There's even a fully decorated Christmas tree in your room.

Details: Three-night package from €1,545pps; kclub.ie

Ballyfin, Co Laois

If you're after next-level luxury, Ballyfin is the place to be. You'll arrive to lunch in the State Dining Room before mince pies and carols, then a wine tasting, champagne accompanied by a live pianist and a lavish dinner. And that's just on Christmas Eve. The luxury continues on Christmas Day with Santa arriving on a horse-drawn carriage, which you can hop on yourself on St Stephen's Day, before a spot of archery and clay pigeon shooting.

Details: Three-night package from €2,588pps; ballyfin.com

Dromoland Castle, Co Clare

If you're always disappointed with your own decorating attempts at Christmas, you'll love the set-up at Dromoland Castle, complete with a massive gingerbread house. Your meals are accompanied by a pianist or ballad singer, there's a Hawk Walk on St Stephen's Day and the package also includes an afternoon at Limerick Racecourse, complete with transfers.

Details: Three-night package from €2,532pps; dromoland.ie

The Merrion, Dublin

While the Christmas packages at The Merrion don't include all your meals, you do get breakfast and the Christmas Day lunch or dinner – a four-course lunch or dinner on Christmas Eve is €150pp. If you stay three nights (from €1,530pps), you also get top-level tickets to the Leopardstown Christmas Race Festival on St Stephen's Day, including coach transfers to and from the hotel.

Details: Two nights from €990pps; merrionhotel.com



*NB: All prices subject to change/availability.
Be sure to check exactly what the price includes
(including meals) before booking*



Clockwise from left: Lough Erne Resort; Glasson Lakehouse; Clontarf Castle; and The Shelbourne



The cozy interior of Glenlo Abbey at Christmas