



SO COOL IT'S HOT

The Ice House Hotel & Spa's sublime food, spectacular views and uber-luxurious decor left **Lucinda O'Sullivan** more than impressed

You only have to look at a picture of the Ice House Hotel & Spa, across the broad expanse of the salmon-rich River Moy, to know that this is a special place in a special location. With the expert duo of Ray Byrne and Jane English involved in this hip development in the north-west, this is not just an Ice House, but an ice-cool place to be, for this couple are also behind the superb Wineport Lodge in Athlone and the Lisloughrey Lodge at Cong.

The hotel is set on a picturesque stretch of the river at the Quay in Ballina, and, from it, there are spectacular views of the rippling water and the wildlife, including gambolling seals with their young in search of a seafood dinner.

The Ice House, a protected structure built in 1859, was originally the Moy Fishery Manager's house and a cold store for salmon exports. Empty for many years, it has been brought back to life in a style that complements the historic building, but brings it right into the 21st century.

The Ice House is very individualistic and is the very definition of a hip, luxury retreat: a perfect getaway from the stresses of modern life, with 28 bedrooms and seven suites located between the main house and the dazzling, ultra-contemporary wings. They have been luxuriously and individually designed with floor-to-ceiling windows, huge beds with goose-down pillows, and equipped with the latest technology — everything that is required by today's discerning guest. We were in a heritage suite, the Moy, which is decorated in a faded French *chateau* style, with a bathroom that just cried out to be photographed.

The 80-seater Pier Restaurant and cocktail bar in the high, vaulted cellars of the Ice House juts out into the River Moy, ensconced in a spectacular glass box. Chef Gavin O'Rourke's food was excellent, displaying a confident attention to detail with many eclectic elements in each dish. A la carte starters were €12-€19. We kicked off with an *amuse bouche* of sublime sauteed foie gras with soldiers of

sweet, aromatic, home-made *pain d'epice* and onion marmalade. Indian-spiced Newport scallops (€19-€35) were available as a starter or as a main course, and, being a fan of Indian food, I just loved the slightly different take, for a non-Asian restaurant, on this luxurious mollusc. The starter portion comprised four scallops, seared and lightly spiced, lined up elegantly with baby fennel, asparagus and a red chilli, and drizzled horizontally with cumin yoghurt and chilli jam.

Brendan had confit of organic salmon (€16) with buttered kale and a mango and chilli salsa. Delicious.

Mains (€23-€39) were equally interesting. Superb roast pheasant (€34) with coppa — a cured ham — celeriac puree and parsleyed mushrooms was rich and refined; a virtual triumph of game at its best. Pan-seared halibut (€33) was also a cracking dish. A perfect tranche of fish was served on a featherweight bed of red chard, red onion, roasted red peppers and basil mash.

After all of that, we were pretty well sated, but we couldn't resist the urge to see what Caribbean panna cotta (€8), promising sweet chilli and coriander syrup with coconut ice cream, would produce. We weren't disappointed — four different elements on a plate; sophisticated and sublime.

The wine list is quite extensive and we enjoyed a bottle of Luis Canas Crianza, Villabuena de Alava, Rioja 2005 (€35). There is also a table d'hote menu (€33-€39) available from Sunday to Friday.

The staff are charming and attentive. The Chill Spa is superb and offers an extensive range of treatments; I indulged in a pedicure. There are also numerous spa packages, and a selection of Ice House breaks from €225 for two nights bed and breakfast, including one dinner. The uber-cool Ice House is one hot destination. ■

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