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GO OVERNIGHT

PATSEY MURPHY VISITS THE CLIFF HOUSE HOTEL, CO WATERFORD

IT'S A BIG improvement on the old place," a local woman said approvingly as she and her husband had a good snoop around the shiny new Cliff House Hotel in Ardmore, Co Waterford, last weekend. Built into the hillside at a slant, with the roof cloaked in alpine greenery, it is what you'd call smart architecture. If it could talk, it would say: "I am not an eyesore. I am anything but a carbuncle." It's also something of an engineering feat, linking two buildings across seven levels and ensuring that all the rooms and attractions look out over Ardmore Bay, with the services hidden away in the back. It makes the most of a stellar location at the edge of an unspoilt seaside town.

The original hotel had been sliding slowly seawards for about 80 years before Barry O'Callaghan, founder of the global educational software company Riverdeep, got involved with the site.

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He spent his boyhood summers in Ardmore, first in a caravan and later in a house, and still returns there with his own children and extended family. Plans for an apartment complex had outraged the town, and it is said that locals convinced O'Callaghan to rebuild the hotel instead, to benefit the area.

It clearly turned into a labour of logistics as well as love, but it opened three weeks ago with an impressive team at the helm. In Adriaan Bartels, formerly of Sheen Falls Lodge, in Kenmare, it has one of the most genial hotel managers in the country – a true hotelier – and this alone should set it apart from the plethora of hotels opening with seemingly no manager at all. With him comes a celebrated Dutch chef, Martijn Kajüter, who has been in situ since September, sourcing local ingredients and establishing a herb and vegetable garden with help from the community at St Raphael's Centre in Youghal. His food has already won high praise from Darina Allen, thus the Cork and Waterford cognescenti have been swift to swoon.

We arrived in evening light and were instantly seduced by the view and prospect of sundowners on the terrace. There is a lot to marvel at: dolphins diving as if on cue, rock pools just below the terrace, the expansive bay, sculpted headland and sandy crescent along the shoreline. Then we went inside for dinner and – wow! – had a five-course meal of rare



Bayside: Cliff House Hotel and, below, one of its 39 rooms

would say, but three of us oohed and aghed our way through some very fresh and innovative cooking. A starter of seasonal vegetables with a simple balsamic reduction and tendrils of sweet pea decorating the plate, for example, tickled me silly. The lapsed vegetarian among us raved about the lamb and duck. A dessert plate of eight flavours of ice cream and sorbets knocked us over.

Great wine list, too, from which Adriaan Bartels recommended a Brouilly to match our diverse selections.

There was a private party going on in the best end of the dining room, where 18 people can share a long communal table and try the chef's taster menu. Three courses cost €62.50, four courses €70, nine courses €90. If you choose the latter, hire a crane.

All but nine of the 39 bedrooms have terraces carved into the hillside, making them completely private, so you can sunbathe in the nip. The bathrooms are lavish, with elaborate waterfall-like taps, clever lighting, opalescent mosaic tiles and opaque glass walls to

let in daylight. Musk Etro toiletries and enormous towels, as well as oversized pillows, soft linens and Donegal tweed blankets, add to the luxury. Headboards are backlit and there are welcome individual reading lights.

Books from the Riverdeep/Houghton Mifflin publishing house, natch, are widely available. Rooms have comfortable armchairs and come stocked with fresh fruit and bottled water. If the sound of the sea isn't enough for you, there's Wi-Fi, a flat-screen TV, a CD player and a radio.

Breakfast is all freshly cooked to order. Seriously delicious preserves, including honey from An Rinn. Yum.

The indoor pool is tiled with sparkly mosaics – very inviting. Steps down to the rock pools, for heartier outdoor swimmers, are still being built; they will also have a pontoon in aid of water sports and sea excursions.

For now the food alone is worth the journey, but be sure to book. If we had any quibbles, it was that we found the dining room too small. The food and the view deserve a more expansive space.



■ **Where** Cliff House Hotel, Ardmore, Co Waterford, 024-87800, www.thecliffhousehotel.com.

■ **Ambience** Cliffhanger of a cool, expensively-built new boutique hotel.

■ **Rooms** All 39 bedrooms have sea views; all but seven have balconies. The private dining room seats 18; the reception room with its own garden would accommodate a small wedding or party of 40.

■ **Best rate** €180 per room, including breakfast.

■ **Childfriendliness** Adjoining family suites available, although decor seems rather precious for happy little larks.

equipment. Spa with three treatment rooms. Pontoon for taking guests out around the bay or for picnics on seven nearby beaches.

■ **Restaurant** Stellar cooking by Dutchman Martijn Kajüter.

■ **Bar** Seafood menu popular at lunchtime. Overlooks bay, with access to terrace. Good wines by the glass.

■ **Access** Possibly the most tricky hotel to navigate, because of the way it spans seven levels across two buildings – but there are lifts.

■ **Local attractions** St Declan's Well, cliff walks and wonderful all-Irish crafts, clothes and jewellery from