

CLIFF HANGER

This luxurious hotel and spa is well worth the long drive down south, writes **John Lavery**

Ok, let's get the bad news out of the way first. Ardmore in Co Waterford is a long, long way from any BT postcode. Get beyond Dublin, and you're still not even halfway there. Get to Waterford City itself, and there's still the guts of an hour's drive ahead.

Driving like a maniac and allowing for no traffic snarl-ups and wrong turns on the way, you could get from Belfast to Ardmore in around five hours. But in normal conditions seven might be a little more realistic.

Well, if any place is worth covering 235 miles of road in one day, the Cliff House Hotel certainly is.

The long drive is soon forgotten when you settle into this superb hideaway which has recently been built into the side of a sheer cliff overlooking the quaint little fishing village of Ardmore.

It has 39 rooms, some of which have not one, but two balconies looking out over the sea. The one we stayed in was magnificent.

With two huge flat-screen televisions, DVD and CD player, fridge, separate living quarters, a bed that Russell Brand would drool over and one of the finest hotel bathrooms I've ever seen, what would drag you out of it?

This boutique-style hotel reeks of opulence, but it isn't shoved down your throat. It is compact, elegant and classy, bathed in natural light courtesy of the acres of glass designed to make the most of the jaw-dropping views over the Irish Sea.

The food was faultless too; all locally sourced and prepared under the guidance of head chef Martin Kajuter, a Dutchman who learned his trade under Marco Pierre White and Michel Roux, among others. It shows on the plate.

The restaurant — overlooking the sea, of course — is simple in its design but all you'll be really looking at is the outside view and what's being laid out in front of you.

The in-house menu, which offers three-course

dinners for €65, certainly didn't disappoint. Even before we got to our chosen dishes the waitress brought us a surprise, complimentary chef's appetiser, a delicious concannon cocktail served in a martini glass. Nice touch, that.

We then had Helvik prawns and West Cork scallops to begin, followed by McGrath's black Angus beef and Skeaghanore duck. For dessert I had chocolate 70%, while the other half went for a selection of cheese.

Grub is also available in the bar, which has big pictures of the modern building's quaint but less functional predecessor.

On the breakfast menu is Glenilien Farm yogurt, Ardmore Honey, cereals, scones, croissants, baked breads and the inevitable full Irish brekkie. Smoked salmon is an a-la-carte option.

Did I mention the Well Spa? Like everything else in this five-star establishment, the devil is in the details and with seaweed treatments, manicure, pedicure, massage, Jacuzzi, sauna, steam room and swimming pool on its list of attractions, it's a terrific place to while away a couple of hours.

There's also a path down the cliff to a rock pool; perhaps next summer when it's a bit warmer.

The fishing village down the hill may be idyllic, allegedly the oldest Christian settlement in Ireland and the setting for three novels by American writer Nora Roberts but, the views apart, Ardmore has little to offer those who prefer something more adventurous than a walk along the beach and a jar in the bar afterwards.

You would, nonetheless, end up finding a shallow reason to get back to the Cliff House, where it goes without saying that the staff were friendly, courteous, helpful and — most importantly for me — non-intrusive.

The Cliff House Hotel is the sort of place you go to if you're not afraid to spend a few quid (or euro). It's also one of the few upmarket places where you leave feeling it's been worth every penny.

TRAVELLERS' GUIDE

How to get there: Ardmore is in Co Waterford and is signed from the N25. The hotel is on the edge of Ardmore village overlooking the sea.

Staying there: The Cliff Hotel has nine Deluxe Sea View rooms available at €225 per night; 7 Deluxe Balconies, €245 per night; 8 Deluxe Terraces, €265 per night; 3 Balcony Suites, €300 per night; 8 Terrace Suites, €330 per night; 4 Cliff Veranda Suites, €450 per night. Check for offers.

Further information:

Tel +353 (0)24 87800 or visit thecliffhousehotel.com



LAVISH: (From top) the hotel bedroom; balcony views and dining room