



Chilling out in the mild West

KIRSTY WILKIE headed to **Westport** in County **Mayo** for some Clew Bay cod and a spot of reflexology...

UN one of the most western points in Ireland, deep in County **Mayo** overlooking Clew Bay sits the quiet little town of **Westport**. Shadowed by the towering Croagh Patrick, Westport has become an extremely popular destination for long weekends and short breaks in Ireland.

It was dry and sunny when we set off on the drive across Ireland for what was to be our girlie-getaway. Taking the most direct (and quickest) route direct to the west coast from Belfast we headed west to Enniskillen where we stopped for a lovely late lunch at Maud's Ice-cream parlour and café.

Forgetting that the UK and Ireland are well on the way into the winter season, we sat on at lunch longer than we should have, and by the time we got back on the road again the sun was quickly sinking on the horizon. It was just past 7pm when we drove into the beautiful little town of **Westport** and immediately we were impressed. Litter and loud free, with plenty to do **Westport** is the perfect place for a quick, cheap break.

The **Castlecourt Hotel** and its sister hotel, the **Westport Plaza**, sit adjacent to each other in a sort of semi-circle formation around an inner courtyard with an ornate fountain marking the middle. The fabulous **Spa Sula** is serenely tucked away toward the back of the resort, which only adds to the tranquility of its location.

We had booked in to the luxurious **Castlecourt Hotel** and wasted no time at all in driving to the back of the hotel and parking the car in the underground car-park (completely free of charge) and heading straight for our room. Tired after the drive we checked out the room service menu and ordered the Chicken Curry with rice and chips. Included in our package were two ½ bottles of wine in our room, which went splendidly with the spicy curry, also two little boxes of chocolates, which we ate as a lazy dessert.

The next morning we got up pretty early and headed down for breakfast (which is also included in the package). After helping ourselves to the continental buffet a waiter came to take our orders for the hot breakfasts. I opted for the Clew Bay breakfast of cod and toasted brown soda (wheaten bread to you and I).

After breakfast we took a quick walk around the town, popping into the Tourist

Information centre to have a chat with the lady there about her recommendations on the best places to visit in the area.

She was very helpful (if a little vague about the distances to these places) so we hopped back in the car, map in hand, and headed along the Clew Bay Archeological Trail out towards Roman Island. Our destination for the morning was Croagh Patrick and the Famine Memorial, and we found it about 20 minutes drive outside the town. Croagh Patrick is one of Europe's best known places for pilgrimage each year many climb barefoot in memory of St Patrick, who according to legend spent 40 days and 40 nights fasting on the summit.

The National Famine Memorial sits opposite the car park and the foot of Croagh Patrick and overlooks the Atlantic Ocean, facing out to the west where so many emigrants sailed. The memorial, entitled 'Coffin Ship', was designed and created by artist John Behan. The bronze sculpture takes the form of one of the emigrant ships, the rigging of which is made from bronze skeletal figures. It is an extremely moving monument. Situated just down the lane from the Memorial is Murrisk Abbey. On the east of the Abbey there is a window carved with human heads on the outside wall.

Back in the car again, it was off north to Achill Island, the largest island off Ireland. If you like to do a bit of sightseeing then I definitely recommend you either drive to **Westport** or hire a car once you're there and it's a good idea to note that although the locals may say "agh it's just up the road there", their idea of "just up the road" may not be the same as yours. After 40-minutes of "just up the road there" driving we realised that Achill Island was probably a two-hour round trip away from **Westport**, but since we were already more than half way there we kept on driving, stopping only for the sheep, dogs and cows that occasionally wandered across the road.

Achill Island is attached to the mainland by Michael Davitt Bridge between the villages of Achill Sound (on Achill Island) and Polranny (on the mainland). If you drive to the north-west of the island you will reach the beach at Keel, which is excellent for gathering the kind of shells where you can hear the sea if you put them to your ear.

I'm one of those people who just can't

resist a spa, so as soon as I had learned there was a spa at **Castlecourt Hotel** I picked up the phone and was booked in for a treatment. Described as a 'luxurious temple of harmony for body, mind and spirit' as soon as you walk through the door you feel at ease and relaxed.

The spacious tranquil sanctuary is designed to allow you to de-stress. Everything from the specialised dry and wet heat cabins, rock sauna, steam room, salt grotto, tropical rain showers, foot spa, ice fountain, heated relaxation room, rasual chamber, heated outdoor Jacuzzi rock pool and the Zen garden unwinds, detoxifies, cleanses and relaxes body, mind and spirit.

I'm a big massage fan and typically go for a full body massage, so in order to get out of my massage rut, I instead opted for a spot of Reflexology. This ancient pressure point foot treatment concentrates on a map of the body's organs and structures. This is a technique used to help the body's natural healing process and after a 60 minute

session (half an hour on each foot) my therapist was able to tell me all about my neck and shoulder pain and even the headaches I sometimes get if I don't wear my glasses when working on the computer! Having spent the day in a mixture of careful driving through the coastal roads of west Ireland and blissfully chilling out in **Spa Sula**, it was with much effort that we left the hotel room and headed to the restaurant for dinner.

The **Castlecourt Hotel** has two restaurants to choose from, the Orchard Restaurant (where we had breakfast) and the Courtyard Bistro while Petie Joes Bar provides live music every night. If they're fully booked you can pop across into sister hotel, the **Westport Plaza** and try out the menu in their Restaurant Merlot or the Plaza Bar. The Library Lounge is the perfect place for some afternoon tea or a quick panini.

After discovering that the Orchard was fully booked until after 8.30pm (our own fault for forgetting to reserve a table) we nipped across to Restaurant Merlot in the Plaza.

After an absolutely mouth-watering Sirloin and a delicious melt in the middle Chocolate Pudding we were thoroughly full and took a little walk about town to walk off our sins.

For such a small town, **Westport** has quite a number of little pubs, restaurants and hide-away bars, most offering traditional live music and 'good craic' - we walked the long way around town, down the river and over the bridge then back up past the little church, which has been converted into an Indian and Thai Restaurant.

Few towns in Ireland have as much charisma and charm as **Westport**. Great for family holidays, romantic getaways, and girlsie spa breaks, it's no surprise that this small coastal town is fast becoming one of Ireland's top holiday destinations.

Factbox

For more information on the Castlecourt Hotel and **Spa Sula** log on to www.castlecourthotel.ie or www.spasula.ie.



BLISS: **Spa Sula** has a wide variety of treatments on offer - try the Reflexology or a Swedish Massage



The outdoor heated outdoor Jacuzzi rock pool, Zen garden and relaxation room