



Style and substance

Siobhán Cronin was impressed with a **Mayo** town rivalling Galway for a cool getaway

WEEKEND BREAK



THE pretty **Mayo** town of **Westport** must be close to rivalling Galway as one of Ireland's top trendy weekend destinations. From its spectacular mountain scenery, which includes the majestic Croagh Patrick, to its unspoilt beaches, and its myriad high quality hotels and pubs, it's a perfect venue for a getaway trip.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

One of those high quality hotels is the **Westport Plaza** hotel, just across a smart courtyard from its sister hotel, the Castlecourt. The marriage of the two hotels means they can share facilities — guests of the Castlecourt can pop across the courtyard to the stylish Sula spa and the guests at the Plaza may wish to avail of the Castlecourt's popular leisure centre.

THE ROOM

Our double room upstairs had no great view, but we did have a very cosy nest to relax in. The clean marble-tiled bathroom had a separate power shower and jacuzzi bath.

THE FOOD

Our package included one evening meal so we dressed for dinner and found our way to the street-level Merlot restaurant. It was packed with families and holidaying couples when we arrived but the staff had kindly booked us a table near the back of the quiet mezzanine area. There seemed to be plenty of non-residents around us, too — always a good sign of a hotel restaurant, and we understood why, when our beautifully-presented meals arrived. A typical evening meal at Merlot features a trio of

salmon, Clew Bay lobster salad or perhaps wood pigeon for starter, followed by rib-eye steak, monkfish or chicken — but fish is, of course, the speciality. To finish, we feasted on desserts from a menu that included crunchy coffee pyramid, ice parfait, fondants, crème brûlée, cheesecakes, cheeses and crumbles.

THE LOCATION

While both hotels are situated just off a busy street, snuggled up in your room, you have no idea how close to the centre of the action you are. But step outside the front door, and all the nightly delights of a busy tourist town are there. **Westport** is also a great shopping town, especially for giftshops like Carraig Donn and Market 57.

WHAT TO DO

The Plaza has its own **Spa Sula**, in the grounds of the hotel, with a connecting bridge from the first floor corridor. Unfortunately, you can only gain access if you have an appointment, so my partner, not having booked a treatment, missed the chance to see the smart thermal suite, the rock sauna, salt grotto, ice fountain, Rasul chamber — and my personal favourite, the outdoor heated rock pool with adjacent conservatory for post-dip relaxation.

Later that day we both ventured into the leisure centre at the Castlecourt. The compete antithesis of the adult-only spa, the pool was a magnet for young kids splashing about and chasing each other around. Great to keep the children occupied for a few hours, especially with the vagaries of Irish weather, but we could have done with a warning from reception, as it didn't really suit our romantic weekend break. I wished I had spent that extra time at the tranquil spa next door.

WHERE TO GO

Westport's top attraction, for me at least, is its location. Within a leisurely hour's drive from the hotel we had found ourselves at Ashford Castle in

Cong — recommended by the Plaza's delightful manager John Clesham — enjoying a Corrib cruise to lake islands with historian David Luskin. Afterwards we shunned the ridiculous entry fee to the gardens and main castle to dine instead at Cullens, a smart thatched cottage in the grounds, offering splendid lunches overlooking the lake and castle. The following day we headed in the other direction, to an old favourite — Keem bay at the far end of Achill island, and admired the new Greenway cycle route running from Newport into the island, complete with its own road crossings, miniature bridges and safety gates.

ANYTHING TO ADD

If you have been promising yourself a weekend treat, with a bit of luxury or spa treatments thrown in, and some nice scenery to entice you out afterwards, we can't think of a better destination than **Westport**. And the welcoming Plaza is certainly worth considering as your base when you get there. It has a deal at the moment with a midweek rate for October for dinner, bed and full breakfast from €85pps. See www.westportplazahotel.ie. And if you are there for Hallowe'en, check out **Westport House's** annual festival from October 29th to November 6th. From the Pirate Adventure Park, a captivating White Witch storytime in the 'haunted' house, to fireworks, and a Hallowe'en dance and fancy dress competition, see www.westporthouse.ie. See also MacTireBushcraft.com and visit Pik a Pot and Paint on James St.



The Westpac Plaza Hotel and its sister hotel, the Castlecourt, share a number of features including the Sula Spa; opposite, the spacious suites and the Merlot restaurant.