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Peace treat in Belfast

Rachael Scott gets a taste of a Millionaire's Makeover at a five-star resort that retains its earthy Irish charm

If you were looking for a relaxing break Belfast might not be the first place you'd think of, but the once troubled city offers a day of pampering so indulgent they call it the "Millionaire's Makeover".

You don't have to be loaded to stay at the Culloden Estate and Spa in Holywood, although plenty of its guests are. The recently refurbished hotel is a prime example of Belfast's urban renaissance. By turning the city's unhappy history into an asset, 30 years of civil unrest has given way to scented oils and chakra balancing.

The 5-star Culloden overlooks the Lough, Belfast's gateway to the Irish Sea, and stands in 12 acres of secluded gardens, five miles from the city centre. Originally built as an official Bishop's palace the chandelier and 19-century stained glass window at the foot of the stairs evoke a sense of bygone grandeur.

It now plays host to the England football team – David Beckham kicked a ball around the hotel corridors with the chambermaids before the World Cup qualifier – and celebrities can park their helicopter on the hotel's heli-pad before they tee-off onto the nearby sloping fairways of Ireland's oldest golf club, The Royal Belfast.

The Culloden's staff have that rare ability of being able to mix a relaxed approach with professionalism and that's probably why the celebrity guests didn't mind autographing the plastic duck that sits on the side of the bath in their room. There's a cabinet tucked away in the lobby full of signed bath time toys donated by the likes of Michael Douglas, Noel Gallagher and Alexander O'Neal, to name but a few.

I wondered if any of these rich artists had spent their royalties on the aforementioned makeover. At £1,200 free-flowing massages and manicures don't come cheap, but for the duration of your stay two therapists are completely at your disposal. Drinking vintage Cristal champagne in a bath drawn by my own personal porter after several spa treatments, seemed enticing indeed.

Alas, my budget didn't stretch to quite so many bubbles. Then again, who needs to be a millionaire when you can have an ESPA Aromatherapy Facial? My stress levels had already started to diminish the minute I looked out of my Executive Suite's huge windows onto the lush gardens and the Lough's natural waters. Unfortunately they were far too heavy to open properly, but by the time I'd experienced my first facial I was away with the fairies.

The Culloden recently spent £1/2 million improving the facilities in their spa. The number of treatment rooms increased to eight, the Zest Juice Bar was built for the nutrition-conscious and two relaxation rooms were added. The spa's design of beech flanked walls is minimalist and classy, but most of all, tranquil.

I was led into a relaxation room called 'Dawn' where I waited to be called by my therapist, Laura, who quickly assessed the state of my skin and how I wanted to feel after my treatment. "Energised" was my answer and a new lease of life was what I got by the time she'd finished.

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She went to work with a combination of cleansers, moisturisers, oils and mineral masks. I had asked her not to use any oils during my head massage as I had an important dinner that evening and little time to get ready. She duly obliged and the nine different potions she applied to my face didn't touch a strand either. Laura was far too professional for that.

So much so, that I barely knew she was there while she gently massaged my weary skin. It was all quite blissful and I didn't even mind her pulling my hair in an attempt to release the tension from under my scalp. She continued to apply pressure onto different points of my face and I learned that acupressure is part of the ESPA's holistic approach to making skin firmer and younger – activating lymphatic drainage will help remove toxins, I was told.

Stress alleviated I had a snooze in the 'Dusk' relaxation room, and if I do have a yin, a yang and a chi, then they felt completely balanced.

Page 1 of 2

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I'm sure the indoor pool with its clear glass ceiling was calling me as I made my way back to my room, but a tour of the city centre had to be done. Andrew, our informative guide, told me that Belfast now has a lower crime rate than the rest of the UK and as he drove down the Falls Road and into the Shankill Estate his explanation of the history behind the Troubles pulled my scattered knowledge together.

With my hair unruffled, dinner in the Mitre Restaurant was a civilised affair without being a stuffy one. Paintings by local artists were for sale on the walls and a refreshing alternative to the austere portraiture decking the walls of the lobby and grand ballroom. My gourmet meal consisted of chicken, smoked bacon and mushroom roulade, followed by saddle of venison with blackberry and balsamic jus. The white peach and champagne mousse for dessert was exquisite.

As I left I realised that Belfast has more to offer than most of us know and the Culloden is only a small part of the city's charms. Belfast is making a valiant attempt to move away from its past by injecting money and spirit into its best aspects and on a personal level my rejuvenation was a complete success.

In brief

USP It's beautiful setting and luxurious treatments delivered with down-to-earth Irish charm.

AMBIENCE Popular with wedding parties, golf weekenders, businessmen and 'Ladies who Lunch' doing their bit for charity by partaking in a 'Pink Afternoon Tea'. (£25 per person with £5 donated to the Ulster Cancer Foundation).

EXPERIENCE A friendly and relaxed atmosphere, the rooms aren't as grand as the hotel's 5-star rating would imply, but have everything you need. The Culloden's selling point is its spa and award-winning Mitre restaurant.

FOOD The Mitre delivers superior gourmet dishes with 5-star service. Less formal dining can be had at the Cultra Inn, a bistro/pub in the hotel gardens.

IN CROWD The go-to hotel for dignitaries and celebrities, with anyone from Tony Blair to Tom Jones staying in the Palace Suite.

WALLET WATCH Prices start from £170 for an Internet Special Single Room to £600 for the Palace Suite. ESPA Aromatherapy Massage: £60 for 55 minutes. The Ulsterman – a head and face aromatherapy treatment designed specifically for men: £60 for 55 minutes. Mini Millionaire's Makeover: £430 per person. Millionaire's Makeover: £1,200 for one person, £1,900 for two. Andrew Beggs, Professional Tourist Guiding & Tour Management Services, 13 Arosa Crescent, Belfast BT15 3EX, Northern Ireland. 07749 902 313

NEED TO KNOW Culloden Estate and Spa, Bangor Road, Holywood, County Down BT18 0EX (028 9042 1066; www.hastingshotels.com) Belfast International Airport – 22 miles. Belfast City Airport – 4 miles. Ferry terminals – 6 miles.

PREVIOUS PAGE Page 2 of 2

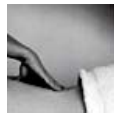
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