



Deck someone else's halls this Christmas and rent a castle, a mansion or even a lighthouse for the festive season, writes Dara Flynn

For most of us who do not live in elegant and spacious Victorian homes, the idealised image of the perfect festive family gathering is not attainable. The reality is as far away from the fairy tale striped stockings and candy-cane Christmas as you can get.

The vast majority of us, when burdened with extra family members to cater for, fret about where to put granny, wonder who will moan the least about having the box room, and panic about whether to buy extra chairs or borrow from the neighbours.

Unless, that is, we make the myth a reality by renting an exclusive period home — the sort of place where beds are

Continued on page 8 >>

The McGahans, far left, restored Ballinacurra House, inset, which can sleep 44 people and has a sumptuous interior, left

Ballinacurra House can be booked through "big house" specialists such as *Elegant Ireland*; elegant.ie. For other properties, see irishlandmark.com and irelands-blue-book.ie

'A STAY HERE ISN'T ABOUT BLING OR ABOUT SHOWING OFF. PEOPLE WOULDN'T EVEN KNOW YOU ARE HERE'

>> Continued from page 7

four-posters, hearths are at eye level and nobody needs to eat their Christmas dinner on their lap.

Given the current climate, demand for such rentals for the holiday season hasn't been as high as it once was. As a result, dozens of characterful heritage properties are still available for hire over the holiday period. They can be found on websites such as that owned by the Irish Landmark Trust, a charity that renovates heritage properties; *Elegant Ireland*, a luxury holiday rental website; *Ireland's Blue Book*, which as well as top hotels also has a handful of properties for exclusive hire; and private agents.

Corné Van Rensburg, 40, and his partner, John Purcell, 36, are already getting into the Christmas spirit in anticipation of their stay at Loop Head Lightkeeper's House, an Irish Landmark Trust property, near Kilbaha, Co Clare, over the holiday.

"I already suggested we bring Christmas jumpers with us. Or even those Christmas-themed onesies from Penneys," says the South African accountant, who has lived in Ireland for the past 12 years.

The pair will be joined on their

five-night stay by their friends Conor Breen, 47, a marketing executive, and his partner, Marcus Newman, 42, a business analyst.

The idea of a "home from home" for Christmas isn't a new one for the group. Purcell, an archeologist, has stayed at one of the trust's characterful properties before, while Breen and Newman tend to go away each Christmas.

Van Rensburg says the Lightkeeper's House was chosen for its size and affordability, as well as the fact that it's in a spectacular cliff-top location with panoramic views to Kerry Head and Dingle, across the Shannon and up to the Cliffs of Moher. "I'm even hoping for really stormy weather. Perhaps subconsciously there's a bit of a fantasy element to the exposed lighthouse experience," he says.

The group's Christmas stay is on a self-catering basis, and they plan to shop in advance, bringing plenty of pre-prepared Christmas foods such as rolled turkey, which can be readied easily in the property's modest but functional kitchen.

"There is a hob, plus two ovens and all the basics we need, but we'll probably pack some extra kitchen



utensils and saucepans just in case," Van Rensburg says.

Bedding and towels are supplied, but the house is likely to be undecorated, so he's planning to bring a "few strings of tinsel to make it look festive". There is no television and only basic mobile-phone reception, so board games and iPad movies will provide their entertainment.

On Christmas Eve, the four plan to take a three-mile hike to the nearest pub for a festive pint. On Christmas Day, braver members of the party intend to join about 50 other swimmers for the annual Christmas swim in a chilly Atlantic Ocean at Killee, half-an-hour's drive away.

Five nights, from December 23 to 28, are costing the group €670, which works out at less than €170 per head for the entire stay, making it an affordable, unique experience. "It means you can really spend on the food and drink," says Van Rensburg.

If having the run of a Georgian manor and surrounding estate, complete with personal chef, maids, butler and a heli-pad, is your idea of the perfect Christmas, Ballinacurra House in Kinsale, Co Cork, which is set in 40 acres of

lawns and woodland, is available for exclusive hire from December 22 to 26.

The plush house, which has an opulent Renaissance-style ballroom that can seat 40 people, is owned by Des McGahan, a former head of Prism, one of Asia's largest event-management companies.

He and his wife, Lisa, lived in Hong Kong for 15 years before selling the business and moving back to Ireland, where they bought and renovated

Ballinacurra. The McGahans travelled abroad to find authentic items to furnish the house and the theme of each room is based on a different country.

The result is a decor that offers manor-house luxury combined with a quirky, personalised element.

"A stay here isn't about bling, or about showing off. People wouldn't even know you're here," says McGahan, who is from Dungannon in Co Tyrone.

A variety of dignitaries and celebrities — including Michael Jackson, who stayed in the Bali-themed room for a month shortly before he died — have been guests at Ballinacurra.

This is a top-notch rental and is available on an exclusive basis only, as it does not operate as a hotel. Sleeping up to 44 people in the main house, stone cottage and gatehouse, the entire estate costs €5,500 a night to rent. There is a supplement for additional parties (to a maximum of 54).

"It sounds like a lot, but if you have a large group, it's quite affordable," says McGahan. "If there are 44 people, it costs €125 a night, fully serviced." The estate, at the time of going to press, is also available for exclusive hire from

Continued on page 10 >>



>> Continued from page 9

New Year's Day to January 3. For groups of a more modest size, McGahan will adjust the charges.

"We're quite fair — we can agree to hire a minimum number of rooms on a pro-rata basis of €125 per head per night, leaving the remaining rooms to lie empty for the duration," he says. In January, that figure drops to €100.

Only breakfast is included in the price. For evening meals, the house has a chef — David Rice, formerly of the capital's Chapter One restaurant and who catered for the Dublin Castle meal with the restaurant's owner, Ross Lewis, during Queen Elizabeth's visit in 2010.

Food is designed after consultation with the guests, so there is no set menu, and prices are aligned with upmarket restaurant prices.

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