

SOME people live and breathe for splashing the cash, finding a bargain or even window shopping, while others see it as a necessary evil.

But whatever camp you see yourself in, every retail expedition is improved by an overnight stay in a hotel, particularly if it comes with an outdoor hot tub and bedroom balconies looking out over lush green fields.

This is where I found myself, complimentary glass of prosecco in hand, after checking in to Voco The Club in Kildare. Located just off the M1 motorway, it's 15 minutes from Kildare Village, the perfect spot for finding those last-minute Christmas gifts or January sale bargains.

I'm something of an odd-ball when it comes to shopping as I don't love it or hate it, it all depends on my mood. So while I'm not likely to make shopping the sole purpose of a trip, I don't mind fitting in an hour or so if there is something I need to buy.

Once the crowds got too much and my interest began to wane, it was great knowing that a relaxing haven was waiting just down the road.

Immediately after checking in and enjoying the welcome drink, we deposited our wares and headed downstairs to the outdoor spa, which is simple and rustic but perfectly suited to its surroundings. There is something really decadent about indulging in a hot jacuzzi while the winter weather tries in vain to dampen your mood.

AFTER an indulgent hour on 'the Deck', it was time to bundle up in our cosy robes and head back to the warmth of the hotel to get ready for dinner.

Despite being so close to the motorway and the city, the abundance of green fields and paddocks surrounding the venue gives the feeling of being in the countryside and helps to keep the post-sauna relaxed vibe topped up.

There is no dress code for the bar or restaurant, with some guests in jeans and trainers and others putting in a bit more effort. As most of the diners are in their own secluded booth, the only deciding factor for your evening attire is how you feel yourself.

My favourite part of any meal out is the aperitif beforehand and we took our time over a G&T at the horseshoe-shaped bar, before heading to our table, which was located right in front of the kitchen, giving us a bird's eye view of the chefs at work.

The kitchen operates a zero-waste policy and the menu is simple but features plenty of classic dishes.

We opted for starters of soy-glazed sticky pork belly with pickled chilli and cod bifes with lemon mayo, followed by roasted hake with chorizo and slow



Close to a range of leisure activities, Voco The Club is an ideal place to flop after a day of adventure

# SHOP ... THEN DROP



BY  
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**ideal location: Voco The Club embraces its proximity to The Curragh. Inset, the hot tub with beautiful views**

cooked feather blade of beef. We had no room left for dessert, but there were plenty of options, including crème brulee, cheesecake and sticky toffee pudding.

Each dish we tried was both beautifully cooked and presented – and was very reasonably priced with starters costing from €8 and mains from €19.

After coffee, we bundled up in coats and headed out for a short, late evening walk, after following instructions to 'find the field with the ponies in' – but as the skies threatened rain, it wasn't long before we turned back and in due course, turned in.

Free from the usual nocturnal sounds and lights of the city, I enjoyed a dreamless sleep before waking

refreshed and ready for the day ahead.

Voco The Club doesn't have a wealth of amenities which would warrant a long stay, so after a perfectly cooked breakfast, with Monday morning business to attend to, we hit the road.

Despite being so close to Dublin Airport, the shops and theatres of the city centre, Kildare Village and the Curragh Racecourse, the hotel is great value. For convenience, affordability and a thoroughly pleasant stay, we will definitely be making a return visit.

## TRAVEL FACTS

Double or twin rooms from €116 per night, visit [clubhotel.ie](http://clubhotel.ie) for details.

'M Dutch by the way – from Holland,' he announces with a charming smile at the hotel's reception desk. That may well have been his opening chat-up line while we queued to enter the famous Casino Estoril on Portugal's Riviera all those years ago.

'What are your lucky numbers?' the tanned twinkly-eyed Dutchman inquired back then. Next, he invited me to join him at the exact roulette table immortalised in Casino Royale, Ian Fleming's first James Bond novel.

To my astonishment the numbers – 9 and 21 – brought Carlo (he was born Carl but his mother liked the name Carlo better) an ever-rising stacks of chips. My new friend, one of a large group of travel writers visiting ritzy Cascais-Estoril and fairytale Sintra, then bought everyone a drink.

In the decades since our eyes locked across the roulette wheel, I often joke how that win has been costing him dear in birthday baubles and wine ever since.

Returning to Cascais – where out of the blue I met my soulmate, having exited an unhappy first marriage – is bittersweet because so much has changed in our relationship of late.

'I get a bit older, that's all,' he says, shrugging off his ever-increasing memory loss and other difficulties. Dementia is an irrevocable and debilitating illness that affects at least 64,000 people in Ireland and global numbers are projected to rise to 139 million by 2050.

Speed was of the essence then while planning our recent return to Cascais, where our love story began more than three decades ago. Travelling with dementia – so what? I told myself, dismissing a few negative vibes from well-meaning family and friends, some of whom are themselves often stressed navigating travel environments like airports, train stations and public transport hubs.

Research is highlighting the benefits of travel with that mix of cognitive, psychological and social benefits for older people and people living with dementia. They can discover new experiences and conversation, as well as getting vitamin D and interesting food, giving a healthy boost to confidence.

Carlo had travelled the world during his long career in hard news and travel journalism, enjoying the buzz, colour and challenge of new horizons, practising his reasonable German and sketchy French abroad.

Looking back now over our four-night late September getaway, there were moments of panic when my Dutchman disappeared from view or needed cajoling and encouragement to emerge from the cocoon of our splendid bedroom, overlooking the sun-dappled shimmering pool and sea beyond. But they've fast faded in the fog of life. Another benefit is that he kept his summer tan, though he has since wondered where he got it from.

Only 30km north of Lisbon,



Cascais is among Portugal's top beach destinations, thanks to sailing-mad King Luis I, who chose the stretch of coastline for his summer retreat back in the 1800s, bringing the royal court and high society to the once sleepy fishing port on the edge of the Sintra mountains.

An avid cyclist since youth, back when we met, my future Dutch husband had won the 45-minute bike race organised for our travel writer group to wild and windy Guincho beach, a vast swathe of supremely photogenic sand. In those pre-electric bike days, I was among those battling the breeze bringing up the rear.

Biking is no longer possible now for him. Instead we have signed up for an 'old-timer' tour of the town and surroundings on our first full day, exploring this historic hideaway for fugitive European royalty who sat out wars in the lap of luxury in Cascais.

INTERNATIONAL spies, including Ian Fleming, used to hang out among the glitterati and double agents. What better way to infiltrate than from the sumptuous back seat of the late Queen Mother's Rolls Royce. The regal motor looks completely at home parked outside glitzy five-star Grande Real Villa Italia Hotel & Spa – once the home of Umberto II, the exiled last king of Italy – where we rest our heads amid eye-watering splendour.

As we purr through town, the 1954 Rolls Royce Silver Dawn is impressive enough to stop traffic and have pedestrians crane for a glimpse at its passengers, who are sipping pink champagne on the polished wood retractable table, leaning into the luxurious maroon leather upholstery.

The car's present owner, Jose Miguel Mira of Superb Tours ([superbtours.pt](http://superbtours.pt)), explains that the Queen Mother kept the Rolls for country drives and after many years of service it was donated to a charitable institution, ending up in an English garden, where a large tree crushed the car after falling on it during a storm.

'My father spent ten years re-building the Rolls – it is one of our most popular old-timers,' he says.

Leg space inside is extremely limited but the Queen Mother was petite so that would not have bothered her, I reflect, noting the footstool, and testing out the silk screen on the rear window that can be lowered for privacy. The bespoke cigarette lighter and ashtray