

SCENE & HEARD

WITH CHRISTINA WALLACE



As the festive season approaches I find myself simultaneously filled with a sense of excitement and dread. Whereas Christmas, like New Year, is one of those times where we feel almost obliged to be brim-full of festive cheer, the reality can be quite different. Navigating through this increasingly hectic time of year can often take the shine off what should otherwise be a time of celebration and good will towards all men.

Slipping on my rose-tinted glasses I can very easily recall many happy childhood Christmas' full of expectation at the prospect of much longed-for gifts appearing at the end of the bed on Christmas morning, and the long days that followed filled with classic TV shows such as the Morecombe & Wise Christmas Special (yes... I sadly can remember that) and the obligatory screening on Christmas Eve of that most magical animation, 'The Snowman'. Take off those specs and re-enter the adult world and what you have is a marathon-like shopping slog followed by at least 2 days of overindulgence in an atmosphere of forced civility that could leave even the most hardened diplomat reaching for the revolver.

So what to do? Over the years I have often considered the alternatives to this well established Christmas routine. There is of course the 'Holy Grail' of every harassed mother – Christmas away! The location... some suitably salubrious hotel where the battle of the brillo pad and the burnt Brussels sprout can be exchanged for a roaring fire, a large hot port, enough carbohydrate to fell a small elephant, and a chair big enough to act as a sensory deprivation tank. Alas, with the best intentions this is for most of us merely the stuff of dreams, and those wonderful Christmas brochures printed up by the Culloden Hotel and it's 5 star friends.

This scenario was brought home to me all the more on a recent visit to Dublin to watch my husband Paddy head out onto the field to play for Ireland against New Zealand. On that occasion we were fortunate enough to stay in the fabulously renovated Shelbourne Hotel, the (let's face it) crown jewels of Dublin's 5 star hostelryes. Always favoured by

the IRFU as the hotel of choice for Ireland Officials and players alike, the Shelbourne Dublin could not be more inviting if it tried.

Greeted by a very pleasant doorman called Norbett (he's Hungarian apparently), my car keys were taken, my bags packed neatly onto a trolley and my son and I escorted effortlessly into reception to check in. This is indeed 5 star luxury at its finest. With banana bread and mulled cider offered while I waited, I was then taken to my room, again by the lovely Norbett.

As I suspected, I was not disappointed. The rooms are carefully designed, with great attention to detail. Goose feathered duvets, a bed that felt like marshmallow, matching plump cushions,



thick embroidered curtains and the obligatory robe and slippers awaited. Paddy-Jack and I, famished as ever, headed straight for the menu, ordering organic chicken and fries for him, pasta and a large glass of sauvignon blanc for mummy. Perfect.

Within 15 minutes, a rather handsome waiter laid out a feast before us, complete with linen tablecloth, napkins and solid silver cutlery, we sat back and watched the Ireland v New Zealand game from the comfort of our cosy room. Despite the disappointing score, P-J was more than happy to play with his toys and occasionally and quite literally peer into the television screen to see daddy.

A hot bath later, a well fed, fat and contented baby, tucked up in his cot with a bottle of milk and a very charming nanny, provided by the hotel called Elsie (who also brought him a pair of rather fetching baby Shelbourne slippers no

THE BATTLE OF THE BRILLO PAD AND THE BURNT BRUSSELS SPROUT

less) and I was on my way downstairs to the dining room for the post match dinner.

I have to say the dining room, in all its glory, with crystal chandeliers, intricate cornicing, champagne décor and sheer size, would make even the most high maintenance of hotel guests among us, reel back in amazement. I have been at several dinners at the Shelbourne now, but the sheer beauty of this room, never ceases to take my breath away.

Seated at table 4, we took our places, as the Master of Ceremonies summoned us to dinner. At occasions such as these, they tend to mix the Ireland and visiting teams together, with 3 or 4 players from each squad, mingling together. I had the pleasure of sitting next to Conrad Smith, a rather handsome and intelligent 13. Conrad, a former solicitor in Wellington, knew Paul Steinmetz well and for 2 hours, we chatted about friendships we had in common, his future career plans, New Zealand, rugby (of course) facebook (of all things) and his love of all things Irish

All in all, the Shelbourne cannot fail to impress. Sumptuous, relaxing and welcoming are just some of the words that come to mind. The staff are attentive, the ambience and layout of the hotel, well considered, the food enjoyable, with a menu that does not overwhelm. For those of us, who feel they deserve a well earned Christmas break, the Shelbourne would be hard to beat. The ultimate yuletide fantasy escape.

For my part, back in the real world, although the idea of Christmas away does have undoubted appeal, it is never likely to make the move from the pages of the glossy brochure into reality. Much like the thought of winning the lottery, it's just a nice idea to be fantasised about in some quiet stolen moment after a long hard day. As the mother of a 22 month old son, the magic of watching him paddle down the stairs in his pyjamas on Christmas morning, eyes wide with excitement as he heads for the tree, could not be exchanged for any amount of 5 star luxury.

And so on this eve of the 'silly season' I find myself, resignedly but contentedly, once more planning another family Christmas at home. Yes... it could drive you mad if you let it, yes there will be times when you fantasise about selected members of your family being led away to solitary confinement, but still, although I would never openly admit it, like a guilty pleasure, I think I secretly enjoy it nonetheless.

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