

Reliving some very happy memories

She chose it as her wedding venue 13 years ago, so who better than **Susan O'Shea** to check out the new, revamped Ambassador Hotel

IT WAS almost 13 years to the day before we returned to the scene of the crime. Or, to be more precise, the venue where we held our wedding reception. The Ambassador Hotel on Cork's Military Hill was where we celebrated with friends and family after saying 'I do' and we hadn't been back inside its doors since. So, when word came through that the hotel had a new owner and had been given quite the makeover we were more than a little curious to see the results... and hopefully relive some very happy memories.

Back in 2002, when we tied the knot, the four-star Ambassador was part of the Best

Western Chain of hotels but, like so many other establishments in the industry after the crash, it underwent a change of ownership. It is now part of the McGettigan Group, which owns eight three and four-star hotels across the country, including the Kingswood Hotel in CityWest; the Royal Hotel, Bray; Dublin's North Star; and the Millrace Hotel, Wexford.

Back before we were Mr & Mrs, we had checked out a number of potential venues but were won over by the Ambassador. We had decided to tie the knot on New Year's Eve and wanted somewhere that felt intimate and inviting on a cold (and what



The Ambassador Hotel on Military Hill in Cork is under new ownership in recent years.

turned out to be a very wet) December 31. Some place that offered more than your bog standard wedding fare of overcooked beef or tasteless salmon (our menu on the day featured among others foie gras, champagne sorbet, barbery duck and john dory) and staff that would make us and our guests feel relaxed and welcome. The Ambassador Hotel fitted the bill on all those fronts. While some would probably have dismissed the hotel's look as being a bit 'dated' we were very taken by what thought of as its 'old world charm', its laid-back atmosphere and friendly but unfussy service.

When we drove back through the gates this time around, a little less radiant and a good bit more wrinkled than on our big day, we were delighted to see that the distinctive red-brick facade has been kept. Compared to some of the newer, breeze-block type establishments that sprung up during the boom and have about as much character as a face frozen by Botox, the Ambassador as a building is steeped in history.

Built in 1872 as a Military Hospital and then later occupied as a nursing home, it didn't start trading as a hotel until 1997. Its history means that its corridors and hallways are big and open, its rooms, particularly to the front of the hotel are airy and spacious, with high ceilings, and lack that cramped-box feel you get in some hotels, particularly of the big chain variety.

The new owners have added an outside terrace, where residents can sit and enjoy a drink, or those who refuse to abandon their tobacco habit can indulge it. Beautifully lit at night, it adds to the hotel without taking from its distinctive Victorian facade, though unfortunately the night we stayed heavy downpours and a whip-sharp breeze meant we couldn't take advantage.

Once you step inside the doors it's immediately obvious that some of that old world charm has been swept away and this is very much a bolder, more stylishly in your face Ambassador. The heavy carpets of old and chintz furniture have been replaced with a spanking new monochrome-styled lobby. It's open, airy and the front-of-house staff were friendly and very quick off the mark in checking us in. But while stylishly done, I felt the floor-to-ceiling wallpaper chosen for the corridor and hallways is over done and can feel almost overwhelming.

Upstairs, the rooms have all been given a makeover and while this time round we weren't fortunate enough to call the bridal suite our own, our extensive room at the front of the hotel looking down on to the city was more than adequate — big and airy with a high ceiling and a small balcony

should one feel like taking the night air. Flat screen TVs and free wifi are the other big additions.

Some of the old traditions still exist with afternoon tea on the menu, but if it's losing the pounds rather than gaining them which interests you there is a small but well-fitted out health club on the second floor.

One thing that has remained the same through the change of look and ownership is the staff, and the friendliness of the service on offer. It is hard to explain but they are just 'natural' in their approach, friendly, able to crack a joke, but efficient at the same time.

The old bar area has also been revamped and Season's Restaurant, with its starched linen table cloths, has given way to the much more up-tempo McGettigan's Cookhouse and Bar. We had a cocktail to start, occupying the spot where we had sat as bride and groom. McGettigan's offers good bar food, reasonably priced, with enough choice to keep a wide variety of punters happy and with portions big enough to satisfy the hungriest of diners.

Lunch is served daily from 12pm-3pm and dinner from 3pm-10pm. My 80-year-old mother is a frequent visitor to the hotel for 'tea with girls' and says all of the desserts on offer more than pass muster. Convenient for the city's train and bus stations, the Ambassador is an ideal venue for a weekend or city break in Cork.

The hotel is also a good family destination, with the big airy rooms and a baby-sitting service available a plus, and there were several families dining in McGettigan's when we were there. The hotel has grown in a popularity for weddings and now has a choice of three suites available that can hold anything from 40 to 200 guests and can also cater for civil marriage ceremonies and blessings.

With its classy makeover it still offers that 'intimate' experience that we so loved and its closeness to the city is a huge plus. From the testimonials on the hotel's website, it seems the Ambassador continues to deliver for brides and grooms, with the food and the service being marked out for particular mention. Our love affair with the Ambassador started a long time ago and we were glad to be able to rekindle it once more.

■ The hotel is offering romantic weekend breaks for Valentine's weekend in superior room and city view from €180 a night.

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