

Travel

If you're a keen gardener, Mount Congreve will be on your radar. After all, its 70 acres near Kilmeeaden in Co Waterford has been recognised officially as one of the Great Gardens of the World. But even if you can't tell your astragalus from your elaeagnus you can still enjoy this extraordinary destination; you can walk the 16km of paths or simply indulge in some forest bathing. Even on the busiest days, such is the scale and the density of planting, you can find yourself feeling that you have the place to yourself.

On the other hand, you can have it to yourself – or very nearly – if like my wife, Johann, and me, you stay the night in one of the impeccably refurbished and appointed lodges. We settled in to Damson Gate Lodge, just by the main gates, and then set out on a long walk through the estate and glimpsed just one other couple in the far distance.

The two-bedroom lodge has everything: a fully equipped galley kitchen, a bijou dining room, a big living room with a stove (and central heating throughout). It's dog-friendly (except the main garden, but there are lots of alternative walks) and there was a dog bed and jars of Bonios to greet our mutt. This is no clinical Airbnb – it's full of period furniture and there's a loaf of sourdough from the fabulous Seagull Bakery in nearby Tramore along with hen's and duck eggs to welcome you in the kitchen. There's even milk in the fridge and an evening meal – a choice between beef stew and vegetarian risotto when we visited – for reheating at your leisure. You'll also find a very stylish picnic basket waiting to be filled with whatever you fancy.

Before an excellent breakfast in the Stables Café in the glorious Mount Congreve House, which dates back to 1760, I came upon some field mushrooms on a very early walk, and cooked them in butter as an amuse bouche on toasted sourdough. I strongly urge you not to do this unless you are absolutely sure of what you're doing. And I have to say, they tasted great, as self-foraged food always does.

Should you have forgotten to bring reading material, a small library shelf provides some books and there's an honesty bar with wine, Mount Congreve's own gin, distilled in Cappoquin, and the Mad Marquess Irish whiskey from Curraghmore, Waterford's other grand house and estate.

Waterford has long been my favourite county, something that may irk my neighbours as I live just on the other side



Damson Gate Lodge is full of period furniture, left and below. The gardens at the 70-acre estate were the creation of Ambrose Congreve, bottom right, who owned it until his death in 2011

The run of the place

A restored gate lodge turns a visit to Mount Congreve into an overnight escape, with 70 acres of gardens to explore after the crowds have gone, writes *Tom Doorley*

of the Cork border. It has everything: the wild and stunning Comeragh mountains, the rugged Copper Coast, the Ring Gaeltacht, Dungarvan, and Waterford city with its outstanding museums.

But let's look more closely at Mount Congreve. It represents the vision of one man, Ambrose Congreve, fabulously rich and obsessed with gardens ever since he was a small boy. He was taken under the wing of his godfather, Lionel de Rothschild, whose famous garden at Exbury in Hampshire he first visited at the age of 11. He fell in love with Rothschild's gardening style, which is best summed up as "Never plant just one of anything, plant lots of them!"

After Eton, where he formed a lifelong friendship with Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, and then Cambridge University, he worked for Unilever in China and married Marjorie Glasgow, whose father was cofounder of a firm that evolved into one of the world's biggest petrochemical engineering contractors, headquartered in London. Congreve became managing director in 1939 and drove its success until the business was sold in 1983.

He took on the gardens at Mount Congreve in 1955 and started clearing

“The autumn colours are just starting and they make the gardens even more magical”

areas for planting between many ancient trees. In 1962 he recruited Hermann Dool, a Dutch plantsman, as head gardener with whom he created Mount Congreve as it is today.

The house, no less than the gardens, was subject to a lot of changes when he moved in and he reintroduced liveried servants – probably the last in Ireland – recruited from Kerala in southern India who served at table wearing immaculate white gloves. He was ferried to and from Cork airport and elsewhere in a silver Rolls-Royce limousine, driven by a chauffeur who had once been the Queen Mother's personal charioteer.

The creation of Congreve and Dool now features more than 400 varieties of magnolia, 780 varieties of camellia and 1,200 kinds of rhododendron and azalea. There is a broad walk lined with 200 magnolia trees, thought to be the biggest single planting of them in the world, and there are 600 different conifers. A four-acre walled garden with its 1840s greenhouse offers a formal contrast to the rest of the planting.

One of Dool's sons, Elmer, has curated an exhibition in the main house, selecting from his late father's archive, and featuring letters from Congreve giving instructions and informing him of how many plants he has ordered (often 300 of each) and, of course, his well-thumbed copy of *The Hillier Manual of Trees and Shrubs*. Another son, Ron, runs the excellent Orchardstown Garden Centre close by, where he has a remarkable collection of shrubs and perennials for sale.

Congreve was 104 when he died in 2011, while on his annual visit to the Chelsea Flower Show. Over his lifetime, he accumulated a staggering 13 RHS gold medals for his horticultural exhibits. Decades earlier, in 1979, he had arranged that ownership of the house, gardens and surrounding estate would pass to the state upon his death. It is now managed by Waterford city and county council.

Our lodge, which has two double bedrooms, is usually available only for a two-night minimum stay but that rule is relaxed at this time of year. At present, Damson Gate Lodge is available for €350 per night and a maximum of two dogs are welcome, at €25 per pet, per stay.

The autumn colours are just starting, and they make a very special place even more magical. And that's still true if you can't tell your astragalus from your elaeagnus.

Tom Doorley was a guest of Mount Congreve, mountcongreve.com

