

VOYAGE



North Ireland

A Spectacular Indulgence

The romance of Ireland is renowned in song and story from generations to present day... and that reputation fits like a glove. The country itself remains a comfortable, well worn shoe for many travelers and given its modest size, the opportunity lays flat on the table to explore its many charms in very personal ways. This is a country to which many flock to escape the dizzying pace of life and believe me... the wild north is just the recipe!

While many opt for the familiar southern names of Limerick, Cork and Killarney, the northern coastline presents a supernatural feast of craggy wonder. With history dating back before the pyramids, the ghosts of ship fights prevail on windblown shores too stark and beautiful to be real. Expect lots of Gaelic here.

Dublin is an obvious launching point and if one were to recommend two places to rest your head, the funky but historically beautiful Number 31 is a bed and breakfast preferred by the rich and famous to escape the crowds. In Leixlip, 20 minutes northwest of town, another gem is the original Guinness factory which has been turned into the fantastic Courtyard Hotel. On this journey, the only honest way to do it is via the

pavement. "Hiring" a car is by far the best way to explore and might we add that the investment of a GPS is certainly worth the expense. Maneuvering those oh, so skinny roads is a delicious pleasure, particularly when your GPS takes you on some "as-the-crow-flies" pathways through sheep country.

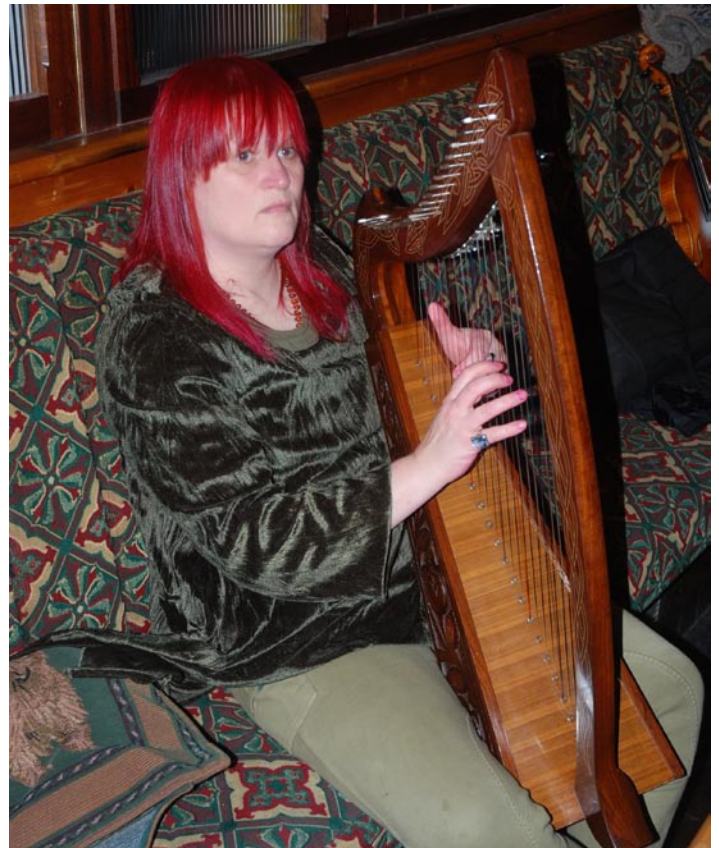
One destination of note that captures the flavour of the wild north is St. John's Point, a finger of land pointing out into the northwest's Donegal Bay. The place to stay here is Castlemurray House. Very stylish and housing perhaps one of the finest French restaurants you will find outside of Paris, it is a marvelous base to navigate ancient ruins, cute little villages and also the breathtaking Slieve League. Slieve League is a run of sea cliffs that are the tallest in Europe and making your way up through the misty clouds to gaze upon the crashing sea below is indeed humbling.

Meandering through to the north coast, a must see place is Leo's tavern, a little pub in the village of Meenaleck, birthplace of the Brennan family, which includes songstress Enya. Still owned by the family, the 80-something Leo still takes great pride in hauling out stories, jokes, accordion and hospitable tunes.

One of the up and coming “it” places on the north coast is Downings. A small town with an uncanny beach and bigger ideas, it sits high on the Irish coast. It is very much an Irish summer type escape where the venerable Jack Nicklaus is currently building a brand new links course. By the way,.. great golf is everywhere in Ireland! To balance off the mix, the Harbour Bar is a rustic watering hole of some celebrity that movie stars and formula one drivers specially chopper into to sip on their Guinness. You will find a LOT of Guinness on the Emerald Island.

Crossing into Northern Ireland and the northeastern Causeway Coastal Route, one will find Portrush and Port Stewart, two ideal resort spots to park for a few days. With miles and miles and... may we say, miles of unspoiled beach, this is also a major staging area to investigate the natural wonders of the north. Bed and breakfasts are big business here and there are myriad choices. Our pick here is the Albany Lodge, which is right in the middle of the Portrush peninsula. Culinary hint... the seafood chowder at D’Arcy’s is a spiritual experience.

In this part of the country a person can easily spend a week poking around the many attractions. Dunluce Castle is a sprawling monolith that dates back to the 1200’s. Though unused for the past 400 years, it’s easy to imagine a bustling centre of life, love, music and survival. A few clicks to the east is the unbelievable Giant’s Causeway. A World heritage



site, 40,000 interlocking basalt columns create a honeycomb of varying heights, which provide entrance-way to a ribbon of cliffside pathways. Your ticker will be put to work here. Legend has it that the ancient giant of Ireland, Finn McCool built the Causeway as stepping stones to Scotland, seen brooding mistily across the North Channel.





Not far away, lies the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge. Situated near Ballintoy, this bridge spans an 18 metre wide chasm that runs about 25 metres above a sheer rock face and squawking seagull roostery. The scenery is again breathtaking (like, what else is new) and perching on a heathered hillside cliff overlooking a gaggle of seductive vistas sends little emotional sparks pinging off the insides of your head.

For those who are inspired by the Irish's "water of life", the Bushmills distillery is about 5 minutes away and it wouldn't be Ireland if you didn't sample at least a drop or two.

The coastal highway itself is a terrific scenic indulgence, though it is agreed that too much gawking can be hazardous. Scrawny roads require concentration, after all, especially when you drive on the left side.

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House and across from the most famous of pubs, the Crown Liquor Saloon, it is right in the middle of the action. Speaking of saloons, please take the Historic Pub Tour of Belfast. Colourful doesn't begin to describe it and the pub characters you meet, both human and canine, make this walk unique. If something a little more natural is on your radar, the botanical garden at Queens University is an explosion of colour.

Romance and lore run deep in Irish culture, as does a lively jig and the comfort of a good potato. The north is a pristine landscape of lush green carpet, sheep by the millions, weather-beaten inlets and wrinkly, Guinness-powered smiles. Taking the time to detox from the big city is great medicine and there are no better remedies than out in the northern Irish boonies.

Sláinte go saol agat!