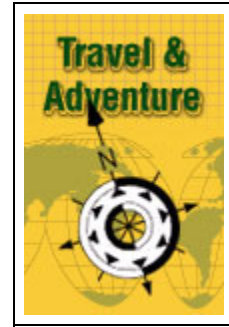


TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

Go north for the new jewels of the Emerald Isle

By John Blanchette
Copley News Service



BELFAST, Northern Ireland - The day I arrived in Northern Ireland, the last of the British troops were leaving after 38 years of occupation. It was surprisingly subdued in the city. It was as if a process was unwinding after the establishment earlier in the year of a representative Parliament that included all major parties.



CASTLE RUINS - Located on the Antrim coast of Northern Ireland, not far from the Giant's Causeway, are the ruins of Dunluce Castle. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

The bigger news was the headline in the next day's newspaper, heralding the opening of the new 100-mile superhighway that links Dublin and Belfast in less than two hours. Relationships, commerce, travel and tourism were changing forever between North and South.

As you might imagine, there was very little tourism during the "Time of Troubles," and very little investment. The country struggled, but peace has brought prosperity.

The last of the sectarian violence ended in 1998 and Northern Ireland is now the second-safest country in Europe. Unemployment hovers around 4 percent and investment funds are pouring in from England, Ireland, America and Europe. The new Celtic Tiger is rising in the North.

Nearly 20 percent of Irish-Americans can trace their heritage to Northern Ireland, including my mother's family, the McDonnells of County Antrim. When I was a student at University College in Dublin 30 years ago, I never visited the old sod because of The Troubles, and I was glad to finally make the pilgrimage to my grandfather's home.

Other Americans whose stock began in the North include Presidents Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant and Woodrow Wilson, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, Davy Crockett, J. Paul Getty and astronaut Neil Armstrong.

An area of magnificent coastal beauty and pastoral midlands, it is a treasury of unspoiled landscapes, castle ruins and idyllic country towns. The largest lake in Europe, Lough Neagh, lies in the center of the country and the Antrim Coast plays with the Atlantic to the north. The area boasts Finn McCool's iconic Giant's Causeway and the Bushmill's distillery. Established 400 years ago in 1608, the distillery is planning many St. Patrick's Day promotions in Irish pubs throughout America this year - slante!



ISLAND HOPPING - Carrick-a-Rede Island is connected to the mainland by a 65-foot rope bridge. It is believed that salmon fishermen erected bridges to the island for over 300 years. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

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St. Patrick, son of a Roman official in Britain, was forced into slavery in Northern Ireland by the Gauls. He later returned to spread Christianity in the fifth century. St. Patrick's Cathedral in the town of Armagh is the seat of the Roman Catholic archdiocese and faces the Anglican seat of power, also St. Patrick's Cathedral. In Dublin, St. Patrick's is the national cathedral of the Church of Ireland and was once home to Dean Jonathan Swift, the satirist and author of "Gulliver's Travels."

Throughout Ireland there are countless Irish churches of both denominations named after the saint who brought Christianity and freed the island of snakes (a metaphor for the pagan Druids, who wore serpentine jewelry often fashioned in snake-like designs and whose religious practices were altered and replaced by Christian rites and ceremonies).

Six counties compose Northern Ireland: Antrim, Down, Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Londonderry/Derry (depending on your persuasion). In the ancient kingdom of Ireland, the area was known as Ulster and also contained the southern counties of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan. The counties surrounding Dublin on the east were called Leinster, the south was Munster and the west was Connacht, a land of fairy tale places.

I was on a culinary crusade through Northern Ireland, and yes I've heard the jokes. Irish cuisine is an oxymoron. A seven-course gourmet meal in Ireland is no longer a six-pack and a potato. They have world-class restaurants and a new appreciation of well-made traditional foods. Along with prosperity and tolerance has come an affinity for the good life. High-quality restaurants are abundant.

But let's start with a pub crawl through Belfast of both Catholic and Protestant establishments. The most famous is the Crown, a Victorian gin palace that survived several bombings and is currently going through a face-lift to clean up all the damage and restore its former glory. They still serve Belfast lager, hand pumped from the cellar.

Other notable pubs were Fibber Magee's for traditional music, Kelly's Cellars where Wolfe Tone, the founder of Irish Republicanism, used to hold meetings; The John Hewitt, named for the Belfast writer; White's; The Morning Star; The Fountain Bar; Bittle's Pub; McHugh's; and Nick's Warehouse, which also serves some of the best food in town.

For a sober and intelligent stroll, take the literary walking tour, which leaves Linen Hall Library every evening at 5 p.m. (5 pounds, \$9.80).

Northern Ireland is a small country that can be easily navigated in less than a week. Rent a car to enjoy the full bounty of the land.

One of the most aromatic stops outside of Belfast was at legendary Irish bread maker Robert Ditty's Home Bakery in the town of Castledawson in Londonderry/Derry. If you visit you must try his smoked oatcakes. He also gave us his recipe for Irish soda bread.

In County Antrim, the Causeway Cheese Factory produces a wide range of Irish cheeses shaped in hexagonal blocks imitating the basalt rock formations of the Giant's Causeway. English wit Samuel Johnson once said the historic landmark was "worth seeing, but not worth going to see." It's a long, strenuous downhill and uphill trek, unless you opt for the 2 pound (\$3.93) bus ride. It's also a bit touristy, 600,000 a year (parking 5 pounds, \$9.80).

Just down the road is Bushmill's distillery, where a tasting tour will help revive you after the hike (4 pounds, \$7.86).

And look for the life-threatening rope bridge to Carrick-a-Rede Island, erected by crazed fishermen who risk their lives during the salmon run.

At the Plough Bistro in Hillsborough, County Down, chef Derek Patterson and organizer Shane Smith invited us to the town's Annual Oyster Festival in September, reason enough to return.



POPULAR PUB - A Victorian gin palace owned by the National Trust, the Crown Bar is probably the most popular bar for visitors to Belfast. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

IF YOU GO

In Belfast, we stayed at the stunning Malmaison Hotel, a restored grainery that serves "the finest steak in Northern Ireland," and the Hilton Templepartick, built on a golf course. In Portrush, the Ramada Inn faces the ocean. But outside of the cities, country inns and bed-and-breakfasts treat you to the real Northern Ireland and serve enormous, artery-clogging Ulster Fry breakfasts (eggs, with fried potatoes, fried bread, friend tomato, bacon, blood and breakfast sausages, etc.).

In the town of Bushmill, stay at the Bushmill Inn and ask to see the secret room and sample the local whiskey in the 400-year-old pub.

In Dungannon, County Tyrone, Nora Browne runs her cookery school at the Grange Lodge Country House and her multigrain breads are addicting.

Anna Johnston serves vegetables from her organic garden at Anna's House in Lisbane, County Down, voted one of the top three B&Bs in Northern Ireland.

Ballyrobert, County Antrim, is the rural home of Oregano Restaurant and inventive master chef Dermot Regan.

In the village of Comber, County Down, is the Pheasants Hill Farm store that sells organic meats and vegetables produced on the farm.

Don't miss the Hilden Brewery tour and tasting in Lisburn, County Antrim. Owner Seamus Scullion is a brilliant conversationalist, especially after one (or two) of his tasty brews.

And finally the best: Balloo House in Killinchy, County Down, a 19th century coach inn, which won the 2007 Hospitality Award in Northern Ireland. It boasts an elegant upstairs restaurant, but the real gem is the neighborhood bistro downstairs that is more like a pub and featured the best traditional Irish music we heard on our trip.

For information on housing, restaurant options, guided and self-guided tours, brochures and maps, contact the Northern Ireland Tourist Board at www.discovernorthernireland.com.

SIDEBAR

Robert Ditty's Irish soda bread recipe:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees

Sift together:

4 cups white flour

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons sugar

Add 2 cups of buttermilk

Knead for three minutes on lightly floured board

Shape into a round loaf

Place on a well-buttered, 8-inch pie pan and cut a cross along the top. Bake 35-40 minutes. Enjoy warm with butter.

John Blanchette is a freelance travel writer.

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FAMED FORMATIONS - The Giant's Causeway is a natural wonder located in Northern Ireland, with tens of thousands of interlocking basalt columns. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.