

Northern Ireland: the country is rebounding after decades of strife.
By Suzanne Wright

Mention Northern Ireland to most people and what comes to mind is the bombings that divided the country and dominated the headlines for 25 years. But after a decade of peace, the country is transforming itself, becoming a dynamic destination for travelers.

As both a traveler and a writer, I am intrigued by places that have suffered, places with layers of complexity, places with resiliency, places that have recovered. The exhilaration of triumph is poignant and powerful in places like Cambodia, Berlin, Vietnam, Bali, Egypt and Northern Ireland.

In Belfast, development is now as rampant as tear gas once was, with cranes rising across the city and a palatable sense of optimism. I stayed in The Europa, once Europe's most bombed hotel (more than 200 incidents from 1969 to 1994). U.S. presidents including Bill Clinton have been guests. The Victorian-era Crown Liquor Saloon is on the National Trust and just across the street; it boasts stained glass windows, warm carved wood and cozy dining "snugs," private booths. After a lunch of boiled ham and cabbage, I meet Ken Harper of Harper Taxi Tours, who gives me a historical and political background of the city. He has an accent that sounds like he's garbling marbles and an affable manner.

We start with the famous political murals (the earliest date from 1908), which illustrate past and present divisions. Harper explains that Northern Ireland's population is about 1.7 million; 50% are Protestant, 45% are Catholic, 5% are ethnic. Since the "The Troubles" (as locals refer to the era of fighting), more than 2,000 murals in support of the Irish Republican Army or the Ulster Freedom Fighters were painted on public buildings; the most famous are in the Shankill and Falls neighborhoods. Today, not all the murals are religious or political in nature—a few parody President Bush; some children have painted messages of peace and tolerance on school grounds and some artists have portrayed Irish mythology. But it's the arresting images of hunger striker Bobby Sands and "You Are Now Entering Free Derry" with a gas mask-clad soldier that pack the biggest wallop.

As does the sight of the "peace lines," a series of metal, brick or iron barriers—some as high at 25 feet—separating Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. In total, they stretch over 13 miles. There are numerous gates in the zip-sag system; Harper says only two are open 24/7. Some are apparently still monitored—I notice a CCTV camera.

We fast-forward from past to present. A little-known fact is that The Titanic was built and launched from the port in Belfast. Blending old and new, a mixed-use waterfront development is underway in The Titanic Quarter, the former shipbuilding site. The recently opened Victoria Square, a retail complex, boasts restaurants and a cinema. I dine at one of the city's most celebrated restaurants, the contemporary Cayenne, owned by Chef Paul Rankin. The menu has numerous Asian dishes including seared beef tataki and duck breast and sea scallops with Asian slaw; but the delicious sticky toffee pudding

is all Ulster. Afterwards, I take a ride on the Ferris wheel in front of City Hall. From here, the city looks vibrant, forward-facing, as electric as the lights.

The next day I set out on the Causeway Coastal Route, an 80-miles curve-hugging highway that starts in Belfast and ends in Derry. Along it's a challenge to drive on the "wrong" side of the road, follow the signs, read the map, navigate traffic circles, take notes and snap pictures—all solo—I somehow manage. My first stop is Carrickfergus Castle, built in the 12th century, the best preserved Norman citadel. Next I pop into Glenarm Castle, once home to the Earls of Antrim, where a tulip festival is underway. The walled garden is one of the oldest and prettiest in Northern Ireland and on this warm and sunny Spring day it's ablaze in color.

The road becomes harrowingly narrow as I crest toward Torr Head, which is, unfortunately, socked-in with fog as I approach. A shame, for it boasts spectacular views over the rugged coast. Instead, I focus on the pretty yellow gorse bushes and make a note to inquire about a hand-lettered sign offering "fresh dulse." (I later learn it is reddish-purple seaweed). The weather, so changeable, clears at Cushendall, a picturesque village where three glens (valley towns) come together. My stomach calls and I pull over at The Fullerton Arms, which sits on the Main Street in Ballintoy, facing the Atlantic Ocean. I order steak and Guinness pie to fortify me as I continue up the coast.

The Giant's Causeway is the country's only UNESCO World Heritage Site and its top tourist attraction. It's after 4 p.m. when I arrive, but as it's a bank holiday and the sun is bright overhead (with hours of daylight remaining), the parking lots—even the auxiliary one—are packed. According to geologists, 65 million years ago, volcanic activity formed thousands of thousands of hexagonally shaped basalt columns, some which tower more than 500 feet tall. There's science and then there's mythology. Local legend has it that the giant Fionn MacCumhaill built it as a pathway across the ocean to Staffa, off the Scottish coast as a way to flee his enemy, Benandonner. (Opinion is divided as to whether there was a giantess involved). Benandonner pursued Fionn to his home, but was outwitted by Fionn's clever wife, who disguised her husband as a baby. Terrified at the size of the infant, he became fearful of the father's size. Then he fled back to Staffa, his thundering steps tearing up the causeway to prevent Fionn from following him.

Whether you ascribe to fact or fable, the site is monumentally impressive. Thousands of people are scrambling over the stones, enjoying the water's view and queuing for the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge. Originally built by fisherman to check their salmon nets, it sways with the weight of daring day-trippers. I bunk down for the night at Bushmills Inn Hotel, a historic inn with ivy-covered exterior walls and a bright red wooden door in the wee town. It's got a certain creaky charm, but by 2009, it will be a more polished property. Enjoying the soft summer air, folks are drinking outside at picnic tables.

After a light breakfast, I head for the Old Bushmills Distillery. Celebrating its 400th anniversary, it was founded in 1608, making it the oldest in the world. The guided tour takes you through the whiskey ingredients and processes, including the copper still

distillation and the cask aging. Then comes the fun part: enjoying a dram of the amber liquid.

I'm off to Dunlace Castle, dramatically perched above the water on a headland of the North Antrim coast. The ruins of this medieval castle, with a history that dates back to the early Christians and Vikings, are haunting. After meditative exploration, I steer toward Portstewart Strand. Children's shrieks punctuate the salty air on the wide, golden sand beach you can drive on. At Morelli's on the town's promenade, the windows overlook the ocean and the line is out door for burgers, pizza and ice cream.

Londonderry—Derry for short—is the only completely walled city in Ireland and one of the best preserved examples in all of Europe. The walls, built as a defense in the early 17th century, form a walkway around the inner city and there are numerous cannons displayed throughout the walls. They are a fine vantage point from which to view the town. Located within the wall, The Tower Museum gives a splendid overview of the city's history, including the siege and the impact of The Troubles on townspeople.

The road widens as I head for my final destination, Galgorm Resort & Spa. It's mostly farmland between Londonderry and Galgorm: sheep flank both sides of the road and the pungent smell of manure and fresh-cut grass fills my nostrils. The resort eludes me, but with the assistance of helpful, wildly gesticulating locals, I roll up to the countryside manor. My fourth floor room is done up in soothing earth tones; it opens onto the burbling of the River Maine. At Gillie's, I have a simple dinner of grilled salmon with champ, mashed potatoes with scallions, before relaxing in the infinity pool at the Zen-like spa and indulging in an hour and a half aromatherapy massage with custom-blended oils.

I'm as transformed as the country after my long weekend.

Visit www.discovernorthernireland.com to plan your trip.