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Northern Ireland: *Transformed from the Troubles*

As the Troubles recede into history, **Norman Wright** finds Northern Ireland buoyant and beautiful during an action-packed weekend coach tour





Clockwise from top left: The Antrim coast route is even better by coach; The stunning White Rocks beach at Portrush; *My Heart Will Go On* but it isn't Kate Winslet outside the amazing Titanic Belfast building; How would you like to be adrift in icy waters in a Titanic boat? One of the exhibits at Titanic Belfast; The Giant's Causeway

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HERE CAN be few drives anywhere that can match the Antrim coast route in Northern Ireland, and it's even better when you can enjoy the ever-changing seascapes from the elevated viewing platform of a luxury coach. Leaving Belfast, you soon hit the sea road. The coast is gentle at first but as you head north it becomes increasingly craggy. The green hills and glens end in rocky cliffs, now hit harder by the Irish Sea rolling in from the Atlantic beyond, funnelled by

the Scottish mainland whose closest point is only 11 miles distant. Soon you are looking down on the ant-sized people edging their way across the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge as the waves race below their feet. Your coast journey ends at the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway that edge out to sea headed for their counterparts on the Scottish island of Staffa. Northern Ireland offers many highlights for a holiday, the first being that it is so close. We took a short lunchtime

flight from Birmingham and had time to explore the city centre in the afternoon. If you can fly into the George Best City Airport rather than Belfast International, you are only a few minutes by taxi from the centre. The Botanic Gardens, including the Victorian Palm House and the nearby Queen's University, make a perfect evening stroll and before that we visited the Titanic memorial in the gardens surrounding the impressive City Hall. From there it is a short walk to the

Europa Hotel. An icon during the Troubles, it was the HQ for journalists from around the globe and is famed as the world's most bombed hotel, surviving no fewer than 28 attacks. Our coach took us on a tour of the West Belfast areas that dominated the news of the Seventies and Eighties. The Republican area around the Falls Road and the Loyalist strongholds of the Shankill have begun to change radically since I was last in Belfast six years ago. Many of the back-to-back terraced

streets are being redeveloped into more modern housing areas, and with the demolition have gone some of the wall murals and outward demonstrations of the sympathies of their residents. The peace lines dividing the communities remain and the sight of 25ft metal barriers between streets and estates is still chilling. It is a fascinating tour, however, and if you are not on a coach trip there are several bus offerings as well as specialised black cab tours available. Everywhere in

Belfast, there is regeneration and the promise of a better future. Down by the waterfront, the gigantic shipyard gantry cranes of Harland and Wolff are reminders of a more glorious past, although Belfast's newest tourist attraction commemorates the most infamous moment of the city's shipbuilding heritage. Triumph in building the world's biggest ship RMS *Titanic* quickly turned to disaster when she sank in the icy North Atlantic on her maiden voyage. Titanic Belfast is a fitting tribute to the

city and people who built her and a memorial to RMS *Titanic*, the era of the transatlantic passenger liners and Britain's shipbuilding industry.

The striking mirrored building, shaped like four prows of liners jutting high above the dockside, sets the standard.

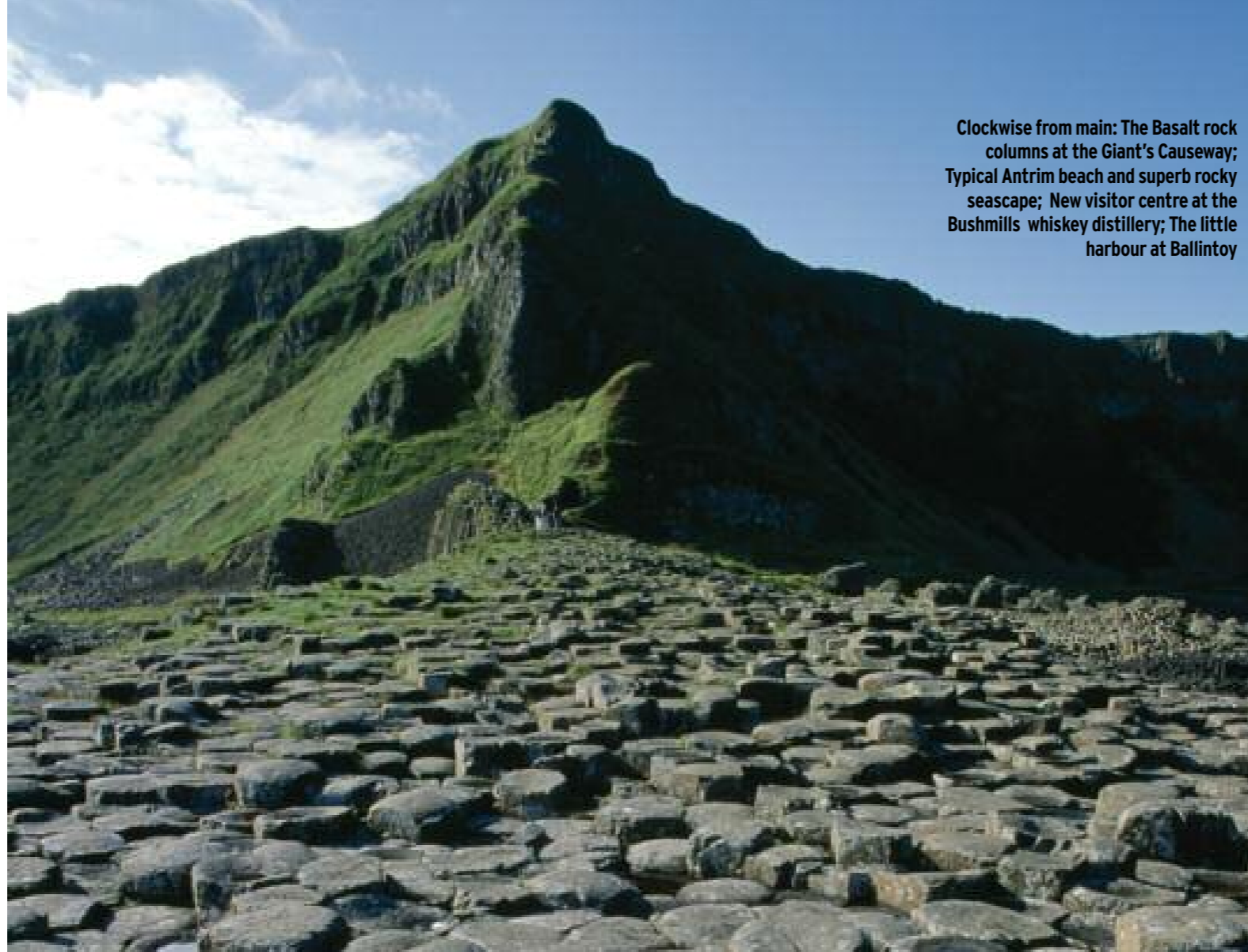
Inside on six floors is a comprehensive, beautifully designed presentation of the *Titanic* story from the explanation of 'Boomtown Belfast' which created the ability to build such a revolutionary ship through to the operation to find and explore the wreck of the vessel.

In between you can take a ride on a gondola that flies you around the shipyard during construction, see the launch and explore the luxurious interior, then find out about the tragedy and its aftermath.

This is a classy example of a modern, purpose-built museum that has quickly become one of the most visited attractions in Ireland.

Heading from here out on to the coast road provided a complete contrast but was just as impressive as the sparks and furnace glow of the recreated shipyard.

The route visits Carrickfergus and the ferry port of Larne before we stop for lunch at the Ballygally Castle Hotel. This was a difficult place to leave. Indoors is a cosy world of armchairs and good food. Outside is a quiet garden with a riverside



Clockwise from main: The Basalt rock columns at the Giant's Causeway; Typical Antrim beach and superb rocky seascape; New visitor centre at the Bushmills whiskey distillery; The little harbour at Ballintoy

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walk and across the road the equally lovely coast.

After Ballygally the road continues alongside the narrow stony beaches but with the green slopes of the glens becoming steeper as you travel north. Sometimes the road cuts through at the bottom of low cliffs. Across the water on a clear day the Scottish coast is in view and, as you round Torr Head and Fair Head to travel west along the top of the province, the Mull of Kintyre is clearly in view just 11 miles away.

Closer still are the rocky cliffs of Rathin Island as you drive through Ballycastle towards Ballintoy. You can pull in to the car park half a mile short of Ballintoy and look down over the cliff edge to the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, erected by

salmon fishermen to bridge the chasm between the mainland and a small island. Now you can either watch from this viewpoint, walk the glorious coastal path or test your courage by edging across the bridge itself.

Northern Ireland's most visited attraction is just a few miles west along the coast, the six-sided basalt columns that make up the Giant's Causeway.

The National Trust looks after the site which has a new £18m visitor centre and the Causeway Hotel where we stayed overnight. From the visitor centre you can stroll down to the sea and clamber on the causeway. Take care, especially when the tide is in: two of our party were soaked by an unexpectedly large wave and taken off their feet. Just a few scrapes



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Clockwise from left: Belfast City Hall was designed by Alfred Brumwell Thomas and built in Portland stone, completed in 1906; The Carrick-A-Rede rope bridge; View inside the city walls from one of the ancient gates of Derry/Londonderry

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and bruised pride were involved as well as ruined iPad and mobile phones.

There's a minibus service to take you up and down if you don't want to walk. We walked down and took the bus back, and spent time in the visitor centre which reveals the history of these ancient rock structures as well as the mythical explanation.

There's another treasure a little further along the coast, the Bushmills Distillery that is the oldest Irish whiskey distillery in Ireland since the first licence to make this 'water of life' was granted in 1608.

A tour of the distillery shows how the

famous whiskey is made and, better still, there's a tasting at the end.

Clinging to the cliff top overlooking the wide bay above Portrush is the 14th century Dunluce Castle. It's the way a proper castle should look and is in the most romantic of settings.

From there we drove past the famous Portrush golf course through Coleraine to the shores of Lough Foyle and followed the wide River Foyle into Derry/Londonderry as it is now known.

You can walk the ancient city walls looking down on first the murals of the Catholic Bogside and then on Protestant streets with their Union Jacks flying. The history of the walls and the city is explained in the Tower Museum just inside the walls opposite City Hall.

As in Belfast, tensions still exist but life is much more peaceful.

On this Saturday afternoon there was a stage in the square in front of City Hall with local rock groups belting it out. On the steps of the hall was the Mayor enjoying the music and the sunny afternoon, and chatting to passers-by without the need for heavy security.

There's quite a 'foody' restaurant culture in the city. We had lunch at Browns in Strand Road which was excellent. Dinner

at Queen's Quay Social had all the nouvelle cuisine flourishes but not quite the quality of food and taste as Browns.

The next morning we drove cross country along the Glenelly Valley through the Sperrin Mountains in County Tyrone stopping off at the

National Trust property Springhill House in Moneymore. This is a 17th century 'Plantation' home – so called as Ireland was colonised by settlers from England and lowland Scotland.

It gives a great picture of how these settlers lived and as well as the house there are gardens and the estate to discover on foot.

Our tour was completed as we drove down through Ballymena back to Belfast. We just had time for a brief stop at Stormont Castle, the seat of government

in the province. The house itself is an imposing sight at the top of a hill surrounded by parks. Locals were putting the park to good use on a sunny Sunday afternoon as families took the air and more serious exercisers either jogged or kicked a football around.

Then it was back to City Airport for the hop back across to Birmingham. It was an action-packed long weekend, which would have worked equally well as a longer stay.

“The Republican area around the Falls Road and the Loyalist strongholds of the Shankill have begun to change radically since I was last in Belfast six years ago”

Passport to Northern Ireland

Getting there

Coach tours to Belfast and Northern Ireland have increased following the opening of the *Titanic* exhibition and new visitor centres at the Giant's Causeway and Bushmills. Dozens of coach companies which are members of the Coach Tourism Council operate holidays to Northern Ireland, generally using ferry connections from Liverpool and Holyhead to Dublin or from Cairnryan, on the south-west coast of Scotland, to Belfast.

They can be found on the website: (www.findacoachholiday.com)

Package prices for tours to Northern Ireland offer great value for money with short breaks of five days/four nights starting from around £300 per person. All generally include half-board hotel accommodation, excursions and of course travel by coach from England, Scotland and Wales. For tours to Northern Ireland operators will pick up passengers from their homes or from a convenient starting point nearby

Flying into Belfast or Londonderry is easy from most UK airports and you can find local coach tours from Belfast. We travelled with Ulsterbus Tours, tel: 028 9033 7004, website: (www.ulsterbustours.com).

Find out more

Giant's Causeway, website: (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/giants-causeway/), tel: 028 2073 1855

Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, website: (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/carrick-a-rede/), tel: 028 2076 9839

Titanic Belfast, website: (www.titanicbelfast.com), tel: 028 9076 6399

Discover Northern Ireland, website: (www.discovernorthernireland.com), tel: 028 9024 6609.