

A NICE PLACE TO VISIT

Like the eye of a hurricane, Northern Ireland's interior is peaceful, fascinating and seen by relatively few

By Ronnie Blandford



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD

Ancient Dunluce Castle—part of it fell into the sea, taking the kitchen and servants with it.

The young soldier with his face blacked hitched his rifle straighter on his shoulder, handed back my driving license, cast an eye over my elderly Chesington 10-speed and remarked, "I wouldn't mind coming back here afterwards. It's a lovely country—a great place for a holiday."

His companion was crouched in a doorway, rifle at the ready, making baby noises to a passing toddler in a push chair.

It happened in Londonderry and it sums up what Northern Ireland is like today. Life for most people, in most places, most of the time is fairly normal. If you go out of your way you can find the ugly side, but as

that young soldier said, it is a great place for a holiday, especially by bike.

Of course the reaction of most people back home to the idea of going to Northern Ireland is one of predictable horror and amazement. "You're not going there?" they say. "You'll get yourself killed."

I have to admit I felt the same way five years ago when I had to make a business trip. By the time the car had been searched by security men at Liverpool docks, who seemed slightly puzzled by the frame and wheels scattered in bits throughout the trunk, by the time I had sailed in a half-

empty ship under Belfast's best-known landmarks, the giant Harland and Wolff cranes, and I had driven off the ferry under the gaze of armed soldiers and police, I was ready to turn round and head back again.

But I did not, and I have never ceased to be glad I did not. Because in the intervals between business calls I assembled the bike and found deserted white sandy beaches, winding lanes and quiet trunk roads, memorable views, historic buildings, forests and lakes. All in a country that is not 100 miles at its widest point and whose map does not have a contour above 750 metres.

I made three tours, spread over three weeks, but the riding was easy and all three could be done by a strong rider in a week, and by easy pacers in two weeks.

Unless you are a dedicated backpacker, I do not think it is worth camping, especially when the dollar gives such a good rate of exchange for the pound sterling. The best hotels cost 50 dollars for a double room including breakfast; a good hotel costs 25 dollars, but I prefer to stay in small farmhouses, which charge only a few dollars for bed and breakfast, because they offer something more important than cheap accommodation. They offer the chance to meet the people, to have tea and homemade cakes in their kitchens and to find out what really goes on in the area.

The first of my three rides was based on Ballygawley, where I stayed in the Thatched Cottage, a structure dating back to the 17th century. The idea was to ride to Enniskillen, round Lower Lough Erne and return, a round trip of about 100 miles. I started along the southern shore, stopping sometimes to watch wildfowl or pick blackberries. Once I abandoned the bike and climbed the forest path leading to the Carrickreagh lookout. It was a beautiful walk through a deserted forest, with the soft northern sunshine picking out a dappled pattern on the ferns, mosses and tree trunks. From the top there was a spectacular view of the lake and its myriad islands.

At the north end of the lake the village of Belleek houses the pottery factory of the same name. You can look round the factory and watch the craftsmen making their eggshell-thin pottery and plates that look like petrified spaghetti. Make a well-padded space in your saddlebag. A plate can cost 100 dollars but it will make an interesting heirloom and can only go up in value.

There are many old castles, round towers and ruins around the lakeside. If you want you can set time aside for yachting, fishing, boat trips to the islands and birdwatching. I was intrigued by the Fiddler's Stone, a monument shaped like a concrete double bass. It commemorates

the drowning of a drunken musician during a party many years before.

That evening, back at the Thatched Cottage, I wound up at the Sunday School concert, where the children in their finery provided the entertainment and their parents provided the homemade cakes and scones.

Incidentally, there is one result of the troubles in Northern Ireland that is of benefit to the cyclist. People are not allowed to park cars in the town centres, which makes life very pleasant for the rider.

My second tour, an easy one from Belfast, was around the Ards Peninsula and across into County Down. I stayed at a small farm at Mountstewart and here another surprise awaited me. After inspecting the pigs I found that the farmer was interested in old machinery. In his barn was a rare collection of gleaming tractors, stationary engines, vintage cars and a couple of motorcycles in the course of restoration. Hotels may be comfortable, but they cannot offer treats like that.

The peninsula itself is an easy flat run along the mud flats of Strangford Lough where basking seals can sometimes be seen. For a few pence and a few minutes you can cross back onto the mainland and test your legs with a hard ride up to the Spelga Dam in the Mountains of Mourne. Check your brakes before coming down again. Warrenpoint, scene of the notorious massacre of 18 British paratroopers by the IRA, is a pretty seaside town with one of the largest town squares in Europe.

Armagh and Newry are both well worth missing, because although they are pretty towns—in Newry the river runs underneath the town hall—the barbed wire and ever present soldiers tend to spoil the view and make me nervous.

The coast road back to Belfast is flat and with lots of temptations to stop, like the Ballycopeland windmill. The windmill has no sails, because in true Irish fashion, they blew off in a high wind.

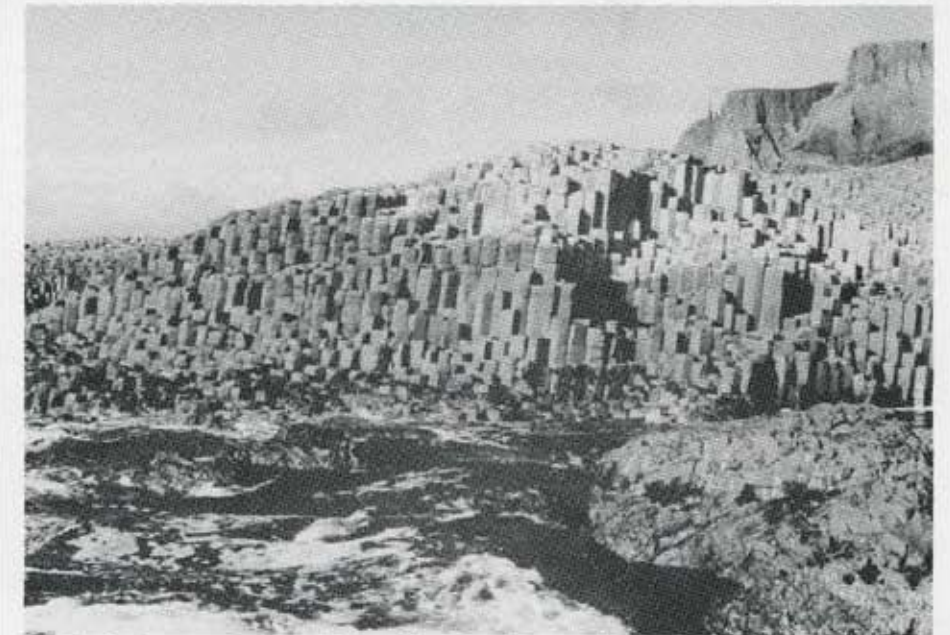
Whatever you do, find half a day for the Cutra Folk Museum on the outskirts of Belfast, and the Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh. These are museums run in the best American style with people in costume working and living the way they

Warrenpoint, where 18 British soldiers were killed in an IRA ambush. Today it is as sleepy as ever.



did centuries before. The Ulster American Park has the Mellon family home as well as a replica of the one they built on arriving in America—and you can taste the scones they ate in Ulster and the new ones they learned to bake from maize flour in the new world.

The best ride of all is northwards from Belfast, round the Antrim coast. Here are



The Giant's Causeway—polygonal pillars of basalt marching into the sea in regular formation.

the beaches, the towns, the harbour that inspired Jimmy Kennedy to write "Red Sails in the Sunset" and the Giant's Causeway which has rightly been described as the eighth wonder of the world. The Giant's Causeway, pile upon pile of polygonal basalt pillars formed by volcanic action, is worth leaving the bike and walking round. Riding on you come to Dunluce Castle, poised over the sea. Part of the castle, complete with kitchen knives, fell into the sea in 1639 and the Countess of Antrim afterwards refused to live there.

Rathlin Island is where Marconi carried out transmissions to the mainland to prove to Lloyds of London that wireless telegraphy was practicable for ships and where Robert the Bruce, King of the Scots, drew inspiration to continue fighting the English for independence. Bruce was in-

spired by watching a spider patiently weaving its web. The swaying rope bridge to Carrick a Rede Island is a breathtaking walk in a high wind with the boiling sea 90 feet below. It is said that someone once rode across on a bicycle. I don't think I would.

The rest of the coast road back to Belfast or Aldergrove Airport is a dream,

flat with the cliffs on one side and the sea on the other.

Since my first visit, I have returned to Northern Ireland many times. There are many more roads to ride and more things to see. But if you decide to follow in my wheel tracks, bring your weatherproof outfit. The sun is always shining in Northern Ireland—usually on the next hill.

Arriving in Ireland by air you can stop off in Shannon and either ride or take the bike north by train. From Britain there are flights to Belfast from almost any airport. By sea, it is two hours from Stranraer to Larne, eight from Liverpool to Belfast.

Bikes can be taken between main towns by train, usually for a few pence. If you do not want the trouble of carrying the bike, good quality machines can be hired in any big town.

Accommodations and food in pubs and restaurants is moderately priced. An enormous breakfast is always included in the price of the room. I often went without a midday meal and had dinner in the evening. There are night clubs, music and theatres mainly in Belfast but the Riverside Theatre at Coleraine is worth a visit.

For a list of places to stay, and any other information, ask the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, River House, High Street, Belfast. They are possibly the most helpful tourist board I have ever found, anywhere in the world.