



You can't spend too much time exploring Co. Fermanagh

By Kathy Dougherty

Mention lakes and many people think of Minnesota — the land of 10,000 lakes. Shift your thoughts about 4,000 miles to the northeast and you'll find another land of lakes: Co. Fermanagh in Northern Ireland. While the county is entirely land-locked, there's no lack of water. Upper and Lower Loughs Erne cover nearly 300 square miles of the county and have over 150 islands to explore; other lakes dot the landscape while rivers and streams make the connections.

Not surprisingly, Co. Fermanagh offers a feast of outdoor activities. Renting a boat and cruising the waterways is a popular way to enjoy the natural beauty of this area. (See the August 2006 issue of the Irish Gazette.) Fishing opportunities abound, with trout, perch, and salmon waiting to test the angler's skills and patience. Angling centers offering tackle, rods, reels and plenty of advice can be found throughout the



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county. For cycling enthusiasts, the Kingfisher Cycle Trail, with more than 300 miles of mapped

and signposted trails, loops through Fermanagh providing spectacular views of the lakes

and countryside.

Other natural attractions in Co. Fermanagh include the Marble Arch Caves and Cuilcagh Mountain Park, which together form Northern Ireland's first European Geopark (Geoparks utilize areas of geological heritage to develop sustainable tourism for local communities; today, 17 locations throughout Europe make up the Geopark network). The Marble Arch Caves feature winding passages, sharp-edged stalactites and boat rides on an underground river. Hiking the Cuilcagh Mountain, the highest point in Fermanagh, allows you to take in the breathtaking beauty of the entire region.

And, just in case it happens to rain, there are a number of indoor options to explore as well. Stately homes, including the neo-classical Castle Coole and Florence Court, provide glimpses into the history of the area, as does Castle Archdale Country Park, which served as a strategic location during World War II. Enniskillen, the county town of Fermanagh, boasts its own historic castle — once home to the Maguire chieftains. While in Enniskillen, be sure to stop by the Buttermarket, a lovingly restored early-19th-century dairy market. It houses local

craft shops offering pottery, paintings, Celtic stone items and even hand-made salmon and trout flies.

One other place to visit in Co. Fermanagh is — maybe you've heard of it — Belleek Pottery. Located in the town of Belleek on Fermanagh's western border, it offers guided tours, a museum, a tearoom and, of course, a showroom where you can purchase some of their beautiful china. Belleek aficionados take note: Belleek will be celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2007.

Lodging options in Co. Fermanagh fit everyone's style, ranging from deluxe hotels and cozy guesthouses to friendly B&Bs located on or near the shores of the Upper and Lower Lough Erne. For groups or families, self-catering choices are numerous, and budget travelers can take advantage of hostels located throughout the county. One bit of advice: no matter how long you plan to stay in Co. Fermanagh, it's probably best to add another day or two. There's almost too much to see and do!

Kathy Dougherty is owner of Northern Ireland Travels, which specializes in personalized, self-guided trips to Northern Ireland. For more information visit www.nirelandtravels.com.