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EXPLORING NORTHERN IRELAND: A Day on Rathlin Island

By

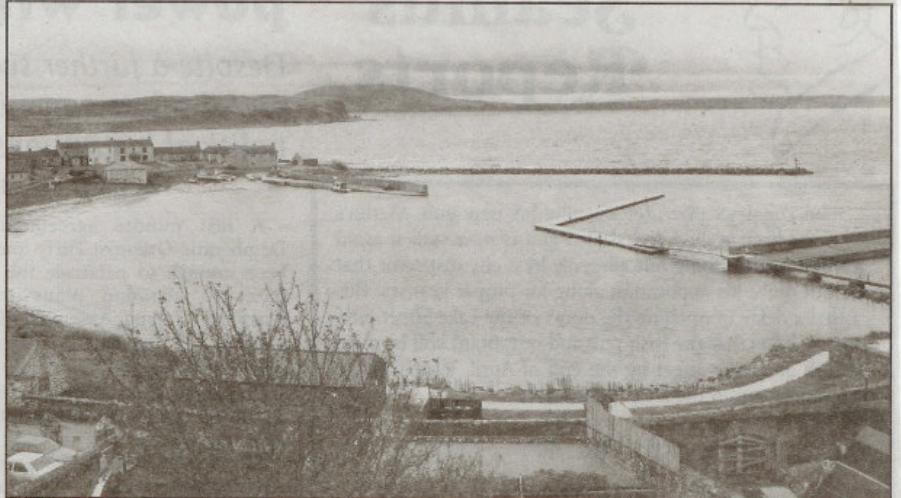
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Only six miles off the north coast of Ireland, Rathlin Island is a tiny oasis for birds, seals and the 70 or so people who live there year-round. While the island can be busy with birders and hikers in the summer, in October it feels almost deserted. Almost, except for the friendly, golden retriever that greeted my husband and I as we got off the ferry from Ballycastle on a cool, crisp morning.

Rathlin is an L-shaped bit of land in the Atlantic, three miles

long in one direction, four miles in the other and no more than a mile across at any point. Apart from its 70 residents, this island is home to a significant seabird population, mobs of playful, curious seals and countless myths and legends.

For a rather small island, it's very well lit. There are three lighthouses spread across Rathlin Island. Since there's a limited ferry schedule in October and few places to stay overnight at that time of year, Steve and I decided to hike to the nearby lighthouse at Rue Point



The harbor at Church Bay on Rathlin Island.



A view of Scotland through ruins on the south end of Rathlin Island.

(about four miles roundtrip), so we could get back in time to catch the ferry back to Ballycastle. As we headed out of Rathlin's only village, up the small road, we realized the golden retriever, (we had already named her "Bally") was going to serve as our tour guide for the day.

The small road we were walking on got even smaller as we headed further out of town. There are very few cars on the island and visitors need special permits just to bring them over, making Rathlin a hiker's dream. Bally was an excellent guide, leading us past small lakes, wary sheep and a couple of cows that thought they owned the road. Every direction offered spectacular views of

Northern Ireland, the wild sea and even the coast of Scotland, a mere 12 miles away.

As we approached the black-and-white striped lighthouse, something in the water caught our attention — a curious seal, keeping a close eye on us as we picked our way along the rocky shore. Bally must have thought the seal was boring; she was much more interested in flushing the Irish hares out of the tall grasses nearby. Thankfully, Irish hares are quite large and very quick, so we witnessed no mayhem that day.

We returned to town with a few minutes to spare before the ferry left, so Steve and I stopped by the only pub that was open to savor a drink along with the scenery. A handmade sign on

the pub's door featured one of the local residents, who happened to be celebrating her 50th birthday with a party at the pub that same night. In typical Rathlin style, a note at the bottom of the sign said everyone was welcome to join the celebration. Once inside, it was clear the celebrating had already started. And the sign outside was right — everyone, even a couple of strangers from the States, were welcome to join in. Ahhh... to live on Rathlin Island!

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