

IRISH GAZETTE



VOLUME 21 • NUMBER 1 • FEBRUARY 2007

PUBLISHED BY ELLIOTT PUBLISHING, PO Box 65782, St. Paul, MN 55165

Exploring Northern Ireland: Co. Down, the Mourne and more

By Kathy Dougherty

As the song says, County Down is “where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea.” I suggest that, instead of snapping a quick telephoto shot of the Mourne on your way from Dublin to Belfast, take a little time to explore the mountains, coast and towns of County Down. Begin your tour alongside the Newry Canal,

built between 1731 and 1742. This canal linked the Irish Sea to Lough Neagh and was used to transport coal from the north to Dublin.

Follow the canal to Carlingford Lough, a beautiful bay encircled by steep hills and forests. The transition from canal to lough is clearly marked by the Narrow Water Keep, a three-story stone watchtower

near Warrenpoint. A guard tower has stood on this strategic site since 1212; the current version dates back to 1570.

Continue hugging the curves along Carlingford Lough to the town of Rostrevor and the spectacular Kilbroney Park — a great place for a break! You can choose between a light meal at the park’s café, overlooking woods and water, or follow the Forest Drive up to a picnic area in the hills. After getting some nourishment, hike up to the 30-ton Cloughmore Stone, still resting where the glaciers dropped it approximately 10,000 years ago. Or, is Finn McCool responsible for this too? McCool, the legendary giant who created the Giant’s Causeway, is said to have tossed this boulder at an enemy from across the bay. The stone is interesting enough, but the picture-postcard views of Carlingford Lough, the Mourne Mountains and the surrounding countryside definitely make the climb worth the effort.

As you continue along the coast, skirting the bottom of the Mourne, stop by the small fishing village of Annalong, home to one of the last working watermills in Northern Ireland. Used to grind corn, the mill was built in the 1800s and was in operation until the 1960s. It’s located next to the town’s charming harbor. If you plan to do some Mourne-walking, several trails begin near Annalong.

One jewel along the County Down coast is the town of Newcastle. The setting alone will make you look longingly at the local real estate listings. The Mourne Mountains look down on you; the Irish Sea lies directly in front and beaches stretch



A view of Carlingford Lough, taken from Kilbroney Park in County Down.

out along the coast. Home to the Royal County Down Golf Club, Newcastle also offers the perfect place to enjoy the perfect setting — the Slieve Donard Hotel. This 110-year-old classic luxurious hotel just enjoyed a €15 million makeover, adding a new state-of-the-art spa.

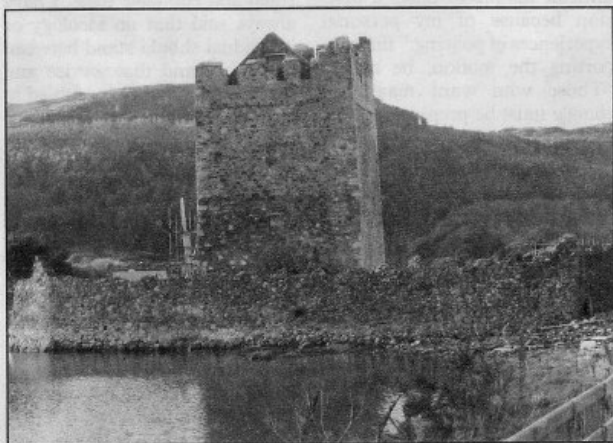
If that doesn’t interest you, how about an old-fashioned therapeutic treatment — centuries old, in fact. SOAK Seaweed Baths, a new business located on the main promenade in Newcastle, offers seaweed baths in hot saltwater. According to the owners, benefits include “lowering body stress, releasing toxins and restoring nutrient balance.” Who would have guessed that soaking in weeds could be so good for you?

The next stop is Downpatrick, reputedly the place where St. Patrick is buried, though other sites claim that honor as well. The gravestone is easy to find at the Down Ca-

thedral cemetery. Downpatrick is also home to The Saint Patrick Centre, which details the life of the patron saint of Ireland through informative exhibits and multimedia presentations.

From Downpatrick, it’s a short drive to the car ferry at Strangford that brings you to the Ards Peninsula. A barrier between the Irish Sea and Strangford Lough, the peninsula offers great bird watching opportunities, beautiful beaches, quaint villages and Ireland’s oldest pub, Grace Neill’s in Donaghadee, which was established in 1611. It’s a wonderful place to relax and drink a toast to your visit to County Down.

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.



Built in 1570, the Narrow Water Keep watches over Carlingford Lough, near Warrenpoint in County Down.