



IRISH GAZETTE



June/July 2007

By Kathy McGorray Dougherty

Belfast for beginners

Dark . . . bleak . . . industrial. These words may have once described Belfast, but no longer! Lonely Planet, the ubercool guidebook publisher, listed Belfast as one of the top 10 “cities on the rise” in 2007. Now is a great time to see Belfast as it blooms.

First-time visitors to Belfast will be happy to learn that many of its major sites and attractions are within walking distance of each other. Begin your Belfast tour at the Northern Ireland Tourist Board’s Welcome Centre, conveniently located in the center of the city. Here you’ll find everything you’ll ever need to know about Belfast and then some. Now your most difficult decision — what to see first?



Starting in the city center, you can visit the famous Crown Bar with its private “snugs” and Victorian atmosphere, the classically designed Grand Opera House and its jarringly modern annex, and Belfast’s City Hall. In 2006, the City Hall celebrated its 100th birthday; it must have been quite a celebration because the building is closing at the end of August for major renovations that could take almost two years to complete.

Just north of the city center, you’ll find the Cathedral Quarter, so-named for the abundance of historic cathedrals and churches located there. This area also features amazing architecture, and is home to a growing arts scene and loads of historic pubs — so many, in fact, you’ll wonder why it’s not known as the Historic Pub Quarter. There’s even a Historical Pub tour available, to make sure you don’t miss any.

The nearby River Lagan links you to a world famous Belfast native — the Titanic. Built in Belfast between 1908-1911, this ship is responsible for the city’s current riverfront-renaissance. Development of the €1 billion Titanic Quarter is well underway. One highlight is the recent acquisition of the Nomadic, known as the Titanic’s “little sister.” This boat, also built in Belfast, ferried 1st and 2nd class passengers, including the unsinkable Molly Brown, to the Titanic at the start of its fateful journey. The Nomadic served many purposes since then, including a stint as a floating restaurant on the Seine, near the Eiffel Tower. After several close calls with the scrap heap, the Nomadic returned to Belfast in 2006 where it is now undergoing restoration.



Street names alone, on the west side of Belfast, are enough to evoke strong images of the city’s more recent history. Falls Road and Shankill Road were the epicenter of “the Troubles” in Belfast. Taxi tours, bus tours and even walking tours guided by former political prisoners can provide visitors with the background, knowledge and hopefully, some understanding of the issues and emotions involved in that

conflict. As with so many areas in Belfast, this too is in the midst of a revival. It's now being referred to as the Gaeltacht Quarter, focusing on Irish language and culture.



The Queen's Quarter, on south side of the city, is dominated by Queen's University (hence the name) and the lush Botanic Gardens, filled with tropical species and a glass enclosed Palm House. The nearby Ulster Museum will be another highlight in this area when it reopens in 2009, after renovations are completed. The university atmosphere has led to a number of restaurants, shops, guesthouses and clubs locating here, bringing with them a hip, urban feel. These are the words people now use to describe Belfast.

Kathy McGorray 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.



The Palm House, built in 1839, is located in the Botanic Gardens in Belfast