



IRISH GAZETTE



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Belfast Castle



A garden at Belfast Castle

Beyond Belfast

So, you've spent a few days exploring Belfast and now you're ready to head up to the Giant's Causeway. Wait a minute! What about the sites just beyond Belfast?

Barely three miles from the city center is Belfast Castle, situated above Belfast Lough and offering spectacular views of the city. This sandstone castle, built in 1870, now hosts special events and wedding receptions. It also houses a restaurant, an antiques store and a visitor center focusing on the social and natural history of Belfast. The castle also has lovely, formal gardens featuring a cat motif. Not surprisingly, there is a legend involving cats, the castle and good luck. This led to nine artistically rendered cats, hiding in plain site throughout the garden. Finding them all can be an entertaining challenge.

Belfast Castle is located in Cave Hill Country Park. Hiking trails from the castle gardens traverse the Cave Hill area, which has played a significant role in the history of Belfast and its citizens. Known to the locals as "Napoleon's Nose," it was here that Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen planned the 1798 Rebellion. During World War II, Belfast citizens hid at Cave Hill during the Belfast Blitz in the spring of 1941. During a one-month period, Belfast suffered through numerous German bombing raids, with casualties totaling over 900 people. Today the park offers a variety of scenery, abundant wildlife and archeological finds.

A typical day in Northern Ireland brings a bit of sun and a bit of rain. The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, located six miles east of Belfast near the town of Holywood, is made for a day like that. It's actually two museums located near each other, and you can purchase tickets to either one or both. While it's raining, spend your time at the Transport Museum. Consisting of a series of indoor galleries, you'll see all modes of transportation from all time periods. Old trains, vintage motorcycles and modern cars, including the Belfast-built DeLorean, are here for you to enjoy. Your kids will enjoy them too — in this museum they are allowed to touch, and even climb into, many of the exhibits.

When the sun comes out, head over to the Folk Museum. This 60-acre re-creation of an early 1900's Irish village features restored buildings and costumed guides who bring the era to life. The museum consists of a town and rural areas, so give yourself plenty of time to explore and wear your walking shoes!

Okay — now you're ready to begin your trek up the Antrim Co. coast to the Giant's Causeway. Well, maybe just one more stop at the imposing castle located in Carrickfergus, about ten miles northeast of Belfast. And then there's the lighthouse near Whitehead and then . . . and then . . .

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.