



IRISH GAZETTE



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Exploring Northern Ireland

A castle or a lighthouse?

By Kathy McGorray Dougherty

Finding accommodations while traveling in Northern Ireland has become more enjoyable over the past few years, as the variety and selection has grown. Thankfully, you can still find bed & breakfast establishments in every county. While not as much of a bargain as they once were, B & B's still offer a relatively good price for a comfy atmosphere and a bountiful breakfast. The added bonus is getting to know the proprietor and learning more about the area than you ever could from guidebooks and Web sites.

The trend in Northern Ireland is toward self-catering accommodations. These typically rent for longer periods than just overnight. They also often sleep a large number of guests, making them an economical choice for families and groups traveling together. The "self-catering" refers to the fact that they typically provide bedding, towels and many of the comforts of home, including kitchen appliances and, often, cozy fireplaces. Northern Ireland is a great place for self-catering stays — no matter where you are located, most sites and cities are within easy day trips.

The variety of self-catering facilities in Northern Ireland is astonishing. City dwellings in Belfast and Derry are available, but the real selection comes in the countryside. From former schoolhouses and refurbished monasteries to small cottages on the coast, the choices are both astounding and memorable.



Ballealy Cottage, an Irish Landmark Trust property. The former deerkeeper's cottage on the Shane's Castle estate beside Lough Neagh. (Photo courtesy Irish Landmark Trust)

The Irish Landmark Trust continues to add to that selection. This charitable organization purchases run-down properties with historical significance and renovates them. The rental fees from these renovated properties help fund their continued restoration efforts, saving even more unique, heritage-laden buildings.

In Northern Ireland, the Trust currently has four properties, located primarily on or near the County Antrim coast. The most unique is the Blackhead Lightkeepers' Houses, just a few miles outside of Belfast. Adjacent to the Blackhead Lighthouse, these accommodations offer stunning views and a peek into Northern Ireland's maritime history.

In May, the Irish Landmark Trust will open its most recent renovation — the Colebrooke Park Gatelodge in County Fermanagh. Reservations are now being accepted for this brand new location — check their website at www.irishlandmark.com for more details.

If it's a castle you want, then it's a castle you shall have! Ballygally Castle dates back to 1625 and is said to be haunted by the friendly ghost of a former resident. You can even visit the "ghost room" in one of its towers! As you might imagine, some renovations and additions have occurred since 1625, but portions of the original castle remain. Now owned by the deluxe Hastings Hotels group, the Ballygally is a premier accommodation. It's located just 26 miles north of Belfast, near the town of Larne on the Antrim coast

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.