

OPENING PICTURE:  
Portstewart Golf Course

# AS GREEN AS THE IRISH

*Cities and coastal towns delight even as links golf takes centrestage in Northern Ireland.* **BY ROSANNE ZINNIGER**

**N**orthern Ireland, under British rule, is known for a rich history of textile producing mills, linen seed agriculture for both rope building and clothing, and maritime heritage, namely the building of the ill-fated ship, the Titanic. Sadly, while some mills still stand, more are rotting in ruin as much of the textile industry is gone.

Northern Ireland is also known to provide livestock, dairy and agriculture for the United Kingdom and set within the backdrop of this countryside are centuries-old golf courses built amongst castles and historic ruins; home to the ancient lords and barons who run the rule of the land. Today, the country has produced royalty of a different kind in the form of major champions Padraig Harrington, Graeme Macc Dowell, Darren Clarke and one of golf's most exciting young prospects, Rory McIlroy. To gain a full appreciation of this feat, Northern Ireland's population is a mere 1.8 million (in the year 2011), a mere fraction of the city of London at 8.6 million.

Golf, however, bears only a part of the theme of beauty and culture that makes up a journey that encapsulates the cities of Dublin and Belfast, embracing the picturesque lush country side of charming patch-quilt grasses dotted with cows and sheep. Three noteworthy golf courses come to mind along the way; Galgorm

Castle Golf Club, Portrush and Portstewart all set within the Antrim County.

## GALGORM ESTATE

Stay at the Galgorm Castle Resort & Spa with golf at the Galgorm Castle Golf Club in Ballymena Northern Ireland, just 40 minutes north of Belfast, and home to famous actor Liam Neeson. Ballymena (means "town in the middle") is in the County of Antrim, which is the eighth largest in Northern Ireland famous for producing the double decker bus, Wright's Coach Company, which presently employs 2,000 locals.

In 1607, estate land at Galgorm, was presented to mighty warrior, Rory - a common name for skilled athletes perhaps? - O'G MacQuillan by King James I. However it was short lived, as Sir Faithful Fortescue (also known as Sir Faithless) tricked MacQuillan out of his estate, and built the Galgorm Castle in 1618, perched right atop the hillock and in Jacobean architecture. Over the centuries, the castle estate turned hands over four times and waned in upkeep even as it survived a 1798 rebellion which burned the chapel that was adjacent to it.

The property saw the crash of the linen industry in the early 20th century along with political and religious unrest and, it was not until Christopher Brooke and his family inherited 245-acre Galgorm Castle in the 1980's that it came alive again. The Brooke family, whom



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presently inhabit the castle, set about the huge task of repairing and renovating the castle and its grounds and turning it into the 170-room luxury resort that it is today.

In addition, the Thermal Village contains the resort's spa and was originally built in 1845 by the Fenaghy's. The original structure was demolished and rebuilt in 1857 by William Young with more additions over the years. The Thermal Village houses the Celtic Sauna, Riverside Tubs, the River House, and the Snow Cabin, with views of the River Maine and while enjoying an exceptional experience inspired by the four elements of nature – earth, water, fire and air.

Flitter down the slopes and the beauty of a 7,000-plus yards golf course designed

by Simon Gidman beckons. The castle overlooks the 10th green and its majestic presence can be seen from the 5th and 8th greens. Home to 600 members with a course of heavy rough, lush trees and the River Maine as added trouble. Phil Collins, the head professional here since November 2000 and a previous EuroPro Tour player, tells us that the signature 13th hole "has had fantastic changes with a new tee box 40 yards further back and towards the River Maine... and when approaching the green, look left to catch a breathtaking view of the Slemish Mountain in the distance."

Other holes to be rejuvenated during the winter break include a new championship tee at Hole 2 with two new bunkers on the left of the fairway, a new championship tee

at Hole 6, increasing the size of the 12th green and adding two new fairway bunkers on the left side of the 15th hole.

#### PORTRUSH

A drive through the countryside of the County of Atrim to the lovely seaside village of Portrush via the Ballycastle coastline reveals boundless scenery from lush valleys to stunning rocky cliffs that reaches down towards Ballintoy Harbour and beach; this familiar scene is the actual backdrop to the hit fantasy drama 'Game of Thrones'.

Highly recommended by longtime Northern Irish resident and tour guide, Ken McElroy, is the Carrick-A-Rede rope bridge that spans rocky jutting masses from the water with views of Rathlin Island, which you can ferry across to the Rathlin Sound. Continue north past Whitepark Bay and you will discover the Giant Causeway, a 60 million year old molten lava polygonal column structure erecting out of the sea, and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Beyond the landmark and perched atop the rocky cliffs above the North Atlantic ocean, are the ruins of the medieval 17th century Dunluce Castle.

Another stopover is the 400-year-old Bushmills Whiskey Distillery, which is the

oldest working distillery in the country that also produces the country's first malts. McElroy recommends a stay at nearby The Bushmills Inn as it is centrally located to golf and other attractions. The 1600's built accommodation holds a secret library, gas lit lamps in the bar, and a maze of halls leading to cosy bedrooms, sitting rooms and a still room cinema. A highly sought-after restaurant that serves locally caught fish, farm fresh produce and Ulster prime beef complete the suite.

When it comes to golf, the Royal Portrush Golf Club offers a historically rich timeline to satisfy the intellect of the golf archivist. In 1888, the Country Club 9-hole course was built; by 1892 it was renamed the Royal Country Club as the Duke of York became its patron; Three years later, it was yet again renamed to its current Royal Portrush Golf Club as the Prince of Wales (later crowned King Edward VII) became its patron. Then, it was the first to host professional tournaments in Ireland by way of the 1907 Irish Professional Open Championship. In 1929, Harry Colts laid plans for the Dunluce Links, which from 1930 to present day played host to many Irish Opens, the Senior British Open and the Open Championship. In 2019 and

after nearly 70 years, The Open will make a return to this fabled course and let the world savour its beautiful swales again.

Apart from the 7,143-yard-long Dunluce Links, there is also a more inland Valley at 6,304 yards that is sited in between the bigger dunes and wild Irish rose bushes of its more revered sibling. While the valley course runs below and parallel to holes 15, 16 and present day 17. (Holes 7 and 9 are temporarily switched during the construction of the new tunnel that will lead to the new holes for the 2019 Irish British Open.)

#### PORTSTEWART

A short drive north of Portrush, through seaside Portstewart town, filled with shops and a seaside carnival park will lead you to Portstewart Golf Club. Of high recommendation is to lunch at Harry's Shack on the beach below the clubhouse. Fresh fish caught by local fisherman is regularly on the menu, and the restaurant can get quite busy, so plan on an early lunch. Like Royal Portrush, Portstewart golf dates back to 1894 as a nine-hole golf course with old course changes and expansion in 1912 and 1934 to a full 18 holes.

1907 marks the date for the Strand course, the Riverside course designed in the late 1980's, and the building of a newer

clubhouse in 1992. Portstewart Golf Club, with a membership of over 1,000, has hosted many championships, including the 1974 IPGA Championship, 2004 British Ladies Senior Championship, and will be the host to the 2017 Irish Open.

Presently, two 18-hole golf courses occupy coastline dune land with the championship Strand Course, which at 7,004 yard, is known for being a classic links ground with unsuspecting bunkers, blind shots to the green, and rough that swallows errant balls. It was once known as 'Thistly Hollow' due to the thistle bushes that grow there. Together with its sibling Riverside course, a 5,725-yard punt situated along a scenic river with sections of the Strand course looming above, these webs of dunes and river valley combine to become two of the most challenging golf rounds in Northern Ireland.

According to Caddymaster Derek Sweetnam, the holes at the Strand reflect a unique tee-to-green experience where

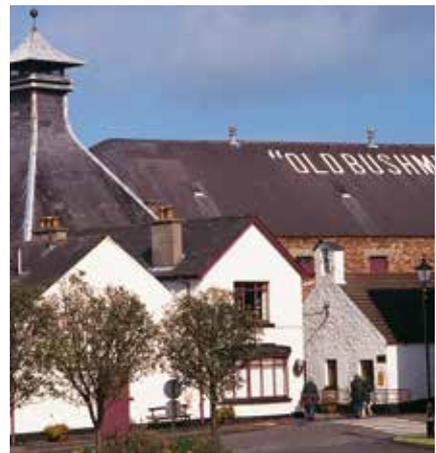
**FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Giant Causeway; Royal Portrush Golf Club; White Rocks Beach; Dunluce Castle.**



## Destination Focus



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Portstewart Golf Course; A lesson on pouring a perfect pint at Guinness Storehouse; Bushmills Distillery; Royal Portrush Golf Club.



most tee boxes are elevated with walks down towards the greens. The makes not only for scenic perches but also pleasant walks as play ensues.

"Signature hole is the 17th, a tough par 4, index 2. Even a good drive leaves work to do in that the second is target golf to a platform green with huge run off to the front and left," says the member since 1970. "Missing right is into severely undulating rough, the difficulty of the hole is exemplified by the fact that even on a links course there is no bunker on this hole," continues the caddymaster of five years.

It is also interesting to note that Holes 1, 5, 7 and 9 also have no bunkers.

Thereafter, it is back to Belfast for a day tour of Belfast Castle and over 200 walking trails, of which I selected none. After days of trekking up and down coastal links hacking through gorse and bush, the thought of another walk isn't all that enticing anymore. I opted for a train back to Dublin for a couple days to tour the city

with the 'Hop-On Hop-Off' tour bus and stayed near Trinity College at the Brooks Hotel, which is also near Temple Bar, an area known for its cobblestone streets lined with pubs, eateries, and interesting shops.

A visit to Dublin Castle and a bus ride to tour the library (over 200,000 books) within Trinity College and view the Book of Kells, which dates back 1,000 years were enough to fill an entire morning. On the way to the famous Guinness Storehouse for that much needed pint or so, I stopped over at St. Patrick's Church to tour the grounds, along with another stop at the Christ Church Dublin for a tour of its majestic cathedral and crypt. The original structure was built in 1030AD however it was devastated in 1562 when the roof collapsed, placing the cathedral in ruins.

Rebuilt in the 1800's with restoration of stonework, its massive crypt, some further roof repair, heating and lighting in 1997, saved this 12th century church from complete eradication. When I finally

made it to the Guinness Storehouse, it is a very enlightening experience with interactive displays of documentaries, pictorials, a river dance demonstration and a lesson on pouring a perfect pint. The tour also includes a ticket for a pint of stout redeemable at the Gravity Bar, which offers a 360-degree view over Dublin perched high atop the storehouse. If time permits, visit the Museum of Modern Art, National Museum, the Dublin Zoo at Phoenix Park, and Old Jameson Distillery (reservations are highly recommended), all of which are on the Green route of the 'Hop-On Hop-Off' bus tour of Dublin. 

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