

Antrim Glens and Causeway Guided Holiday



The charming county of Antrim in Northern Ireland is one of the best kept secrets in Irish tourism. For decades the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland deterred all but the most determined travellers from visiting this area. Media coverage of ‘the Troubles’ compounded this, giving the misleading impression that the armoured cars, tanks, bombs and guns were everywhere in the province.

With the ‘outbreak of peace’, walkers are now able to discover the reality for themselves. In fact, this north-eastern corner of Ireland is a magical place of scenic beauty and varied landscapes which are best discovered on foot, and a warm welcome awaits one and all. The nine Glens of Antrim are amongst Ulster’s finest features and are rich in history and tradition. It is less than a century since the Irish language was widely spoken in this area and it is also the stronghold of Ulster Scots, a broad dialect of English which has much in common with Scottish dialects. From Slemish, where St. Patrick herded sheep as a young slave, up to the imposing cliffs of Fair Head, the glens offer some magnificent walking routes through a landscape unspoilt by tourism.

It is here that Ireland and Scotland are closest to each other, just 12 miles across the North Channel (also known more poetically as the Sea of Moyle) lie between Fair Head and the Mull of Kintyre. Bright days bring inspiring views of Ailsa Craig (‘Paddy’s Milestone’) in the Firth of Clyde, and the Hebridean islands of Islay and Jura.

A visit to Rathlin Island is a must to experience its flora and fauna, especially its wealth of seabirds. It is extremely popular with birdwatchers, geologists, botanists, divers, sea-anglers and anyone with a love of wild and rugged scenery. From early Spring to late Summer Rathlin is awash with floral colour and its Atlantic nomads – puffins, guillemots and razorbills which make the cliffs and sea stacks their nestling sites in summer. The island’s unspoilt environment is a reminder of what much of Ireland was like before the advent of intensive mechanised farming. It is the largest island in Northern Ireland and is a model of co-operation and integration between the Catholic and Protestant communities.

Rathlin was the first landing place of the Vikings during their raids and subsequent colonisation of Ireland. The island’s historical links are not only with the Irish mainland, but also with Scotland. The sea was a highway rather than a barrier. Bruce’s Cave, where Robert the Bruce is said to have been inspired by the tenacity and persistence of a spider climbing a wall, is near the East Lighthouse. This made him determined to return to Scotland and to ‘try, try and try again’ until he succeeded in gaining the Crown. Rathlin is an L-shaped island. One side is four miles long, the other three and nowhere is the island more than a mile wide. It is located just over six miles north of the pretty seaside resort of Ballycastle and 14 miles from the Mull of Kintyre, Scotland. In the seas between Rathlin and Fair Head is the Corrie Vreckan, a ferocious maelstrom which has claimed the life of many a seaman.

The Causeway Coast is best known for the fairy-tale landscape of the Giant's Causeway, consisting of thousands of hexagonal basalt columns. The bizarre rock formations have inspired imaginative names such as 'Giant's Chair', 'the Organ' and 'the Granny'. However, there are so many other places of interest and natural beauty along this coast, such as the cliffs of Torr Head, Fair Head and Benbane Head, the vanishing lake of Loughareema and the fishermen's rope-bridge across to Carrickarede Island, built to access a valuable salmon race. These are just a few of the gems waiting to be discovered by the traveller in this tranquil, unspoilt corner of Ireland.

Trip Outline

The coastal village of Carnlough is our base for the first three nights as we explore the beauty of the nine Glens of Antrim and the surrounding hills. For the next four nights we stay in the market town of Ballycastle on the north coast of Antrim, famous for its Oul' Lammas Fair. From Ballycastle we explore the area around Fair Head, the north-easternmost tip of Ireland. On our free day, weather permitting, we make a day trip by boat to Rathlin Island. We then walk along the Causeway Coast and visit the world-famous Giant's Causeway. Our final day's walk takes us inland from Ballycastle over Knocklayd to Glendun.

Day 1 Courtesy Airport Collection Service from Belfast City Airport @ 16:00hrs, and from Belfast Central Bus & Train Station (Europa) (within our timetable). Arrive at our first guesthouse on the Antrim Coast at Carnlough, our stop for the next three nights. We will have an evening meal together and a general chat about the coming week's walks.

Day 2 Our first walk takes us along the Ulster Way where we have excellent views over the North Channel towards Galloway and Kintyre. We walk along the Sallagh Braes and continue across Scawt Hill to Glenarm. This has to be one of the finest walks in Northern Ireland. History is all around us with wonderful panoramic views. Return to our accommodation for dinner and overnight.

Walk Details - Distance: 18kms. Duration: 6 hours. Max. Height: 420m. Rough and rugged terrain with no tracks. Can be wet underfoot, some road walking. Boots essential.

Day 3 For today's walk we ascend the escarpment behind Carnlough along an old mining trail and cross this plateau with its unrivalled views. We then trace a circuit through the famous Forest Park in Glenariff, the Queen of the Antrim Glens. Return via the Miners Trail to Carnlough for dinner and overnight.

Walk Details - Distance: 18kms. Duration: 6 hours. Max. Height: 400m. Grass tracks and rough mountain with no tracks, and some road walking. Rocky terrain and which can be wet underfoot – boots are essential.

Day 4 From Carnlough we continue North along the coastline of the Antrim Glens to do a walk via Fair Head and Murlough Bay. This is a spectacular walk from where we get our first views of Rathlin Island and the Mull of Kintyre across the narrow channel to Scotland. We continue to Ballycastle (our accommodation for the next four nights) for dinner and overnight.

Walk Details - Distance: 14kms. Duration: 4.5 hours. Max. Height: 400m. Grass tracks and some rough cliff walks, with and without tracks. This is a circular walk. Boots are essential.

Day 5 In Ballycastle, enjoy a 'free day' which allows you to partake in other activities if you wish – such as cycling, horseriding, canoeing or just laze about with a book! Weather permitting, we may arrange to take the ferry (45 mins.) across to historic Rathlin Island with its many lighthouses, world famous bird sanctuary and its coastline surrounded by the treacherous waters of the North Irish Sea. Here you have the option to partake in either a cycling or walking activity. We do a circular walk down to the Southern Lighthouse. We also view the treacherous waters of the Corrie Vreckan. We return by ferry to our accommodation for dinner and overnight.

Day 6 After breakfast we visit the spectacular Carrickarede Rope Bridge. We then travel west to start our walk which snakes along the famed cliffs of the Causeway Coast, passing the sands of White Park Bay and the ruins of Dunseverick Castle. Finally, we descend to explore the magical realm of the Giant's Causeway. Transfer back to our accommodation for dinner and overnight.

Walk Details - Distance: 16kms. Duration: 6 hours. Max. Height: 150m. This is a lovely cliff path walk. Some beach also and a little rocky terrain, grassy tracks. Boots essential.

Day 7 Our final day's walking takes us along the Moyle Way from south west of Ballycastle, over Knocklayd Mountain, via Breen Wood Nature Reserve to finish in Glendun. This is challenging end to an exciting weeks walking! Transfer back to our accommodation in for overnight and final dinner.

Walk Details - Distance: 18kms. Duration: 6 hours. Max. Height: 520m. Grass, forest and rocky tracks, and a little road walking - boots recommended.

Day 8 Departures. After breakfast we return you to Belfast Central Bus & Rail Station (Europa) for your onward journey. You will have excellent connections from here to Dublin and Belfast Airports. A bus to Dublin takes 2 hrs. approx.

Recommended reading: 'A Companion to the Causeway Coast Way' by Philip S. Watson, published by the Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland).

Holiday Includes: 7 nights bed in room with private shower/ bathroom. Full Irish breakfast each morning. Picnic lunch (on walking days only), 7 Evening Dinners, 6 Days Walking with an expert Irish Guide who accompanies the group for the duration of the holiday. Transport to/from each day's walking locations. Luggage transfers when required. Courtesy Airport Collection to the start of the holiday and first nights B+B (as per our transfer timetable). Transfers to nearest bus/train station at end of holiday (also within our timetable). Public Bus Service may be used.

Not Included: Any boat trips (ferry to Rathlin), personal drinks, entrance fees to theatres, parks or museums etc. or gratuities.

Courtesy Airport Collection - Saturdays Only: Belfast City Airport at 16.00 hrs. & Belfast Central Bus & Train Station (Europa) at 16.00 hrs.

If you do not wish to avail of the Courtesy Airport Collection, please make your own way to the first accommodation, where your guide will meet you at 18.00 hrs. for a Briefing Session followed by dinner with the group at 19.00 hrs.

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Please note that Ireland can be a bit 'damp' both underfoot and overhead, with some liquid sunshine! Irish weather is unpredictable and the nature of walks can change quickly and dramatically because of the weather. This is one of the many pleasant aspects of walking in Ireland. We reserve the right to alter this itinerary due to weather conditions or the walking ability of each group.

2012 Tour Dates:

July 28 - August 4

Difficulty of Walks: 2 Boot

