

The Antrim Glens & Causeway Coast Independent Walking Tour



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, and the 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) 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 in the spring and early summer. The unspoilt environment of Rathlin 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.

The Causeway Coast is best known for the bizarre formations of the Giant’s Causeway, consisting of thousands of hexagonal basalt columns. 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. These are just a few of the gems waiting to be discovered by the traveller in this tranquil, unspoilt corner of Ireland.

Trip Outline

This independent walking tour of the Antrim Glens & Causeway Coast spends two days on the Moyle Way in the Glens of Antrim, a day on Rathlin Island and three days along the Causeway Coast.

The Moyle Way

The Moyle Way is a waymarked route that winds its way between Glenariff and Ballycastle. It takes you through many of the scenic valleys and mountains that lie within the Glens Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Antrim Coast. As well as beautiful scenery the area is full of fascinating geology, wildlife, history and folklore. On its way the route passes through five of the nine famous glens; Glentaise, Glenshesk, Glendun, Glenballyemon and Glenariff.

Rathlin Island

If you are a dedicated naturalist you will not want to miss Rathlin Island, a hidden treasure that lies just over six miles north of the pretty seaside resort of Ballycastle and 14 miles from the Mull of Kintyre, Scotland. The island is reached by ferry from Ballycastle and takes 45 minutes. 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 the Atlantic nomads – puffins, guillemots and razorbills make the cliffs and sea stacks their nestling sites in summer. There are few cars on the island so the roads are quiet and ideal for walking or cycling.

The Causeway Coast Way

This waymarked trail follows one of the most dramatic coastlines in the world, passing rugged and windswept cliffs, spectacular scenery and fabulous unspoilt beaches.

Walking Route

Day 1: You begin your holiday on the first evening by meeting Ian and Linda McKay, owners of a B&B in the picturesque village of Broughshane where you will be staying for the first 2 nights. Ian oversees the running of the self-guided walking tours in Antrim and is very knowledgeable about the region.

Day 2: Orra Beg to Glenariff Forest Park

Distance: 7 miles; average walking time: 4 hours

After a hearty breakfast you are driven by coach to Orra Beg, an intersection on the Moyle Way to begin your walking tour. Today you are heading south to Glenariff Forest Park passing Slieveanorra Nature Reserve, which has spectacular views over the glens and plays host to a great variety of birds. From Slieveanorra you carry on over open moorland for Trostan Mountain and on to Glenariff Nature Reserve and Forest Park with its visitor centre, nature trails and famous waterfalls. From here you will be collected and returned to your evening accommodation in Broughshane.

Day 3: Orra Beg to Ballycastle

Distance: 11 miles; average walking time: 5 hours

Today you return to Orra Beg and head north for Ballycastle. Continuing on the Moyle Way, the route is divided into three sections. The first part of the walk takes you along a forest track then follows the banks of the Glenshesk River, ending up back on a forest track as it leads you through the Breen Oakwood Nature Reserve and Wood. The next section follows the country road along Glenshesk offering views of the Glenshesk River, Knocklaid Mountain and Coolaveely Wood. The final part of today's walk takes you into Ballycastle Forest where you descend along a good forest path into Ballycastle. There are magnificent panoramic views of Rathlin Island and the forest is also home to an abundance of birds and other wildlife. Overnight at Ballycastle.

Day 4: Rathlin Island

Distance: variable, depending on which parts of the island you visit Rathlin, described as a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered is an L-shaped island, one side is four miles long, the other three and is nowhere more than a mile across.

The island is a naturalist's delight and you can choose between three walks varying from 1.5 miles to 4 miles.

Visit the RSPB West Light viewpoint to see the puffins, guillemots and razorbills along with kittiwakes and fulmars, which together make up the largest seabird colony in Europe.

Walk the trails to the old Coastguard Look Out to see the East Lighthouse, standing high above the legendary 'Bruce's Cave' at Altacarry Head, which has been flashing a warning to mariners since 1856.

Spend some time in the Boathouse Visitor Centre for a dip into Rathlin's history. Return to Ballycastle by the evening ferry. If the boat trip to Rathlin is not possible due to adverse weather, we recommend a walk to Knocklayd, the highest peak in Co. Antrim, which lies south of Ballycastle. You can either climb to the summit or skirt the mountain on tracks and roads passing through Glentaisie and Glenshesk. Alternatively, you could explore the town of Ballycastle or visit the whisky distillery at Bushmills. Overnight at Ballycastle.

Day 5: Ballycastle to Ballintoy

Distance: 6 miles; average walking time: 3 hours

Today's walk takes you along the coastal road from Ballycastle to your evening stop-over at Ballintoy. It is a rolling road with ample vantage points to view the magnificence of the Antrim coastline. As you continue along the route you will come to Larrybane with its visitor centre and the world famous Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. The bridge spans an 80 foot deep chasm that renders Carrick-a-Rede island, a must do for every visitor and gives a fitting dramatic climax to an exhilarating day's walk. From here it is only a short distance by the coastal path to the little village of Ballintoy. The little harbour at the foot of the cliffs is well worth a visit. Overnight at Ballintoy.

Day 6: Ballintoy to Portballintrae

Distance: 11 miles; average walking time: 5-6 hours

"Before you lies one of the finest walks that an ordinary pedestrian can experience anywhere in the wide world" An extract from Ulster Rambles by Peter Wright

The best coastal walk in Ireland - bar none! Varied geology, views across to Scotland, cliff and beach walks, the Giant's Causeway and Ireland's smallest church are all to be found on today's route.

From Ballintoy harbour you very soon come to the beautiful strand of White Park Bay, then on to Portbraddan, with Ireland's tiniest church measuring only 12ft by 6.5ft. Continuing on you come to the ruins of Dunseverick Castle and then along the cliff-top path round Benbane Head and on to the Giant's Causeway. From here you can stay on the path which leads to Portballintrae and your evening accommodation. Alternatively there is a shorter route along a pleasant path and through golf links to end this most splendid of walks. Overnight at Portballintrae/Bushmills.

Day 7: Portballintrae to Portstewart

Distance: 12 miles; average walking time 5-6 hours

Your final day's walk begins on the coastal road to Portrush passing Magheracross viewpoint and Dunluce Castle, perched precariously high on a promontory overlooking the sea. Shortly you come to Whiterocks beach and then a formal pathway at the far side of the beach leads you up around Ramore Head, until you reach Portrush harbour. Your walk continues along Mill Strand (beach) and then, following the Causeway markers, the route continues along the coastline, ending at the promenade in Portstewart. Overnight at Portstewart.

Day 8: After a final breakfast and farewell at Portstewart you commence your homeward journey.

We reserve the right to alter this itinerary due to weather conditions, the conditions of the walks, or the ability of clients. The above Walk Details have been given as a guideline - these may not be accurate on the day due to weather or individual walking pace.

Rathlin Ferry crossing price not included. Stg £8.50 return.

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

Please note that Ireland can be a wet country both underfoot and overhead. Irish weather is unpredictable, that's one of the "joys" of walking in Ireland, and the nature of walks can change quickly and dramatically because of the weather. For all self-guided holidays you must be able to map read and navigate with a compass. There is some road walking on self-guided holidays. Some parts of the walks in Ireland are very remote in places. Very often there are no opportunities to purchase a mid-day lunch – a packed lunch is required in such locations.

Now Available: Beginning on any day of the week a 3-5 day mini-break walking holiday of the famous Causeway Coast. Your holiday begins in the coastal town of Ballycastle where you have the option of staying for an extra night and visiting Rathlin Island.

