

Causeway Coastal Route

Historical Tour

The Causeway Coastal Route is steeped in history with reminders of the area's rich tapestry of tall tales and majestic monuments at every turn. It's a fascinating journey that leaves an inescapable feeling that the past is still part of the present.

Day 1: Belfast to Ballygally

What better way to kick-start this odyssey into a bygone era than by following the Causeway Coastal Route signs (white lettering on a brown background) along the M2 from Belfast. A cursory glance back towards Northern Ireland's vibrant capital city reveals the imposing cranes of the world famous Harland & Wolff Shipyard where the RMS **Titanic** was built. Forever etched into the annals of maritime history, the Titanic hit an iceberg and sank just four days into its maiden voyage on April, 15, 1912.

Leaving Belfast behind the tour arrives at **Carrickfergus**, one of County Antrim's oldest towns with its impressive castle, built in 1177 by John de Courcy. Lying at the entrance to Belfast Lough, Whitehead is home to a Victorian Railway village and the headquarters of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland. During the summer season you can climb on board the Portrush Flyer and be transported back in time as you steam towards the north coast. Ten miles away lies Larne, gateway to the Glens of Antrim. During the 18th century, Larne was the departure point for families seeking a new life in America. A monument in **Curran Park** commemorates the first immigrant ship to sail from the port in May 1717. Just off the coast at Larne sits **Swan Island**, a Special Protected Area and haven for birdwatchers, but once, so legend has it, the burial place for the crews of foreign ships struck down by plague. Located three miles north of Larne, overlooking the sea at Ballygally Head, is the perfect place to indulge a love of both history and modern day's creature comforts. The **Hastings Ballygally Castle Hotel** dates back to 1625 and is the only 17th century building still in use as a residence in Northern Ireland. Haunted some say by a friendly ghost (Lady Isobel Shaw) the brave amongst you can visit the 'ghost room' in one of the castle's towers to see for themselves.

Leaving Ballygally behind continue along the Causeway Coastal Route to **Glenarm**. Fittingly, Glenarm (one of the nine Glens of Antrim and meaning Glen of the Army) is home to one of Northern Ireland's oldest estates, **Glenarm Castle**. Dating from the 18th century, a tour of its splendid walled gardens is highly recommended. If you work up an appetite on your stroll through the flowers and plants, the tea-room, with its delicious homemade cream tea, is surely a must.

Day 2: Glenarm to Ballintoy

Visitors have the option from Glenarm to divert inland to one of Northern Ireland's most recognisable natural landmarks, the plug of an extinct volcano better known as **Slemish Mountain**. Ireland's Patron Saint (Patrick) is said to have tended livestock on Slemish in the 5th century and it was also the site of a United Irishman camp during the 1798 rebellion. If

heights are not your thing, then why not just pop along to the village of **Broughshane**, winner of Ulster In Bloom, Britain In Bloom, and Europe In Bloom awards; or call at the Mid-Antrim Museum in Ballymena with its range of talks, events, and excursions tapping into local history.

Continuing on the Causeway Coastal Route from Glenarm to Glencloy, the second of the nine Glens, lies the village of **Carnlough** with its picturesque harbour overlooking Carnlough Bay. The harbour was built by the owners of the quarries west of the village, these excavation sites connected to the harbour by a tramway network and bridge over two parallel streets, both of which remain today. Carnlough's main street also boasts a building with an impressive past and bright future, **The Londonderry Arms Hotel**. Built in 1848 as a coaching inn, it offers a stunning example of Georgian architecture throughout and a famous former owner in the portly shape of Sir Winston Churchill. You can stay in one of the Executive rooms favoured by the former Prime Minister, although not even the keenest sense of smell will detect a residue of Sir Winston's trademark cigar.

The Causeway Coastal Route continues on through **Cushendall** which sits at the meeting point between the three Glens of Antrim (Glennan, Glenballyemon, and Glencorp). It is at this point that the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland is a mere 16 miles away. The village itself has a number of places of historical interest, including the four-storey red sandstone **Curfew Tower** that housed prisoners and is today owned by musician, producer, and writer Bill Drummond. The ruins of **Layd(e) Church** still remain on what is one of the oldest sites in the Glens. Rebuilt in 1696 after nearly half a century of neglect, it was still a site of worship in 1800. The accompanying graveyard contains a fine example of the Celtic cross, erected in memory of Dr James MacDonnell, co-founder of the hospital in Belfast that would become the Royal Victoria. **Ossian's Grave**, on the outskirts of the village, is believed to be the burial place of the acclaimed Celtic warrior poet.

By using Glendun Viaduct the tour now crosses the Dun River (translation 'brown river'), whose colouration is the result of the peat bogs that permeate through the nearby land. One of the finest viaducts of its kind anywhere in the UK, the 'big bridge' as it's known, was designed by Englishman Charles Lanyon (the man responsible for Belfast landmarks like the main building at Queen's University and the Palm House in Botanic Gardens) and was completed in 1839.

The tour moves inland to the National Trust village of **Cushendun**, completed with its quaint Cornish cottages, before returning to the Causeway Coastal Route through **Ballypatrick Forest**, a woodland expanse that provides fine views of Rathlin Island and Ballycastle. The road passes near the site of a '**Double-Horned Cairn**', an archaeological site with two burial chambers dating back a staggering 2000B.C.. Next up is that peculiar phenomenon '**The Vanishing Lake**' at Loughareema. One day it is a sparkling lake, a few days later nothing more than a dried up bed of cracked mud.

Before you have had time to ponder the vagaries of vanishing water you will be in **Ballycastle**, a small seaside town perched on the most north-easterly tip of County Antrim. Perhaps best known for the '**Ould Lammas Fair**' which takes place on the last Monday and Tuesday of August each year, the town dates back to the 17th century. Amongst the 'Ould Lammas Fair' traditions is to eat Dulse (seaweed) and Yellow Man (a hard yellow candy). You could always walk off those extra calories with a stroll along the sea front overlooking the harbour, with **Rathlin Island** and Scotland in the distance. Rathlin, a six-miles long, one mile wide island, still has a thriving community and is renowned as a Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Centre. There are many myths surrounding Rathlin, the most famous is that Robert the Bruce (banished by King Edward I of England) took refuge here in 1306. Bruce is said to have watched a spider try and try again to bridge a gap with its web and, suitably inspired, returned to Scotland to fight for and ultimately win his kingdom.

Further around the coast is **Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge**. Suspended across a 20-metre chasm between the mainland and the tiny Carrick Island, with 30-metre drop to the water below, the choice is yours really. Admire from afar the ingenuity of the fishermen who for 350 years have built a bridge to reach their salmon nets, or take your courage in your hands and actually have a go at crossing yourself. If you're brave enough to walk across remember the cardinal rule - don't look down!

Next stop is **Ballintoy**, one of the country's most picturesque spots looking across to Sheep and Rathlin Islands and on to Scotland. As you drive over the hill from Ballycastle the pristine white walls of Ballintoy Church beckon you on, minus the square tower that supported a steeple until a hurricane in December 1984. Take the narrow road down Knocksaughey Hill to Ballintoy Harbour (not suitable for coaches) and you will quickly understand why this particular site has proved popular with television and movie crews.

Day 3: Ballintoy to Limavady

Day three takes the tour past **Dunseverick Castle**, where part of a tower is all that remains, surrounded on three sides by ocean. Then it's time to take a deep breath and prepare for the jaw-dropping next stop – UNESCO World Heritage Site **The Giant's Causeway**. Science tells us the unique six-sided basalt columns and formations were formed by volcanic activity, but we know better. Legend has it that local giant **Finn McCool** created the world famous tourist attraction, hence not to be missed sights such as the Wishing Chair, Giant's Boot and a massive hexagonal formation of columns that resembles church organ pipes. First documented in 1693, sketches of The Giant's Causeway were published in 1740. The already fantastic Giant's Causeway experience is set to be further enhanced in 2012 with the opening of a new state-of-the-art visitor centre, guaranteed to bring history to life.

It's then all aboard the **Giant's Causeway and Bushmills Railway** for the short steam train trip to Bushmills. In 1833, the first hydro-electric tramway in the world was opened between Portrush and Bushmills, eventually extended to Causeway Head in 1877. Today the train puffs along a two-mile stretch of that original tramway bed. In the village of Bushmills a visit to **Old Bushmills Distillery** is a must. The oldest licensed whiskey distillery in Ireland is approximately a ten minute walk from the train stop and a tour provides proof that the whiskey making tradition is still very much alive. After a visit to the gift shop why not grab a bite to eat at the Distillery Kitchen or one of the village's family run businesses before re-boarding the train back to the Giant's Causeway (the Giant's Causeway and Bushmills Railway does not operate all year).

Further along the coast is **Portballintrae**, originally a fishing village and nestled around a horse shoe-shaped bay. It was off this section of the Antrim coastline that a team of Belgian divers recovered the greatest find of Spanish Armada treasure taken from a Girona wreck. Still on the Causeway Coastal Route and perched precariously on the cliff top is **Dunluce Castle**, one of the most iconic and historic images in Ireland. Dating back to the 14th century, the castle has a rich history. Richard de Burgh, Sorley Boy MacDonnell, Sir John Perrott, and its last occupant, Randall MacConnell (the second Earl of Antrim) all appreciated its strengths as a fortress (even if their enemies didn't). A village settlement that grew up around the castle was destroyed by fire in 1641, although some of the walls remain.

Head for **Coleraine** and a visit to **Mountsandel Fort**, setting for one of Ireland's oldest hunter-gatherer settlements (dating back to before 7000B.C.) with its magnificent views along the River Bann. Then it's on to **Castlerock** where the River Bann ends its journey and merges with the sea. Continue along the road and you will pass the 17th century **Hezlett House**, providing a taste of life in a bygone era, and at the crossroads stands an ancient tree reputed to be where the infamous highwayman Cushy Glen was hanged. Appearing through

the trees is **Mussenden Temple** and **Downhill Demesne**. The temple sits proudly on the cliff top overlooking the golden strand below. Built in 1785 as a summer library, it provides stunning views westward over Downhill Strand and on to Donegal, and east to Castlerock, Portstewart, and Portrush. Mussenden was modelled on the Temple of Vesta in Italy and bears the inscription: 'Tis pleasant, safely to behold from shore. The rolling ship, and hear the tempest roar'.

Further fabulous scenery awaits at **Binevenagh Mountain**, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, with Lough Foyle and the mountains of Donegal in the distance as you arrive in **Limavady**. Limavady, meaning Leap of the Dog, derives its name from a legendary hound belonging to a local chieftain that jumped over the River Roe to warn his master of an impending ambush. You can also visit the site of the Brighter Gold, a treasure trove that included bracelets and necklaces discovered by two farmers in 1896.

If the Causeway Coastal Route Family Tour is your idea of holiday heaven why not visit our accommodation and special offers section and spend a few days sampling what the region has in store.

For further details check out our website on www.causewaycoastandglens.com.