

Causeway Coastal Route

Myths & Legends Tour

Back in the mists of time before X Factor and Facebook, the favourite form of entertainment was the ancient art of storytelling. Gathered around roaring fires, locals would regale one another with tales of saints and scholars, heroic deeds of daring, fairies, banshees and bogeymen. The Causeway Coastal Route Myths & Legends Tour delves into this rich tapestry of fascinating narrative to bring the stories to life and guide the tourist on a journey they will never forget.

Day 1: Belfast to Ballycastle

Starting out in Northern Ireland's capital city **Belfast** and following the Causeway Coastal Route signage (white writing on a brown background), the tour makes its way along the M2 towards Whiteabbey and Carrickfergus where the imposing castle dominates the town's skyline. **Fergus Mor**, the first Scottish King of Dalriada (which included parts of the North Antrim coast) was drowned when his boat foundered on the rocks near the castle, which became known as Krag Fergus (and eventually Carrickfergus).

Continuing along the Causeway Coastal Route and two miles outside the town of Larne is a cave known as the **Devil's Churn**. The lapping waves produce sounds like old hand churns and legend has it that a drunken piper went into it to explore and never returned. At midnight, he can be heard playing his pipes underneath the hearthstone of a house in Ballycraigy (Larne), where the cavern is supposed to terminate. Less than five miles further along the road, at **Cairncastle**, outside the village of **Ballygally**, is the first of many tales associated with the ill-fated Spanish Armada. Locals speak of a Spanish nobleman who drowned when his galleon sank along the coastline at Ballygally in 1588. His body was taken to the graveyard at **St Patrick's Church** in Cairncastle and at the spot where he was buried stands the gnarled and twisted branches of a **Spanish chestnut tree**. Adding further credence to the story is the fact that samples taken from the tree for analysis reveal it does indeed date from the 16th century.

A further five miles along the coast, just outside the village of **Glenarm**, sits a huge rock with a window-like opening at the top. The story goes that a beautiful young woman drowned whilst swimming in Glenarm Bay and her sweetheart was so distraught that he lost his sanity and each day for the rest of his life would gaze through the gap in the rock awaiting her return (hence the name **Madman's Window**). This is no fairytale, so the locals say, although Glenarm does have its fair share of history with the 'little people'. At the annual flax harvest celebrations, the **Fairy Fiddlers** of Glenarm and Glencloy would entertain the locals – although be warned, you will only ever see them if you *truly* believe.

Before reaching **Carnlough** the tour turns inland along the A42 towards **Ballymena**. Casting its shadow over the landscape is **Slemish Mountain**, a volcanic plug with more than its fair share of myth and legend. **St Patrick**, Patron Saint of Ireland, was brought to Slemish as a young man by pirates who had slaughtered his family. Sold into slavery, he worked on Slemish for six years. Continuing towards Ballymena and two and a half miles North-East of

the village of Broughshane (on Skerry Hill), you will find the ruins of **Skerry Church**. Walk 30 feet due north of the church and you will come across an indented stone known as **St Patrick's Footprint**. Slemish, however, has another interesting story to consider before leaving for Broughshane. **Nessy O'Haughian** is Ireland's answer to Robin Hood, a local boy who set about righting the wrongs perpetrated on his family by the cruel local landlord. Following many tough years trying to make a living at the foot of Slemish, his mother and father were evicted for rent arrears. Nessy was so outraged, he struck a bailiff and killed him, consigning himself and his three brothers to a life on the run.

The village of **Broughshane**, famous in recent years for its vibrant flower displays, was also once the site of a racecourse. Situated on a level field close to the village, the landlord of Broughshane Estate in the 1760's, Charles O'Neill, acquired a spirited mare called Broughshane Swallow. The day before racing against a strong contender, Charles met an old woman who gave him some rosary beads, telling him that the horse would win as long as the beads were draped around its neck. Although not a particularly religious man, Charles thought it prudent not to tempt fate and sure enough the horse won wearing the old lady's beads. Rivals came from far and near to challenge '**Mare of Podhreen**' and she kept winning until, one day, the horse collapsed and died as it passed the finish line. O'Neill was so heart-broken he too died shortly after and the magic rosary beads disappeared, never to be seen again.

Five miles from Broughshane lies the estate of **Galgorm Castle** where, if you choose to believe, the local doctor who lived there made a pact with the Devil. Selling his soul for riches to ease his financial worries, the medic twice fooled Old Nick who has never been seen in the vicinity of Galgorm from that day to now.

The tour now heads back towards the coast along the A43 and into the land of **Ossian**, warrior/poet son of the giant Finn McCool. On one occasion, it's said that Ossian tried to outrun a large band of Vikings who chased him into picturesque **Glenariff Forest**. As they closed in, Ossian decided to climb down a steep gully. About to plunge to his death, he suddenly grabbed a mysterious grey, rope-like column and climbed to safety. On reaching the top he saw a white horse grazing and realised it was her tail. He thanked the horse and asked for help. She turned into a mountain mist, fell to the ground as water, and washed away the pursuing Norsemen. Today you can visit the picturesque waterfall in **Glenariff Forest Park** known as the **Grey Mare's Tail**. A stone-age burial cairn is also visible at Lubitavish, near the village of **Cushendall**, said to be the grave of Ossian. Also near **Cushendall** is **Fairy Hill**, a prominent round mound on the east slope of Glencorp where, every May's Eve (April 30) the fairies are said to emerge in procession.

Cushendall's near neighbour **Cushendun** (four miles away), not to be outdone, has its own tall tales, like **Castle Carra** where the headless ghost of **Shane O'Neill**, Earl of Tyrone, is said to haunt the area since his murder there in 1597.

Heading inland once more there is another treat in store for lovers of great stories. Just before Ballypatrick Forest is **Loughareema Lake**. Known locally as the '**vanishing lake**' or '**fairy lough**', it is a phenomenon that one day is a sparkling lake, then a couple of days later a dried up bed of cracked mud. Some say it has something to do with an underground river, but I prefer the tale of the cruel landlord and the priest. Standing up for tenants being driven from their land, the priest was struck by the angry landlord and his hat knocked to the ground. The priest prophesized that the landlord would drown on that spot within the year, but where his hat lay would always be dry land. Within the year the prophecy came true and the evil landlord perished in the lake. Today a hilly mound exists (where the priest's hat landed) that remains dry even when the vanishing lake reappears.

Before ending day one, the tour has two more tales to tell. Heading in the direction of **Fair Head** three miles east of the seaside town of **Ballycastle**, this rocky headland has a tragic story of beauty and a beast. A **Rathlin Island** (six miles off the coast from Ballycastle)

chieftain decided the only way to stop Viking raids was to offer his beautiful daughter's hand in marriage. She refused and a brutal retaliation by the Norsemen was expected. Instead the Viking lord invited the locals to attend a feast at Fair Head. Of course it was too good to be true and in the middle of the celebrations a local servant, at the behest of the devious Viking, danced the fair maiden straight off Fair Head to her death.

Finally the touching legend of the **Children of Lir** will give you food for thought as you tuck into supper. Lir was the King of Ireland whose beautiful children were turned into swans by their wicked mother in law. The children would not be free from the spell for 900-years, consigned to spending 300 years on Lake Drava, 300 years on the **Sea of Moyle** (the stretch of water between County Antrim and the Mull of Kintyre), and 300 years on the lake isle of Mora in Mayo.

Day 2: Ballycastle to Portrush

Having spent the night in one of the area's hotels or Bed & Breakfast, the Myths & Legends Tour continues in the town of **Ballycastle** itself with the story of the **Black Nun**. Situated off the Cushendall Road on the approach to the town, **Bonamargy Friary** sports a small rounded cross with a hole in the centre on its west door. It's said to mark the grave of **Julia McQuillan**, a recluse from the 1600's known locally as the Black Nun who now haunts the building. The ghost theme continues as you head inland from Ballycastle eight miles along the A44 towards **Armoy**.

Near Gracehill Golf Club is one of the most photographed natural phenomenon in the region, a stunning avenue of trees planted by the Stuart family in the 18th century and known as **The Dark Hedges**. The '**Grey Lady**' is said to appear at dusk amongst the trees. Some say she is a maid from a nearby house who died, others a lost spirit from an abandoned graveyard.

From Armoy leave in the direction of **Ballymoney**, a bustling market town with its own famous, and in the case of George Hutchinson, infamous characters. **George 'Bloody' Hutchinson** was a local magistrate responsible for helping to suppress the United Irish Rebellion of 1798. He sentenced two men to death at Dungorbery and hanged them from a tree at the top of the hill. Said to get around by using a tunnel under the town, George was a genuine bogeyman who still haunts Ballymoney today (some say!).

The tour now sets its sights on the coast once more, through the town of **Bushmills** and on to the **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 this world famous tourist attraction in a fit of pique. Angered by the insults of a Scottish giant who questioned his fighting prowess, he created the Causeway to enable a showdown to take place. This battle of the heavyweights was won, not by brawn, but guile, as Finn dressed up as a baby to hoodwink his Scottish counterpart. Fearing what the father of such a babe would look like, the Scottish behemoth fled home with Finn flinging rocks at him as he went. One of the rocks plucked from the ground landed in the sea to create the Isle of Man, the gap left forming Lough Neagh. Proof of Finn's existence comes in the shape of such sights as the **Wishing Chair, Giant's Boot**, and a massive formation of hexagonal columns that resembles church organ pipes. The Giant's Causeway experience is set to be further enhanced with the opening in 2012 of a state-of-the-art visitors centre.

As the tour heads off in the direction of **Dunluce Castle**, the spectre of the **Spanish Armada** again raises its head. The Armada set sail from Lisbon in Portugal to enforce King Phillip II of Spain's claim to the throne of England. Scattered by storms and English galleons, some of the vast fleet foundered off the Irish coastline. Perhaps the most famous was the **Galleass La Girona**. La Girona sank on the morning of October 26, 1588 and lay undiscovered until 1967

when Belgian marine archaeologist Robert Senuit rekindled everyone's interest by recovering its treasure trove of artefacts from the wreck near Dunluce Castle.

Dunluce Castle, perched on a headland that drops straight into the sea off the north Antrim coast, dates back to the 14th century. Few places in Ireland boast the legacy of myth and legend that surrounds this proud citadel. In fact, Dunluce doesn't just have one ghost haunting its ruins, but dozens. It must get busy of an evening as servants, a daughter of former inhabitants the **MacQuillans**, and an English constable all go about their spooky business. The servants died in the severe winter of 1639 when part of the castle fell into the sea, the girl as she tried to elope, and **Peter Carey**, complete with black cloak and purple scarf when he was hanged by local chieftain **Sorley Boy MacDonnell**.

Dunluce Castle looks down on **Royal Portrush Golf Club**, the only club to have hosted The British Open golf championship outside Scotland and England. The main course bears its name, The Dunluce links, and part of the area now frequented by fairway fanatics was the alleged scene of a battle between the Vikings and local Irish tribes in the 12th century. The sandhills of the East Strand Portrush were known as **The War Hollow**, following the ambushing of Norsemen returning with plunder after capturing Dunluce Castle. The King of Norway, Magus, lost his head (literally) and his army was sent packing back to Scandinavia. For the record, the Norseman's haul of silver still lies buried somewhere in the hills (along with, I suspect, a few hundred lost golf balls).

Portrush, a holiday destination for more than two and half centuries, is the perfect place to call a halt to day two of the Causeway Coastal Route Myths & Legends Tour with its top class accommodation, restaurants, and entertainment.

Day 3: Portrush to Limavady

After a hearty local breakfast, it's fitting the first story of day three involves the notorious skull and cross-bones. Just off the coast at Portrush lie a small group of islands called **The Skerries**. Invaders would often use the islands as cover to launch an attack on the nearby Dunluce Castle, including the ill-fated Norse King Magus. It was also a favourite haunt of our next legendary figure, the Scottish pirate **Tavish Dhu (Black Tavish)**. In 1315, **Edward Bruce** came to Ireland to be crowned King and camped at **Coleraine**, a town five miles inland from Portrush and our next port of call on tour. Unfortunately for Edward, the Earl of Ulster had other ideas and lay siege to the town with his army. All looked lost for Edward Bruce until Tavish Dhu attacked four English vessels bringing provisions to the Earl. He sailed up the River Bann to Coleraine and presented them to Bruce to save the day. Folklore says Tavish is buried on The Skerries with, I might add, his treasure. It has never been found.

Coleraine, rendezvous point for Tavish and Bruce, is a busy shopping town on the banks of the River Bann. It has a history stretching back in the annals of time and is possibly site for one of the oldest, if not the oldest, settlement on the Emerald Isle. At **Mount Sandel**, a prominent mound that looks down on the town's two bridges across the Bann, evidence of human activity was discovered dating back to somewhere between 8000 and 7000 B.C.. You can take a walk around the Mountsandel area and marvel at the stunning panoramic view – small wonder it was chosen as a site for forts. Coleraine's main shopping street also boasts an impressive church with links to St Patrick. Another of Ireland's saints, Colmcille, also spent time in the town following his pilgrimage along the Causeway Coast.

Leaving Coleraine in the direction of **Limavady** along the Windyhill Road, the Myths & Legends Tour immerses itself in the world of the not so dandy highwaymen. The Windyhill Road is better known as **The Murderhole Road** due to an infamous history of attacks by notorious local highwaymen **Shane Crossagh O'Mullan** and **Cushy Glen**. The stunning scenery of the Roe Valley provided the backdrop for the bloody exploits of O'Mullan who was

eventually hanged in 1722 and is buried in **Banagher Old Church** graveyard. Cushy Glen would linger around Bridge Street in Coleraine identifying potential travellers to attack. He too met a sticky end when he was shot and killed by one of his would-be victims and the highwayman is said to still haunt the Murderhole Road.

Limavady is 21-miles from Coleraine and few places in Northern Ireland can rival the town for myth and legend. The name Limavady itself has its own tale. From the Irish *Leim an Mhadaidh* it means **Leap of the Dog**, derived from the legendary leap over the River Roe by a hound owned by the **O’Cahan Clan** to warn chieftains of an impending ambush. The jump took place from Dogleap Bridge in the **Roe Valley Country Park**, where the O’Cahan’s castle once stood. Amongst the fascinating stories in the area is the **Brighter Gold**, a hoard of Iron Age artefacts discovered in a field just outside the town in 1896 by two local ploughmen. Now on display in Dublin’s National Museum, a hologram of the Brighter Gold can be viewed at Limavady’s Tourist Information Centre.

Saint Colmcille, a member of the Royal Family of Donegal, is also inextricably linked with Limavady. Colmcille returned from Scotland (where he founded the monastery at Iona) to attend a conference of the **Kings held at Drum Ceat**, just outside Limavady. The town also played an important role in one of the Emerald Isle’s most famous pieces of music, The **Londonderry Air** (or **Danny Boy** if you prefer!). The haunting melody to Danny Boy was first heard in Limavady, played by a blind fiddler on market day. A local lady, **Jane Ross**, heard the tune, recorded the notes, and sent them to **George Petrie**, an English collector of Irish music. **Jimmy McCurry**, the enigmatic figure who played the tune on his fiddle, is buried in **Ballykelly Parish Church** graveyard (Ballykelly is a village eight miles from Limavady) in an unmarked grave. Miss Jane Ross was born on Main Street in Limavady and a plaque commemorates her residence there. A statue has also been erected on Catherine Street in the town to recognise her significance to Danny Boy.

It’s time, too, for the pipes to call an end to the Causeway Coastal Route Myths & Legends Tour. For further information on the myriad of tall tales and historic yarns why not check out **causewaycoastandglens.com/myths**.

Or if you would like more information on other tours, accommodation, restaurants, entertainment, or places of interest, it’s all at your fingertips by typing in **causewaycoastandglens.com**

The Causeway Coastal Route Myths & Legends Tour – the perfect blend of sublime scenery and spine-tingling tales.