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## Not So Troubled Northern Ireland by [Roger Starkey](#)

A Catholic opponent dribbled the soccer ball past me and delivered a quick pass to his Protestant teammate on the other side of the goal. The Protestant swiped at the still approaching ball and delivered a screaming left-footer past my goalie. I'm not sure if the goalie attended mass or church or neither. Religious affiliation, contrary to the stereo-type, didn't matter to this group of Northern Irish friends who had gathered for a bachelor party (a 'stag do' on this side of the Atlantic) in the Northern Ireland coastal city of Port Stewart.

It was September and the annual July sectarian troubles were now a memory, a bad memory, in the minds of most. Ignoring the usual familial protests to not visit Northern Ireland because of the dangers, a fellow American, also living in Dublin, and I had set out a few days prior on a visit to the northeast of the country.

Arriving in Belfast, the contrast with Dublin was immediately obvious. Not for the bad things we had been told to expect, but rather for the wide streets and general cleanliness of the city. Although our primary interest in Belfast lay in West Belfast, home of 'the troubles' and Belfast's largest tourist draw, we pretended to take the moral high road on the first day by visiting some of the other tourist draws. City Hall and Queens University, like the city itself, were surprisingly beautiful. The shipyard where the Titanic was built was rather unimpressive but the walk to the docks provided an opportunity to enjoy the city's omni-present 19th century architecture. With the sun shining, the impressive architecture and the general friendliness of the people, this could have been any other European capital city. But it isn't any other city and the abundance of patrolling armored police vehicles provided a constant reminder of the fragile atmosphere of Northern Ireland's capital.

After a night spent at a typical Irish Bed and Breakfast, and a typical Irish fry-up for breakfast, we could fight the urge no longer and drove to West Belfast. Although taxi tours are available for around ten British Pounds per hour, we decided the area was best viewed in our own vehicle so that we could stop when desired and take pictures of the famous murals painted on many of the buildings. Anyone who has taken the mural tour will not be surprised to learn that no-one else was to be found snapping photographs of their friends posing before the wall paintings.

The drive down the Falls Road, and through the surrounding Falls neighborhood, had our hearts racing. It wasn't the occasional, and incredibly peaceful looking, murals of Irish freedom fighters or the numerous Irish flags flying from the houses and painted on the curbs that had our chests pounding, it was all of the news reports that we had seen. One would have expected to see rows of barricades and mobs of angry youths throwing rocks and sectarian slurs at each other. But it was, in fact, a decidedly peaceful neighborhood. A walk around the neighborhood, and a beer in a pub that had a wall proudly displaying the names of the Irish who died during the 1981 Hunger Strikes, did nothing to raise the blood pressure.

Driving through the 'peace line' (an iron wall that separates the Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods), we arrived in the Shankhill neighborhood. The signs of the troubles, in stark contrast to Falls, were ubiquitous in Shankhill. The Union Jack flags appeared to outnumber the residents at a rate of three to one and the murals depicted anything but peaceful scenes. Where as a mural of a smiling Bobby Sands looks down on those who drive the Falls Road, a mural of an anonymous ski-masked man, with an automatic assault rifle, seems to warn all those with opposing views to stay off Shankhill Road. The increased heart rate we were experiencing had little to do with the news reports.

Although wary, we decided not to let our fears get in the way of a good photo opportunity and went for a walk. The streets of Shankhill were thankfully empty so we were able to move about unmolested and to take pictures of the more intimidating murals. A minor scare was provided courtesy of a young man who, despite the Northern Ireland climate, insisted on walking the streets sans shirt in order to show the world that he had more tattoos than body hairs. Although not a soothing sight in the most peaceful of surroundings, the tense setting compounded the affect.

It was getting close to lunchtime and, although the KFC with the mural of three masked men toting automatic weapons seemed like a quiet place to have a nice meal, we decided to leave Belfast for a tour of the nearby Carrickfergus Castle instead.

Carrickfergus is a formidable looking castle that has been refurbished to the point of almost removing the castle charm. If you find enjoyment in an out-of-the-way castle that requires a perilous walk to reach it, and an even more perilous walk through the narrow staircases to see each level, Carrickfergus is not for you. Any hopes of finding that real medieval charm here will have been dashed before you find an open parking space in the mall-sized parking lot.

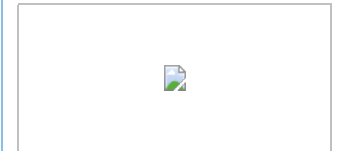
Traveling north on the A2, after leaving the sterile castle, we passed mile after mile of stunning coastline and thoughts that all of North Ireland was a land of trouble were beginning to be removed one gorgeous ocean view at a time.

Entering Glenariff Forest Park, which is a quick detour off the A2, I was still unsure of my feelings about Northern Ireland. By now the beauty of the country was unquestionable, as was the kindness of the people, but the news reports and the murals in Shankhill still left me questioning my choice of tourist destinations. The serene, tree-covered 'three-mile waterfall walk' in the park removed all doubts. The North (as it is known to the residents of the combined island) was proving to be one of the best travel destinations in Ireland. The next few days of the journey only reinforced that opinion.

A short drive from Ballycastle, the unassuming seaside village in which we had spent the night, is the Carrick-a-read rope bridge, which is best avoided by the faint of heart. The bridge, made only of rope and small pieces of wood, extends perilously 80 feet (24 meters) above the crashing ocean below connecting to a tiny nearby island. The bridge is used by local fisherman to reach a salmon hatchery just off the small island but is open to tourists who queue up for their turn to tempt fate. No more than two people are allowed on the bridge at one time and it is closed during high winds. If you can brave the trip across the bridge, the small island provides great ocean views.

Less than thirty minutes down the road from the Carrick-a-read rope bridge is, perhaps, the most famous of all Northern Ireland tourist attractions, Giant's Causeway. Giant's Causeway was created when the giant Finn McCool wanted a walkway across the ocean to reach a giantess, that he rather fancied, which lived on an island just off the coast of Scotland. At least that's one explanation given. Although the origin of the causeway is uncertain, what is certain is its uniqueness. Hundreds of basalt columns, the number visible varying with the tides, jut out of the water forming a path (or a walkway for an amorous giant) that leads straight into the ocean. The columns also serve as a great playground for adults and children.

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Giant's Causeway was the last stop before meeting our friends in Port Stewart. After a late lunch, we all proceeded to the beach where we spent the remainder of the day on the enormous, tranquil, cliff-backed Port Stewart Strand. Although I was repeatedly reminded that my lack of soccer skills betrayed my American nationality far more than my accent ever could, I still had a great day playing soccer on that Northern Irish beach; playing soccer with my Northern Irish friends, Catholic and Protestant, 200 miles from Belfast and millions of miles from the rare sectarian violence that gives this beautiful country an overly visible black eye.

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