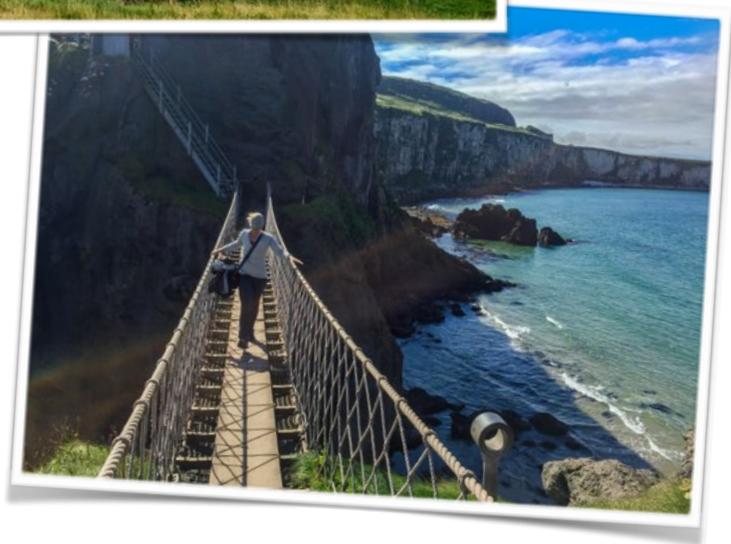


10 Days in Northern Ireland

by Julie Brooks @ Plan-Pack-Go



Céid Míle Fáilte!

A hundred thousand welcomes!

My husband Chris and I recently spent 6 weeks in Ireland (amazing!) and while only a small part was in Northern Ireland, we can't imagine a better introduction to the country. I think the phrase "small part" is the key to our satisfaction: we considered the trip a taste, and didn't try to gulp the whole country in one bite. When traveling, Fear of Missing Out can loom large and lead to crammed schedules and rushed touring. As Chris and I travel more, we've come to realize that the best experiences come when we slow down. Skeptical? Fear not! A slower pace doesn't rule out variety. This focused, 10-day itinerary has it all: hiking, history, charming villages, castle ruins, and stunning vistas.

You'll notice pretty quickly that the plan involves three days of hiking the Causeway Coast Way (CCW). Not that into hiking? That's ok - I'll provide a lighter alternative. This itinerary also presumes you'll rely on public transportation; it's economic and a nice way to become immersed in the culture and countryside. If you rent a car, you'll require less travel time and can add more sightseeing, but you'll need to make arrangements for the car while you're hiking the CCW (3-day parking, and a ride either to the start or back to your car at the end) Walking tour companies will provide the service for a fee, as will many B&Bs.

Like any generic itinerary, this plan is unlikely to suit your needs to a T so soak it in and adjust accordingly. If you have follow-up questions, please [contact me](#). I'd love to help!

Days 1–2: Arrival + Belfast

Waste no time once you hit Belfast! Drop your bags at your hotel/ hostel/B&B and start exploring. The [Titanic Belfast](#) is high on any Belfast sightseeing list, not only for fun and interesting details about the famous ship, but also its importance to the people and city who built her.

If you'd like to learn more about Ireland's history, the [Cathedral Quarter](#), [Peace Wall](#), and murals along both [Shankill Road](#) and [Falls Road](#) provide a window into "The Troubles". We walked and did a self-guided tour, but [Black Cab Tours](#) are highly rated and give an insider's view and personal touch.

The historic [Belfast City Hall](#) offers free tours, and for shopping, stop into [St. George's Market](#) (Friday through Sunday) or wander through [Victoria Square](#) (any day).

If you can, plan your Belfast visit to overnight in town on a Saturday or Sunday. The city has a rich music scene and the trad session at [The Fountain Tavern](#) was one of the best we've ever come across. Never experienced a trad session? [Here's a brief introduction](#).



Day 3: Travel Day + Ballycastle

To get from Belfast to Ballycastle, take the [218/219 bus](#) from Belfast to Ballymena, then change to the [131/131b/217](#) to get to Ballycastle. One Rambler ticket should cover the whole journey; it cost £9/adult when we traveled.



The bus ride to Ballycastle takes about 3 hours all-in leaving plenty of time to explore in the afternoon. Stop into the free [Ballycastle Museum](#), take a self-guided tour of town using posted placards/maps, walk to the harbor to purchase [Rathlin Island ferry](#) tickets, and go grocery shopping at [the Co-Op](#) to stock up for snacks and picnic lunches for Rathlin Island and the CCW. In the evening, there's a good chance you'll find music at [Central Bar](#).



Day 4: Rathlin Island

Do yourself a favor and spend a full day on [Rathlin Island](#)! This little island is only 4 miles wide and home to about 135 hardy souls, but it packs a big punch for its size.

Stop into the [Boathouse Visitor Centre](#) and peruse its excellent little museum downstairs before deciding the rest of the day's activities which could include hiking to one of the island's three lighthouses, checking out the Smuggler's House or the Kelp House, visiting the [RSPB Bird Centre](#), or

grabbing a refreshment in [McCuaig's Bar](#). If you visit the bird centre in May or June, there's a good chance to see a huge variety of nesting shorebirds and even - wait for it - [PUFFINS!](#)



If you want to conserve energy and perhaps see a little more, rent a bicycle from [Soerneog View Hostel](#) for £10/day. There's also [a bus](#) that runs between the harbor and the RSPB Bird Centre that costs £5/adult for the round trip.

Days 5–7: Hike the Causeway Coast Way

The Causeway Coast Way is one of dozens of Waymarked Ways in Ireland. This scenic Way runs for 32-miles along the rugged northern coast between the towns of Ballycastle and Portstewart. You can break the hike up however you like, but many do it in three sections as we did. For detailed hiking info, [check out my guide to the Causeway Coast Way](#).

Ballycastle to Ballintoy (7.1 miles)

Be sure to take side hikes to [Kinbane Castle](#) and the [Carrick-a-Rede](#) rope bridge. They add about 4 miles to the hike but are well worth it. In Ballintoy, have a bite at the [Fullerton Arms](#) and check for music at the [Carrick-a-Rede Bar](#).



Ballintoy to Bushmills (12.6 miles)

Technically the CCW leads through Portballintrae but we prefer the Bushmills option for the chance to tour the country's oldest distillery. Regardless, this section of the CCW is one of the most beautiful hikes we've ever taken!



The trail starts off at the quaint [Ballintoy Church](#), winds down to [Ballintoy Harbour](#), segues to a serene beach walk in [Whitepark Bay](#), passes the [Dunseverick Castle](#) ruins, climbs to a thrilling clifftop walk to the [Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site](#), and finishes with a lovely walking path to Bushmills. Be sure to

allow at least an hour to explore Giant's Causeway when hiking through. It's a stunner!

Bushmills to Portstewart (12.2 miles)

If whiskey is of interest, start the day with a ~9:30am [Bushmills Distillery tour](#) before hiking 3 miles to your next must-see stop at [Dunluce Castle](#). The extensive ruins coupled with ongoing archaeological work make make for an informative and engaging stop. The rest of the hike meanders peacefully along beaches, through the Portrush promenade, around [Ramore Head](#), and along low clifftop trails. In Portstewart, stop into the [Anchor Bar](#) for dinner and a pint.



Hybrid Hiking/Driving Option

Is this way too much hiking for you? Try this hybrid driving/hiking option instead:

- ▶ Drive from Ballycastle to Ballintoy stopping at the sights mentioned above.
- ▶ Arrange to stay in a B&B in either Ballintoy or Bushmills, calling to make sure they offer portage services for hikers.
- ▶ Hike the CCW section between Ballintoy and Giant's Causeway, making specific drop-off and pick-up arrangements with your B&B host. This may cost a bit more but you won't regret it! It's a gorgeous hike - definitely one for the bucket list.
- ▶ Drive from Bushmills to Portstewart, stopping along the way to see Dunluce Castle and perhaps wander the Portrush Promenade and Ramore Head which divides Portrush into its East Strand and West Strand.

Days 8–9: Travel Day + Londonderry/Derry

If traveling by car, take a quick trip to [Mussenden Temple](#) before leaving the area. Using public transportation, the trip from Portstewart to Londonderry/Derry requires a quick bus ride to Coleraine followed by a 2-hour train ride. It's not wasted time though; the [train runs through lovely countryside with sweeping views](#) so it's a relaxing sightseeing activity in and of itself.



To get from Portstewart to Derry, take the [140a/140b bus](#) to Coleraine, then [catch the train](#) to Londonderry/Derry. Upon arrival, take a short walk across the [Peace Bridge](#) to get from the train station to the historic walled city.

There's so much to see in Derry you'll use every bit of your time here! Start off with a [Wall Tour](#) for a nice overview and to get the lay of the land, then go back to sights that pique your interest like [The Siege Museum](#), [St. Columb's Cathedral](#), the [Guildhall](#), or the [Tower Museum](#).

For a meaningful look at the [1972 Bloody Sunday](#), visit the [Museum of Free Derry](#) and take a compelling [Bogside History Tour](#).

The walled city is compact and laid out in a tidy grid, so it's very walking-friendly. For an inexpensive, filling meal, try [The Diamond](#) - it'll keep you well within budget!



Day 10: Travel Day + Departure

Sigh...all good things must come to an end. To get from Londonderry/Derry to Belfast, you can take the [273/X273 express bus](#) which takes 3+ hours, or [the train](#) which takes 2+ hours.



What do you think? Are you ready to head to Ireland's north coast? After you visit, please shoot me a quick email. I'd love to hear what you love about Northern Ireland.

Wherever you're keen to travel next, make your plans, pack those bags, and go, go, go!

Cheers,

-Julie  **PlanPackGo**

P.S. [Here's a handy Google Map](#) with pins for most of the sights mentioned above!