

Let the Good Times Roll:

Two Days in Belfast

There's no doubt about it – Belfast is buzzing. Massive investment combined with the confidence created by the peace process have transformed Northern Ireland's capital, and its old bombs and bullets reputation has given way to a new designer Belfast. Jump on and ride the wave with our guide to the best of the city.

BELFAST OLD & NEW

Start your day with breakfast and people-watching in one of the many cafés on Botanic Avenue – homely **Maggie May's** (No 50 Botanic Avenue) will do nicely – before strolling north into the city centre. The Industrial Revolution transformed Belfast in the 19th century, and its rapid rise to muck-and-brass prosperity is manifested in the extravagance of **City Hall** (Donegall Square; closed Sunday; www.belfastcity.gov.uk). Built in classical Renaissance style, it was completed in 1906 and paid for from profits of the gas supply company. The highlights of the free guided tour include the sumptuous wedding-cake Italian marble and colourful stained glass of the entrance hall and rotunda, an opportunity to sit on the mayor's throne, and the idiosyncratic portraits of past lord mayors. Each lord mayor is allowed to choose their own artist, and the variations in personal style are intriguing.

Leaving City Hall, nose around the many shops on **Donegall Street** and **Royal Avenue**. Keep your eyes peeled for items particular to Northern Ireland: fine Belleek china, linen (antique and new) and Tyrone crystal.

Pop in for a pub lunch at historic **White's Tavern** (2-12 Wine Cellar Entry), down a cobbled alley between Rosemary and High Streets. After food, stroll north along the regenerated Lagan waterfront to the **Bigfish**, a prominent modern artwork gracing the riverbank.

From here, track down the Lagan Boat Company (www.laganboatcompany.com) for the **Titanic Tour** (yes, the *Titanic* was built in Belfast). The trip (75 minutes; last departure 3.30pm) explores the docks and shipyards downstream of the weir. Back at the **Bigfish**, discover the whys and wherefores of weirs by popping into the **Lagan Lookout Visitor Centre** (1 Donegall Quay; www.laganlookout.com) or head back into town to **Ormeau Baths Gallery** (18a Ormeau Avenue). Housed in a 19th-century public bath-house, this is Northern Ireland's principal exhibition space for contemporary visual art.

All done, head up towards Donegall Square for dinner. Representing the cream of modern Irish dining are bustling **Deane's Brasserie** (34-40 Howard Street; www.deanesbelfast.com), sophisticated Paul Rankin-owned **Roscoff** (7-11 Linenhall Street; www.rankingroup.co.uk) and, for lighter purses, **Jeffers Gastropub** (3 Skipper Street). Polish off the evening with a few swift ones in the local bars: **Irene & Nan's** (12 Brunswick Street), **Kelly's Cellars** (1 Bank Street) and **Apartment** (2 Donegall Square) show three very different faces of the Belfast drinking scene. Too early to head back to the hotel? Then follow the beautiful people to **La Lea** (43 Franklin Street; www.lalea.com), Belfast's most style-conscious nightclub.

MUSEUMS & MURALS

Shake off the cobwebs with brunch at **Conor Café-Bar** (11a Stranmillis Road), set in the glass-roofed former studio of Belfast artist William Conor. Fully fortified, head to **Queen's College** (University Road; www.qub.ac.uk/vcentre), a Tudor Revival building in red brick and honey-coloured sandstone; it's Northern Ireland's most prestigious university. The university quarter is an attractive district of quiet, tree-lined streets – don't

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miss Georgian-style **University Square**, one of the most beautiful terraced streets in Ireland.

Spend an hour or two getting lost in the **Ulster Museum** (Stranmillis Road; www.ulstermuseum.org.uk), taking care not to miss the Early Ireland gallery. A short stroll from the museum will take you to the green oasis of the **Botanic Gardens** (Stranmillis Road), with the beautiful Palm House as its centrepiece and the irresistible Tropical Ravine.

Walk south along the river for lunch at **Cutter's Wharf** (Lockview Road), one of the few bar-restaurants in Belfast with a waterside setting. As you settle in, phone for a black taxi tour of the **West Belfast murals**. Recommended operators include the cunningly named **Black Taxi Tours** (☎ 9064 2264; www.belfasttours.com). The former battleground of West Belfast is one of the most compelling places to visit in Northern Ireland. The main attractions are the powerful murals that chart the history of the conflict as well as the political passions of the moment; for visitors from mainland Britain there is a grim fascination to be found in wandering through the former 'war zone' in their own backyard. You'll visit the more spectacular murals as well as the Peace Line (where you can write a message on the wall) and other significant sites, while the cabbie provides a colourful commentary on the history of the area.

Get your driver to drop you off at the National Trust's **Crown Liquor Saloon** (46 Great Victoria Street; www.crownbar.com), Belfast's most famous bar. Refurbished by Patrick Flanagan in the late 19th century, it displays Victorian decorative flamboyance at its best (your man was looking to pull in a posh clientele from the new-fangled train station and Grand Opera House across the street). Above the Crown is **Flannigan's**, another interesting bar with *Titanic* and other maritime memorabilia. If you've gained an appreciation for history as seen through the bottom of a pint glass, explore the lanes around the High St: good options include the

Morning Star (17 Pottinger's Entry); **McHugh's Bar & Restaurant** (29-31 Queen's Square); **Bittle's Bar** (103 Victoria Street), and the **Duke of York** (11 Commercial Court). If you prefer to look to the future, end your stay with a few cocktails at **The Potthouse** (1 Hill Street) and **Bar Bacca** (43 Franklin Street), fine examples of Belfast's burgeoning entertainment scene.

SLEEPING

Budget:

Ark (www.arkhostel.com; ☎ 9032 9626) Designer-style cheap sleeps on vibrant Botanic Avenue.

Midrange:

Crescent Town House (www.crescenttownhouse.com; ☎ 9032 3349) Elegant Victorian town house transformed into a den of designer chic.

Top End:

TENsq (www.tensquare.co.uk; ☎ 9024 1001) Style magazines the world over drool over this Asian-inspired luxury hotel overlooking City Hall.

For more reviews of Belfast accommodation, check out the Sleep section on www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation.

By Amanda Canning

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