

The New Capital of Cool

IMAGES COURTESY: NORTHERN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD

From war-torn to wow, Northern Ireland's capital, Belfast, is a bucket full of surprises

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Having shed its image as a war-weary destination in the '80s, Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital city, has stylishly reinvented herself with a vibrant cultural scene and world-class restaurants that can rival Europe's best and on a considerable lighter load on the wallet, one might add.

DON'T FORGET THE CROSS

The trendy Cathedral quarter was my first stop, and being the epicenter of this new capital of cool-th, it is dotted with trendy cafes spilling onto cobblestone pavements. I couldn't help walking into the gigantic St. Anne's Cathedral with its towering pillars, semi-circular arches and imposing windows built in true Romanesque early 20th century style: the church has been lovingly built by the city and its endearing to see small touches all around. Don't miss the 1,000 vibrant hassocks hand-embroidered by churchgoing women since 1950; and the Spire of Hope, a 76-meter stainless steel spike that pokes through the roof which was added in 2007.

OF TITANIC AND TOURISTS

Thanks to the Hollywood blockbuster, The Titanic Museum is the top draw for visitors to Belfast. Located at the very place where Titanic was designed, built and launched in 1912, Titanic Belfast tells the story of the Titanic, from her conception in Belfast in the early 1900s, through her construction and launch, to its maiden voyage and subsequent place in history.

Don't miss the nine interpretive and interactive galleries, which bring to life the largest and most luxurious ship in the world in her time at her birthplace. The most educative feature of the visit is the last segment at The Ocean

Exploration Centre. Here visitors get to visualize the ocean bed with simulators and learn vital lessons on environment conservation.

As the birthplace of The Titanic, Belfast's supremacy as a world leader in shipbuilding is dominant everywhere, especially in the Titanic Quarter - where the ageing shipyards on the



(Left) Fresh oysters for dinner that I harvested myself from the oyster farm



Lagan have made way for one of the world's largest waterfront regeneration schemes - a hip redevelopment with apartments, restaurants and retail set amidst 185 acres with the shimmering sails of the museum as the crowning glory and centerpiece of the area.

A FOODIE PARADISE

For a city the size of Belfast, the choice of places to eat is commendable. Start your day at the St. Georges Market - a culinary paradise with the freshest produce from Ireland's best suppliers. The present St. George's Market, built between 1890-1896, is one of Belfast's oldest attractions and customers travel from near and far to sample the delights of its Friday, Saturday and Sunday markets.

Here you can shop for anything, from Atlantic sharks to antiques, with live jazz bands enhancing the experience.

(Above) The Titanic Museum has nine interpretive and interactive galleries and is the top draw for visitors to Belfast

Belfast's award-winning gourmet artisan chocolates, *Co Couture*, literally melt in your mouth. Famed for its seafood thanks to the majestic coastline, I decide to actually do a 'dive for my dinner'. And pray what is that? Well, in my quest to discover the freshest catch, I contact Tracey Jeffery, a specialist in gourmet food tours for Northern Ireland. The next thing I know is that she has me donning a pair of thigh-high wellies and I'm wading out into an oyster farm with Frenchman Patrice Bonnargent, foraging for my dinner.

I learn as I trudge through the icy water that oysters are farmed in almost the same manner as they were since Victorian times. Because of the confluence of fresh and salt water in this region, the oysters get a nutty taste without being overly salty. "The minerals make a difference," explains Patrice, who compares such variations in flavour to that of wine from different regions. As we manage to catch enough fish for dinner we decide to a lightly sauté the oysters in fresh butter and dine under the stars, and thank them at once. It is, after all, the very tiny pleasures in life that make life worth living.



(Above) The iconic Irish brew finds an appropriate canvas on a mural in newly bohemian Belfast; (below) The awesome St. Anne's Cathedral

