

Golfing up North



Ardglass Golf Club, Co Down

We recently had the occasion to visit some golf courses just a 90 minutes-drive from Dublin to the border county of Down in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Golf has great pros like Rory McIlroy and Darren Clarke but what are the courses like that create such great players?

Royal County Down golf course is the county's best but on the weekend we were there it was hosting a national scratch player event and we were recommended to try Kilkeel, a 20 miles trip to Newry but three hours 40 minute from Waterford.

This links course below the mountains of Mourne is a little challenging, known as Mourne golf club.

It is just a few miles from the village and in last decade went from 9 to 18 holes, when they bought a mature forest and made another nine holes with wonderful mature trees alongside the fairway.

Easy to navigate, we found the holes challenging but not threatening,

A printed golf guide can be obtained at the pro shop and locals were only too willing to give tips as we joined up with players in a friendly fashion, before we even set out we were offered playing partners by a local member so you can get a friendly reception across the border.

How times have moved on, we can recall going through the village in the 1980s and not getting such a friendly welcome to the southern accent but now it is different, the village like others had its own share of atrocities but now that it is behind us for past two decades.

Locals obligingly gave us directions to the course, as the signposting was limited.

To play Kilkeel was relaxing as the sun shone on a May Sunday morning.

The course was busy with the traditional Sunday morning competitions.

The day before we had played the spectacular Ardglass, which is like of a film promo for golfing in Ireland.

It may not be Trump's Doonbeg but it has some amazing cliff side holes.

Holes 1-5 are mapped out along the cliff side with tee boxes on the edge of the cliff face in some instances.

The day itself was quite blowy but as we are from the seaside we were not too put out. But then again it was still tough.

The first drive we hit the cliff wall to get back into play but on hole two instead of a lofted shot over the cliff gap we went down into the sea, bye bye ball.

It was fairly amazing, cool heads required, playing in such stunning location our Kilkeel golf partners the next day said they found it tougher too than their own parkland course.

Two years back we went to see the Game of Thrones TV film locations in Antrim this was like a golfing "Game of Thrones" film set so fantastic are the cliffs of Ardglass in Down.

Imagine golf along the coast road to Dungarvan between Boatstrand and Kilmurrin, this is a similar comparison in scenic terms.

After hole 5 you go inland to a bumpy links style where we managed some more respectable golf prowess with no ball losses and getting to green in regulation for our standards.

We recommend playing the full 18 as you finish at the end of course, we returned after 9 via some farmland that had got a silage cut.

The costs of golf are almost half price for GUI members, £70 weekend and £50£ midweek.

There's no hotel in the village but good value B&Bs we were told.

The assistant pro said visitors call it the hidden gem of golf in Northern Ireland.

We would have to agree. Five years back we did a walk and coastal trip in Down, seeing Ardglass and Coney island made famous by the Van Morrison song.

Now we think of Ardglass as the place of amazing golf with a fishing village nearby, just like Dunmore East at home.

Previously we stayed at the Slieve Donard Hotel, this time it was the Burrendale in Newcastle a really busy hotel with communions, confirmations and family reunions taking place.

It was hectic but still service was good and breakfast plentiful with the traditional Ulster fry and potato cakes.

The seaside town of Newcastle boasts some fine places to eat and stay, a great promenade like Tramore and forest parks like Tullymore Forest Park.

Many young people come here for climbing like scouts and other climbing groups.

Castlewellan Forest Park is nearby Newcastle, again with fine gardens blooming in May, well worth a visit with an interesting Peace Maze.

Evening meals :

Recommendations: We tried the Vanilla restaurant in Newcastle, great food very modern as the main man said the chefs are local but brought back international ideas to add flair to local foods.

Sucking pigs mains, starter was chowder with leek and potato.

Altogether, a fine place that was fully booked out, lighting was with copper shades giving us all a fake health tan as we ate, a funny idea that worked well as did the slate covers.

The restaurant is fairly discrete on the Main St., the town also had a big leisure centre, pool and sea weed baths, plus shopping centre in a close area.

While Tramore has main shops on the hills it's nice to have ones near the sea and prom. Dunnes had a plan to go into old Celtworld premises but the crash hit that plan.

Dundrum :

Mourne Sea Food Bar, is renowned across Ireland, Maitre'D says you need to book a table at least a week to two weeks ahead for peak time on Saturdays.

We managed to get our cousins to eat with us, as the name suggests great sea food, we had roll mop herring a German /Dutch dish with preserved herrings and then brill on the bone, all really good, service a little slow but friendly, again really good fayre, just four miles from Newcastle.

They also fine bar restaurant in Belfast Cathedral Quarter the happening said our fellow diners, they did have a place in Dublin but a step too far and is now called something else. Slieve Donard and Burrendale hotels also have good food too.

Other things to do up north hiking in the Mournes, cycling getting more popular, horse riding is another pastime.

We did a quick visit to see St. Patrick's church in Downpatrick and Down Cathedral on the way, to Ardglass where St. Patrick is buried. Like the Collins Brothers in Waterford in WW1

There is a memorial to the Love brothers, some of whom died in the 1916 Somme battle. Four died and four survived over the war in that case from County Down.

We met a granddaughter from that family on duty in the church and shared the Collins story from Waterford with her.

A final word on the sea from Newcastle's promenade as you look up from there you see the majestic Mournes.

While admiring them a local passer by gave us some poetry that was part of a hymn and spoke of the bountiful and wonderful world over the horizon, where more of Gods gifts are found, he was glad to hear they making crystal in Waterford again, a nice word on a windy day.

We headed back briskly on the Sunday for a family event in Waterford returning via Dublin in under four hours, it could take longer from west Ireland.

So why not make use of our great motorway network and travel north sometime soon.

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