

# Golf & Whiskey

From Royal Portrush to Old Bushmills,  
is The North of Ireland Heaven on Earth?

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PHOTO CREDITS: PAUL MARSHALL

The 18th green Ballyliffin's Old Links



© Ballyliffin Golf Club

**F**rom Dublin airport we drive two hours up Ireland's northeastern coast into Northern Ireland, to the first course of our trip - Ardglass Golf Club. This spectacular old style links and clifftop gem hugs a rugged headland on the County Down coastline, offering sea views from every hole. The course begins with a bang, where a line of cannons point the way to the green of the par-1st, followed by the daunting par-3 2nd, both requiring a carry across the coastline or cliff tops of the Irish Sea. Holes 11 and 12 (the Amen corner of Ardglass) are particularly exciting, set across from Coney Island made famous by Van Morrison, and on clear days you can see past the Irish Sea to the Isle of Man.

Protected by water on the right and wind bushes on the left, at the 488 yards par-5 11th it's essential to hit three straight shots to reach the green in regulation. As the course guide says: 'Play this hole with the same ball and be happy!' The par-3 12th is arguably the course's signature hole, drawing comparisons with the famous 17th hole at Pebble Beach. The view from the elevated tee, with a backdrop of the Irish Sea and the majesty of the brooding Mourne Mountains is worth the green fee alone.

Ardglass is home to one of the oldest and most distinct clubhouses in Northern Ireland and Ireland - a castle that dates back to the 12th century. We hole out on the final green and then enjoy some cold

beers on the rooftop turret bar. As the late afternoon sun casts long shadows across this memorable course, we raise our glasses to the days ahead. Our accommodation for the night is the Slieve Donard Resort & Spa situated immediately adjacent to the world famous Royal County Down golf club, home to the 2015 Irish Open.

The following morning, we continue driving northwards to join the stunning Causeway Coastal Route to play the second course of our trip - the Strand course at Portstewart (home to the 2017 Irish Open), which boasts arguably the best opening hole in Irish golf. Played from an elevated tee with topography that bucks and plunges like a raging river, I need to focus on my ball and avoid being distracted by the stunning coastal views on this classic 427 yards par-4 called Tubber Patrick.

It's a memorable start to a wonderful links dominated by huge dunes peppered with plenty of testing holes. One of these is the 6th, aptly named Five Penny Piece, and with a green not much larger than a snooker table and only 135 yards from the whites, it can be anything from a rescue club to a gap wedge depending on the wind. It's been a tough nine holes with more snowmen (8's) on the card than in British gardens at Christmas time, so we head straight to the windswept bar near the 10th tee to enjoy a smooth Bushmills whiskey before tackling the excellent back nine.

# ESCAPE NORTHERN IRELAND

## The home of Irish whiskey

In the afternoon, it's time to discover more about the region's other drawcard - Irish whiskey. It is difficult to explain to the uninitiated the pleasures of this smooth amber fluid. James Joyce wrote of "the light music of whiskey falling into a glass - an agreeable interlude." An old Irish toast gets straight to the point: "Too much of anything is good for nothing. Too much whiskey is barely enough." Amen.

A 'must do' while in the area, is to make the pilgrimage to the place where it all began - Old Bushmills (1608), the oldest licensed whiskey distillery in the world. Here, inside the distillery on this cool spring day, we take a guided tour to learn more about Bushmills whiskey. "We get visitors from all over the world taking a Bushmills tour," says our guide, literally walking and talking us through the whiskey-making process, one that takes malted barley, grinds it up into a mash with water and then distills it before putting it in casks to mature.

Whiskey drinkers worldwide can thank a band of Irish monks for their favourite tippie, who in the 6th century brought

back from the Middle East, the 'alembic' used to distil perfumes, but soon adapted it to a more recreational use in the creation of the still. By distilling the essence of barley they created a golden spirit, "Aqua Vitae" - The Water of Life, or in Gaelic, "Uisce Beatha."

"Many people confuse Irish whiskey with Scotch," says our guide inside the Malt House. While the Scots roast their barley over open peat fires (which gives Scotch its distinctive smoky taste) and distil it only twice, the Irish roast their barley in closed kilns and distil it three times. Our guide also points out that the Irish spell whiskey with an 'e'. No one quite knows why, but they're sticking with it, and they did invent it after all. Their version, like their accent is gentler and more beguiling.

The heart of the whiskey-making process is the stillroom. Inside, it's around 25 degrees and the atmosphere is thick with alcohol. As we arrive, the still-man is busy at work testing for quality among the traditional copper stills. The principle behind distillation is simple, to separate alcohol from water. At a precise moment the still-man

FROM LEFT  
Old Bushmills whiskey  
distillery.

Bushmills mirror and  
whiskey bottle inside the  
distillery bar.







collects the pure spirit. “The cut off point is a trade secret,” he says with a grin.

The oak casks in which the Irish whiskey matures are those once used for bourbon, sherry or port, which helps provide not only the whiskey’s colour but also its flavour. Casks may remain undisturbed for up to 25 years. In the process of maturation, a portion is lost. This is known as the ‘angels’ share.’ After visiting the stillroom and the bottling section, our guide announces that there will be a taste test in the distillery bar.

It is here that we learn the proper way to drink Irish whiskey. The experienced whiskey drinker will often say: “If you want to drink whiskey you drink whiskey. If you want to drink water, you drink water. You never mix the two.” At the end of our visit, we can’t resist buying a bottle



**FROM TOP**  
The stunning Carrick-a-Rede swinging rope bridge that spans a gaping chasm between the coast and a small island used by fishermen

Various whiskeys inside the distillery bar, ready for a taste test at the end of an Old Bushmills tour

# ESCAPE NORTHERN IRELAND



**Dunluce Castle**  
**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
The par-3 12th  
Ardglass Golf Club.

of Bushmills 16-year single malt (matured for 16 years or more in a combination of American bourbon barrels, Spanish Oloroso sherry casks and Port pipes), before heading to our accommodation for two nights at the nearby Bushmills Inn.

On day three, as Royal Portrush Golf Club first comes into view round a curve in the Causeway Coastal Route, it provides us with a magical sight with its green fairways hiding among shaggy-topped dunes and the great headland of Inishowen contrasting vividly with the low line of the Skerries and the sea beyond. Established in May 1888 and included in every list of the world's top 100 courses, Royal Portrush's Dunluce course has long been regarded as a great test of a golfer's skill. It hosted the British Open in 1951, when England's eccentric Max Faulkner lifted the trophy and the great news is

that it will be home once again to the prestigious championship in July 2019.

There are plenty of great holes at Royal Portrush and it's truly difficult to choose just one. On the front nine, the 5th with its cliffside green is a worthy contender, but on the back it's got to be the 210 yards 14th known as Calamity Corner. This testing par-3 calls for a long carry with a long iron or hybrid over an 80-foot ravine to reach the green and to slice or push the ball right will earn you an almost certain double bogey or worse. Don't be ashamed of taking a four at Calamity Corner - threes are as rare as an unfriendly Irishman. Once we finish our rounds we enjoy soup and sandwiches in the clubhouse dining room, and on the way check out 2011 British Open champion Darren Clarke's winner's medal and Rory McIlroy's scorecard of 61 that





CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT  
Slieve Donard Hotel  
in Newcastle

“Try some  
Bushmills whiskey  
with your porridge”  
at breakfast when  
you stay at the  
Slieve Donard Hotel  
in Newcastle

Golfers tee off at  
the opening hole at  
Ardglass Golf Club



# ESCAPE NORTHERN IRELAND

he shot (aged 16), when he won the 2005 North of Ireland Amateur Championship.

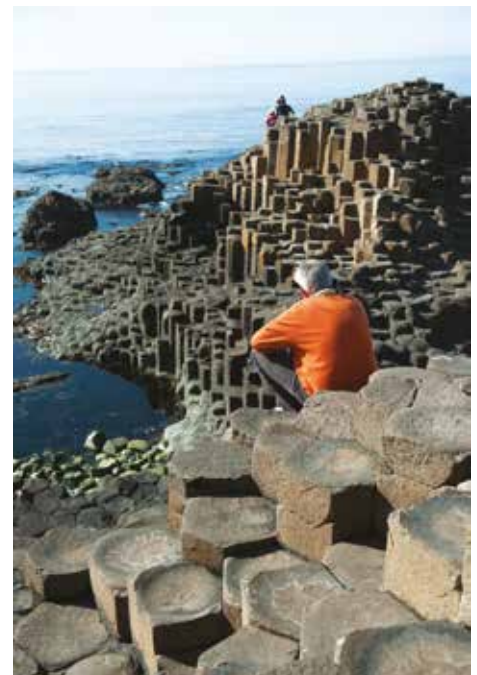
In the afternoon, it's time for some more off-course attractions, and top of the list is a visit to the famous Giant's Causeway, Northern Ireland's only UNESCO World Heritage Site. Made up of thousands of hexagonal pillars that climb out of the Atlantic Ocean, this stunning natural formation was created by Finn MacCool, an Irish giant that lived along the Antrim Coast. The logical and less romantic version is that about 60 million years ago there was intense volcanic activity along the coast, after which the lava cooled very quickly. The uneven cooling rate resulted in the basalt contracting into the characteristic hexagonal and octagonal pillar shapes you see today.

The Giant's Causeway may be the star of the Causeway Coastal Route but other worthwhile attractions include the stunning Carrick-a-Rede swinging rope bridge that spans a gaping chasm between the coast and a small island used by fishermen, and the haunting ruins of 16th-century

Dunluce Castle perched precariously on the edge of a rocky headland. Later that evening at the Bushmills Inn we spend a convivial evening by an open peat fire, sampling Bushmills whiskies and swapping golfing tales with other guests.

The following morning after enjoying a full Irish breakfast, our fourth round awaits at Castlerock Golf Club's Mussenden Links, situated further west along the Causeway Coastal Route, and only a twenty-three minute drive from Portstewart and Royal Portrush. Founded in 1901, this historic links set amid tall sand dunes besides the picturesque River Bann estuary is a worthy neighbour of the aforementioned courses and will test every department of your game.

One of the standout holes is the 200 yards par-3 4th called Leg O'Mutton which requires a tee shot struck over a burn, with a railway line lurking to the right and a tricky pot bunker in front of a raised green. Great courses have great closing holes and Castlerock's short dog-leg right 18th is a beauty.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
A golfer tees off at Castlerock's first hole watched on by his caddie

The Giant's Causeway

The Giant's Causeway is a UNESCO World Heritage site







A decent drive will leave you with a relatively blind approach with a short iron, to a tricky two-tiered plateau green with the clubhouse just beyond. We enjoy a 19th hole pint of Guinness before taking a short drive west to Magilligan Point where we board the Lough Foyle car ferry to Greencastle back in Ireland, and then continue north-west across the scenic Inishowen Peninsula to the village of Ballyliffin, and our bed for the night at the Ballyliffin Lodge & Spa.

Ballyliffin is such a beautiful and intriguing spot, that six-time major

champion Nick Faldo used to visit it before playing the British Open and at one time was so smitten with the place he tried to buy it, on the cheap according to locals. A remarkable 36 holes meander through this most beguiling of links land, with rocky outcrops, perfect greens and enchanting views of the coast. Principally designed by Mother Nature (with upgrades by Faldo including new bunkering, tees and enlarged greens), the classic Old Links undulates in the glory of its natural terrain. The rippling fairways give the course a unique character and charm, and it's the type of place where you can easily imagine the golfing forefathers striding along the sheep-cropped turf with hickory clubs.

The more recent Glashedy Links (designed by Pat Ruddy and Tom Craddock) is fashioned around the incredible dunes on predominately higher ground above and beyond the Old Links, offering stunning views as you play. Ballyliffin's Glashedy course was a worthy stage for the 2018 Irish Open, which Scotland's Russell Knox won after beating New Zealand's Ryan

**FROM TOP**  
The 11th and 15th greens on the Dunluce course- Royal Portrush

Golfers get ready to tee off at the excellent par-3 5th on Ballyliffin's Glashedy Links



# ESCAPE NORTHERN IRELAND

Fox in a play-off. Here, we tee it up with two other golfers we meet, Jo from Belgium and Scott from America, and engage in a thoroughly enjoyable matchplay contest. The course kicks off with three long par-4s and the challenges never let up – negotiating cavernous peat-riveted bunkers, large contoured greens, fairways that twist and roll between towering dunes and a collection of exciting par-3s.

It's been a tight contest all day and the Marshall brothers are 1 up standing on the tee of the par-4 18th. Paul is safely on the dance floor in two and I am already anticipating the taste of that winning Guinness or Bushmills whiskey and sliding some euros into my wallet. Paul takes two putts to secure a par and then it's over to Jo. He's also on the green in two and stalks his putt like a hungry lion. He lines it up and takes one last look at the cup. Amazingly he holes it for birdie to halve the match and the place erupts like the final scenes of the Ryder Cup. It's a golfing adventure on a brilliant course and a fitting finale to our 'golf and whiskey' trip...

Golfers at  
Castlerock Golf  
Club



## WHERE TO PLAY (THE 5 COURSES)

**Ardglass Golf Club:**  
[www.ardglassgolfclub.com](http://www.ardglassgolfclub.com)

**Portstewart Golf Club:**  
[www.portstewartgc.co.uk](http://www.portstewartgc.co.uk)

**Royal Portrush Golf Club:**  
[www.royalportrushgolfclub.com](http://www.royalportrushgolfclub.com)

**Castlerock Golf Club:**  
[www.castlerockgc.co.uk](http://www.castlerockgc.co.uk)

**Ballyliffin Golf Club:**  
[www.ballyliffingolfclub.com](http://www.ballyliffingolfclub.com)

### Approximate distances between the courses:

**Dublin Airport to Ardglass:**  
162 km, 100 miles.

**Ardglass to Portstewart:**  
146 km, 91 miles

**Portstewart – Portrush:**  
6 km, 4 miles

**Portrush to Castlerock:**  
26 km, 27 miles

**Castlerock to Ballyliffin:**  
75 km, 47 miles

## WHERE TO STAY

**Slieve Donard Resort & Spa:** This 100-year-old Victorian property is one of Ireland's most stunning and luxurious golf hotels and is situated immediately adjacent to the world famous Royal County Down golf club, home to the 2015 Irish Open. The property boasts a luxurious Spa (16 treatment rooms, a 20-metre pool and vitality rooms), fine dining or relaxed bistro-style and a sumptuous breakfast featuring a full Irish or perhaps porridge with a dash of Bushmills whiskey. [www.hastingshotels.com/slieve-donard-resort-and-spa/](http://www.hastingshotels.com/slieve-donard-resort-and-spa/)

**Bushmills Inn** – This multi award-winning luxury four-star accommodation in the heart of Northern Ireland's Causeway Coast is an excellent base for golfers, being well situated for Royal Portrush, Portstewart and Castlerock. This former coaching inn oozes character from intimate 'snugs' with aged timbers to the secret library and the cosy glow of an open peat fire. The AA Rosette Restaurant blending 'new Irish cuisine' with the finest North Antrim fresh produce overlooks the garden courtyard. [www.bushmillsinn.com](http://www.bushmillsinn.com)

**Ballyliffin Lodge & Spa Hotel:** Set in the heart of Ballyliffin village with spectacular panoramic views of Malin Head and the Inishowen coastline, the four-star Ballyliffin Lodge makes an excellent and comfortable base for playing Ballyliffin's two courses ideally located within 1km of the hotel. After a tough day on the links enjoy the facilities at the award-winning leisure complex including a 17-metre pool, sauna, steam room and jacuzzi, or book a spa treatment or massage. [www.ballyliffinlodge.com](http://www.ballyliffinlodge.com)

## NORTH & WEST COAST LINKS

With decades of experience, the North & West Coast Links are experts in organising quality golf trips to Ireland's north-west region. Contact John McLaughlin or Paul Collins who can help arrange a bespoke golf trip for you and your mates or join one of their organised itineraries. Depending on the size of your golf group, there are various transport options, from a self-drive 4-seater Mercedes V-Class vehicle, to a chauffeur-driven Taurus vehicle (6-12 golfers), and a full-size chauffeur driven coach (12-28 golfers). Accommodation options can range from comfortable guest houses to luxury hotels. For more details visit the website: [northandwestcoastlinks.com](http://northandwestcoastlinks.com)