A mural of people engaged in sport is painted on the proud gable-end of a house

NORTHEN IRELAND TOURIST BOARD

Northern delights to surprise us

The North's turbulent past seems well behind it in this cultural, vibrant and friendly part of the country. And the exchange rate is to your advantage, writes **Deirdre Mulrooney**

Forget the Troubles. The North is full of surprises – not least of which is the best blow-dry in Ireland. A friend and I tried our luck in Isobell's on the Falls Road one random Friday afternoon.

We arrived into a symphony of busy hairdryers all a-blow. It's a walk-up-the-stairs service – no appointment necessary.

Once in the fast-moving queue to the washbasin, a lovely old dear plies you with tea or coffee, served in a dainty cup and saucer with a couple of Nice biscuits on the side.

Before you know it you find yourself in the meticulous hands of one of Isobell's skilled team of blow-driers, who lavish a good 45 minutes' undivided attention on your locks.

After Deborah wielded her tight curl brush and sizzling hairdryer I walked out with the straightest, sleekest locks ever. And at stg£7 (€10), that's what I call value.

On the recommendation of a fellow traveller on the Dublin-Belfast train, we stuck our well-groomed heads into the Culturlann across the road, discovering a cultural centre a-buzz with people eating, talking, reading books, looking at CDs and talking – in Irish.

Upstairs an Irish play was running in the evenings.

Flicking through a giant-sized cartoon children's book I was amazed to see that the story of mamaí agus babóg ag siopadóireacht was of African origin, no less.

As a morning prelude to the epic blow-dry we took a Black Taxi Tour of Shankill – the word, of course, means 'old church' in Irish. Then I went to the Falls Road, and to the mind-boggling Peace Wall in between.

The so-called 'wall' stops the inhabitants sneaking across and being mean to their neighbours. It is Ireland's equivalent of the Berlin Wall – the key difference being that the ironically-titled Peace Wall is still standing.

John, our taxi driver, related his apocryphal version of the city's origins, in which Belfast didn't exist before the British and the Scots came there. This explains why it is a British city, he says.

He pulled up outside landmarks such as a parish priest's house whose brass door shone through dents donated by people who were rather too eager to get in. His windows were bulletproof Perspex.

A mural of Oliver Cromwell's cavalry treading on the natives painted on the proud gable-end of a Shankill house cut a dash against a blue sky, framed by satellite dishes and a solitary palm tree.

We were just one of many vanloads of tourists to pull up and snatch a photo opportunity, neutering its symbolism somewhat.

Just beside Bombay Street we heard the bells of Clonard Chapel. "I've never heard those bells ringing before," said our driver. Curiously, a large percentage of the doors in Shankill and the Falls are wide open – in a 'Though I walk in the Valley of Death I fear no evil' style.

We were snapping at the angry, vibrant murals when I spotted a young man struggling out of a black taxi with a huge teddybear wrapped in a love heart. It was Valentine's Day on the Falls Road.

The Black Taxi tour is less invasive than, say, a Township Tour in Cape Town, though I suppose it operates on the same principle.

For Southerners living two short hours away, the murals and painted footpaths form a strange kind of living art.

If you don't want to take a tour, getting to 'The Falls' (as it is known in common parlance) independently is easy – just jump in a cab.

We hailed ours outside the Town Hall, carrying a large latte and pastry from the panoramic Apartment café bar, another bargain at stg£1.25 (€1.85).

Our driver was the self-professed favourite driver of NBC and CBC news crews, and driver to West Belfast comedian James Young.

In another random taxi from the Europa Hotel to Crawfordsburn in County Down, the driver, Tooty, prefaced his conversation with a heartfelt "you are very welcome", before regaling me with tales of the Europa, allegedly the most bombed hotel in the world.

I hoped the day-jaunt to Co Down would improve my knowledge of the county beyond Count John McCormack trilling Star of the County Down, and Van Morrison's stream-of-consciousness crooning in Coney Island.

We followed Morrison's agenda first, with a whistle-stop tour from the Old Inn at Crawfordsburn to Portaferry, via the house of racing driver Eddie Irvine.

After elevenses in the Portaferry Hotel we made the short ferry crossing across the reputedly perilous waters of Strangford Lough at the Narrows, beside open sea.

From there we went to nearby Dundrum for an excellent pub lunch in the Buck's Head. A quick hop brought us to Downpatrick, home of the award-winning St Patrick Centre, at the foot of St Patrick's grave.

Inside, we were swept away by its 180-degree documentary, In the Footsteps of St Patrick. The film is a helicopter ride to all the places in Ireland associated with our patron saint. It features a multitude of voices, including Ian Paisley's.

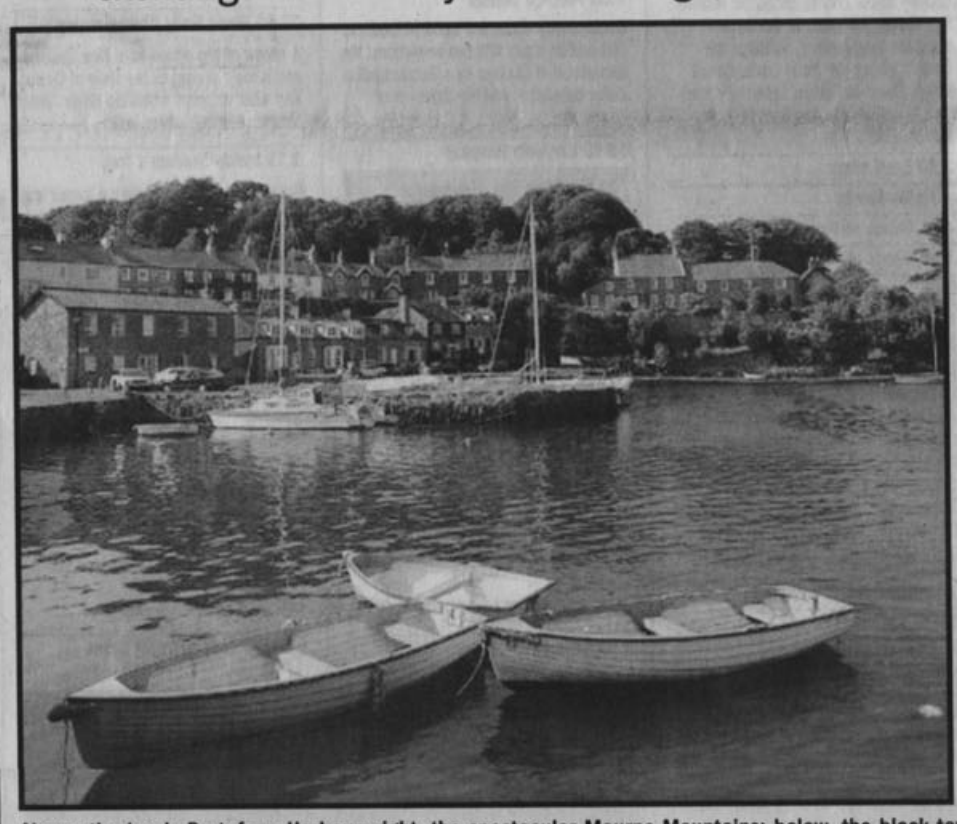
We took a late afternoon stroll around the breathtaking Castlewellan National Arboretum. Curator Michael Lear talked us through the collection amassed by the former residents of Castlewellan, the Annesleys.

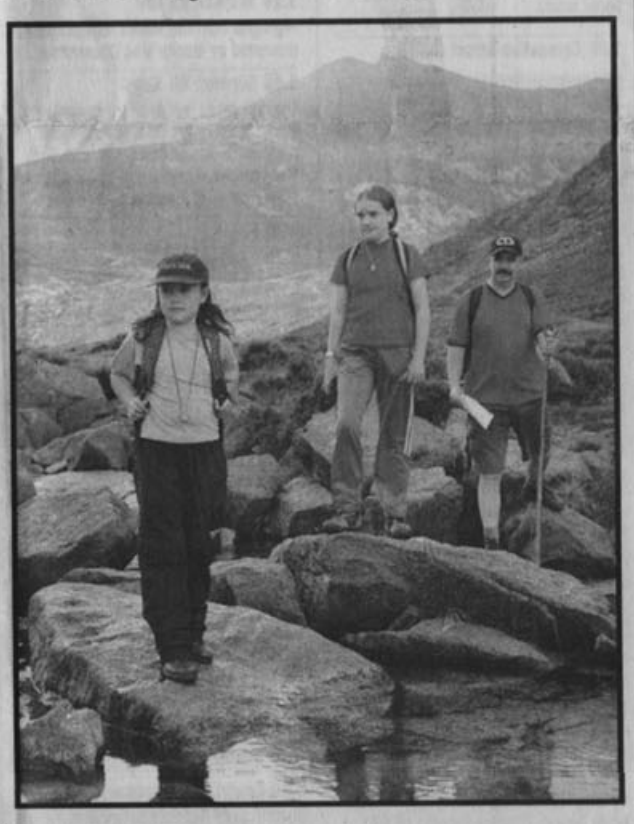
Against the backdrop of the Mourne Mountains, we admired Irish yew and exotic imports from the Himalayas, China, India, Japan, and magnificent giant redwoods.

Castlewellan is also home to the largest hedge maze in the world, the 'Peace Maze', planted in honour of the Good Friday Agreement. Gazing wistfully at the myriad watersports on the lake in our rearview mirror, we headed home for dinner.

And what a dinner it was, in Shank's Michelin star restaurant. At stg£23 (€34) for a fabulous two-course meal, this has got to be the best value fine dining in Ireland. Notice a theme emerging?

The only thing is, two days in the North is nowhere near long enough to enjoy seeing how far your money will stretch. Too soon, I was on the train back to complacently overpriced Dublin.





Above, the lovely Portaferry Harbour; right, the spectacular Mourne Mountains; below, the black taxis

Factfile

How to get there: The first-class train journey to Belfast costs €83 return from Connolly Station. The standard return fare is €46

Travel time: Two hours

Currency: stg£1 equals €1.48

Places to eat: Shank's Michelin star two-course dinner (Tuesday–Thursday) with chef Robbie Miller: 048–91853313. Deane's Brasserie with Michelin Star restaurant upstairs: 048–90560000. Zen Japanese restaurant – 048–90232244. The Rankins' Cayenne: 048–90331532, and Rain City: 048–90682929

Places to stay: The Old Inn at Crawfordsburn, Co Down €125pps – two nights' B&B + one dinner (midweek or weekend). Europa Hotel. €139pps – two nights' B&B plus one dinner (weekend), €125 (midweek). Ten Square – Belfast's trendy new boutique hotel. €139pps – two nights' B&B plus one dinner (midweek or weekend). For a brochure of hotel breaks priced in euro call in to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 16 Nassau Street, Dublin 2, or callsave 1850–230230

Things to do: Watersports @ Castlewellan – Bluelough Mountain & Water Sports Centre: 048-43770715. Black Taxi Tour: 048–90642264. St Patrick Centre, Downpatrick: 028–44619000

Useful websites: www.saintpatrickcentre.com; www.tourismireland.com