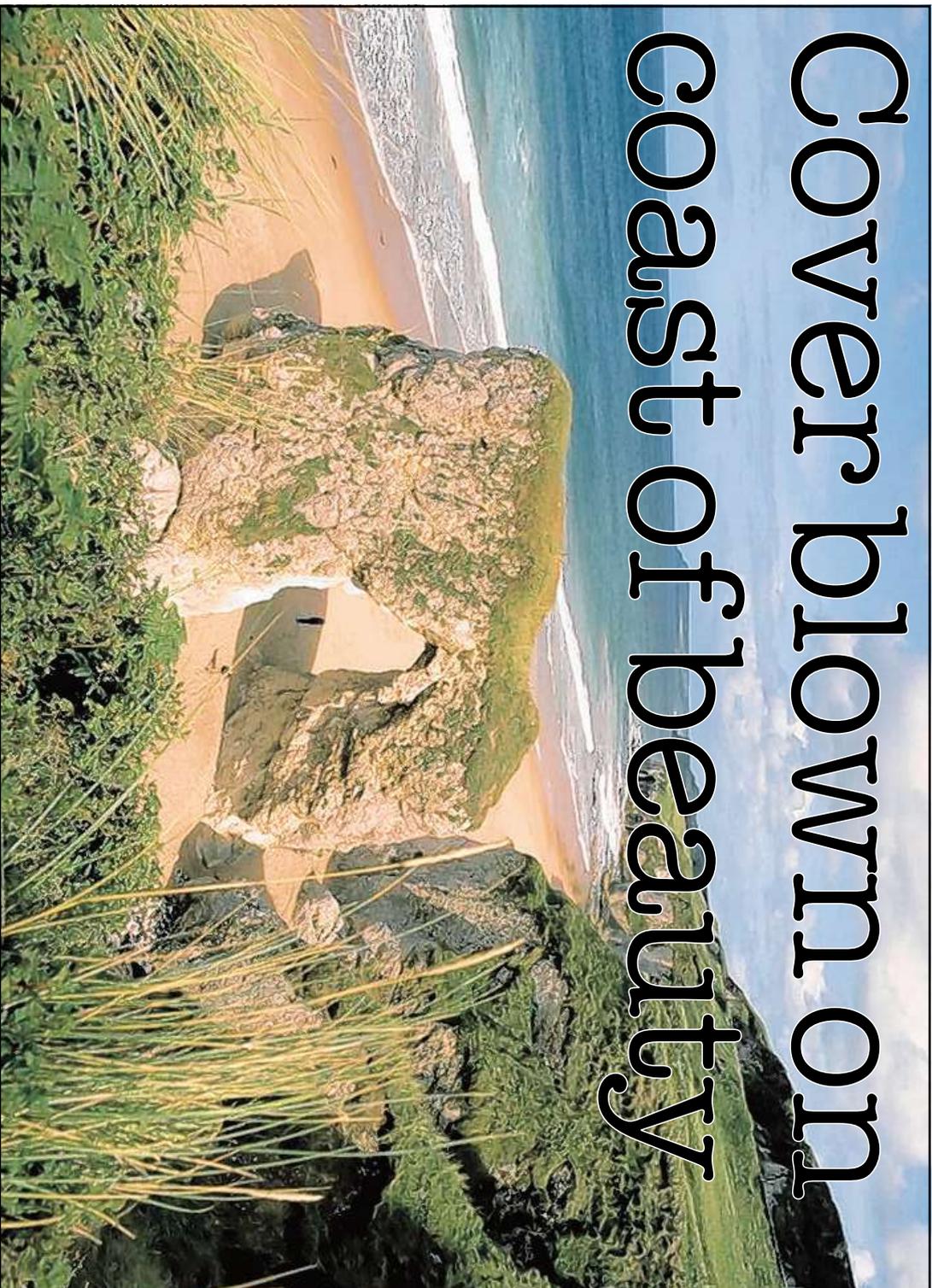


Cover blown on coast of beauty



UNSPOLIT BEAUTY: The beaches along the Northern Ireland coast can rival any in the world

THE Northern Irish have been keeping a secret. For decades they have been building sandcastles on pristine sandy beaches, paddling in clear blue water and walking along jaw-droppingly beautiful coastline and keeping schtum about it.

Well, I'm about to blow their cover. The coastal county of Antrim is staggeringly beautiful. Wild fuchsia flourishes in the hedgerows, the local ice cream is some of the best I've tasted outside of Italy and the people are genuinely warm and friendly.

There are ruined castles set on promontories jutting out into the sea to explore, cliff top walks which you never want to end and local produce like Ulster sirloin of beef to savour.

We spent a week driving along coastal roads with fabulous views down on to wide and unspoilt beaches or following dead ends that took us to staggering high cliff tops.

We passed ad hoc roadside stalls selling Ulster Queen potatoes. One hand-written sign proudly proclaimed "like balls of flour". My Irish mother would have been in potato heaven.

I was already chilled out by the time we got to Northern Ireland. Thanks to the eight hours of sunbathing, wildlife spotting and reading that you

Mary Murtagh discovers the

staggering beauty of Northern Ireland

just can't do on a jumbo jet 30,000ft up in the air. Sailing with Norfolk Line from Birkenhead couldn't be easier. No standing in security queues for ages, fluids in a plastic bag or ash cloud issues. Just pitch up an hour before you sail and you go. Up on deck we watched the Three Graces slip past us and the Mersey widen her mouth as we sailed past the Isle of Man and out into the Irish Sea. It's a mini cruise before you even start your holidays. Bliss.

Rathlin Island is a must-see. Just eight miles long and separated from the mainland by a stretch of water with treacherous currents it's famous for harbouring Robert the Bruce and his spider

and has inspired a song by Mary Black. A day spent on foot crisscrossing this pretty island is magical. Keep your eyes peeled for its seal colony, go

highthouse spotting and at the right time of year you may see puffins in the sea cliffs.

If you've ever been to a tourist trap and left disappointed then The Giant's Causeway is the



BE BRAVE: Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge

TRAVEL FACTS

Mary Murtagh was the guest of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Prices for the Causeway View Mews property, which sleeps up to four people, start from £225.

For more information visit www.causewaycottages.co.uk. Norfolk Line sails between Birkenhead and Belfast with prices from £79 per person.

For more information visit www.norfolkline-ferries.co.uk.

antidote. It exceeds expectations with its otherworldly 40,000 basalt columns, rock pools teeming with life and cliff-top walks overlooking this natural phenomenon.

The Carrick-a-Rede bridge is another highlight. If you've ever fancied walking a tightrope this is as close as you'll get without running away with the circus. You cross a 30 metre deep and 20 metre wide chasm using a bridge made of rope. It's a bit like the one in 'I'm a Celebrity, Get me out of Here' but without the photographer's flashbulbs at the other side.

It's exhilarating, liberating and good fun for all the family providing no one is afraid of heights.

Whiskey-lovers will enjoy a tour of the Bushmills Distillery. It's Ireland's oldest whiskey distillery and the visitor experience is as good as that offered by Guinness in Dublin. You'll breathe in the smell of

dried barley; feel the warmth of the copper pot stills as the whiskey distills. Watch out for the aptly named ginger cat called 'Whiskey' that lives in the distillery room.

Enjoy a dram of your favourite Bushmills whiskey at the end of the tour. I chose the alternative, a hot toddy, which was as good as I have ever tasted.

Just down the road is The Bushmills Inn which is a great place to stop and enjoy some local cuisine from seafood to Irish beef.

The bar area has cosy snugs, inglenook turf fires and rocking chairs in which to enjoy a drink. The menus are superb and showcase the best of what Ulster has to offer food wise.

Our base for the week was the cosy and well equipped Causeway Mews apartment in the lovely seaside town of Portrush.



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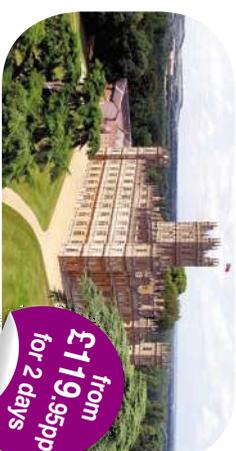
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