ONE DAY, ONE PLACE

Retracing footsteps of heroes in Belfast

No one who’s read “The Chronicles of Narnia” would mistake Belfast for the fantasy lands in the books, but in it author C.S. Lewis was born and spent the first 10 years of his life before going on to write more than 40 books. Many of the places of the East Belfast of Lewis’ youth inspired his writings, from lamposts at his boarding school in a less-shaded shadows on a church door.

Here too is where you’ll find the “hollow” where Van Morrison and his “Brown Eyed Girl” laughed and ran — the sleeper was born in a tiny terrace house in East Belfast far not from the playing fields of foot-baller George Best, who also grew up here before he left for to play for Manchester United.

The East Belfast area, once home to the workers of the shipyards that built thousands of vessels (but is best known for the Titanic), has a raw, gritty feel. But like some of the heroes who started from humble beginnings and went on to bigger things, the area is undergoing a perhaps long overdue regeneration. Here’s one way to spend a day finding out what inspired some of its most famous locals.

— Yvonne Gordon

NORTHERN IRELAND

ONE MORNING

Start the day with a tour of CS Lewis Square, where young Morrison was a pupil (it’s still a school) and see some of the places that found their way into his childhood of Van the Man and the rector at St. Mark’s Church (Smoren locally as the the Lion on the Hill), and the lion-shaped door handle on the former rectory of St. Mark’s Church.

IF YOU GO

Tours of CS Lewis Square: www.communitygreenway.co.uk/vanmorrisontrail
EastSide Visitor Centre and JACK coffee bar: www.visitbelfast.com/eastsidevisitorcentre
Van Morrison trail: www.communitygreenway.co.uk/vanmorrisontrail
Van Morrison Tours: Lynn Cooke, (44) 777 391 2448.
George Best House: www.georgebesthouse.com
Cyprus Avenue restaurant: www.cyprusavenue.co.uk
Visit Belfast: www.visitbelfast.com

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ONE AFTERNOON

Put on your walking shoes for the Van Morrison trail, which runs a little more than 2 miles through the East Belfast of his youth and should take you about two hours. You’ll learn about the childhood of Van the Man and see some of the places that found their way into his songs. Start at the red-brick Elmgrove Primary School, where young Morrison was a pupil (it’s still a school) and see some of the places that found their way into his childhood of Van the Man.

Clockwise from top right: Hyndford Street, where Van Morrison grew up, is part of a trail of sites related to the singer. The EastSide Visitors Centre is on CS Lewis Square. Several murals feature images from the author’s books, including Aslan the lion, who is said to have been inspired by the lion-shaped door handle on the former rectorry of St. Mark’s Church.

ONE EVENING

The footballer George Best was born in 1946 and grew up in East Belfast. His father worked in the Harland & Wolff shipyard, where construction on the ill-fated RMS Titanic began in 1909. Check in for your overnight accommodation at George Best’s childhood home on Burren Way in the Cregagh Estate. Best played football on the nearby playing fields and lived here until he moved to England to play for Manchester United at the age of 15. The cozy, flat-roofed terraced house is still furnished as it would have been in Best’s time, giving it a lovely retro feel. There are copies of family photos and even Best’s school reports, and some of his old memorabilia. If you are planning to go to this house, it would be as it would have been when he was a child, complete with football kit. His dad, Dickie, lived in the house until he died in 2008. Finish the evening with B&B ribs or beer-battered fish and chips at neighborhood restaurant Cyprus Avenue, before retiring back to the Best house for dreams of Narnia, seaside holidays and cheering football crowds.

Photos by Yvonne Gordon / Special to The Chronicle