

## 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 it is where 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 lampposts at his boarding school to a lion-shaped doorknob 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 singer

## NORTHERN IRELAND

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



Photos by Yvonne Gordon / Special to The Chronicle



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 Center 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 rectory of St. Mark's Church.

## MORNING

Start the day with a tour of CS Lewis Square and rediscover the Narnia characters — Mr. Tumnus the fawn has his arms out, as if in welcome, and there are six other sculptures from "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" in the square: Maugrim, the Beavers, the White Witch, the Robin, the Stone Table and, of course, Aslan the Lion. Take a tour and the guide will read from the books at each sculpture — listening to excerpts such as how Edmund goes to the Queen's house looking for Turkish Delight brings Narnia to life. Next, explore the C.S. Lewis Trail for some of the places that inspired his writing. Lewis' grandfather was the rector at St. Mark's Church (known locally as the Lion on the Hill), and the lion-shaped door handle on the former rectory is said to have inspired the character of Aslan. At Belmont Tower, there's a small exhibition where you can see first editions of Lewis' books, as well as copies of his letters and his academic work at Oxford. A chair with a jacket on the back makes it seem as though Lewis has just stepped away for a few minutes.

## MIDDAY

Drop in to JACK Coffee Bar (Clive Staples Lewis was known as Jack to friends and family) at the EastSide Visitor Centre for lunch and browse his books, which are on display for visitors to read. Here you can also read information panels about the lives of two of East Belfast's other famous sons, Van Morrison and George Best, and browse maps before you set off in their footsteps.

## IF YOU GO

**Tours of CS Lewis Square:** [www.hiddenulstertours.com/cslewis](http://www.hiddenulstertours.com/cslewis)

**EastSide Visitor Centre and JACK coffee bar:** [www.facebook.com/eastsidevisitorcentre](http://www.facebook.com/eastsidevisitorcentre)

**Van Morrison trail:** [www.communitygreenway.co.uk/vanmorrisontrail](http://www.communitygreenway.co.uk/vanmorrisontrail)

**Van Morrison Tours:** Lynn Corken, (44) 777 910 2448.

**George Best Trail:** [www.visitbelfast.com/things-to-do/member/george-best-trail-self-guided](http://www.visitbelfast.com/things-to-do/member/george-best-trail-self-guided)

**George Best House:** [www.georgebesthouse.com](http://www.georgebesthouse.com)

**Cyprus Avenue restaurant:** [www.cyprusavenue.co.uk](http://www.cyprusavenue.co.uk)

**Visit Belfast:** [www.visitbelfast.com](http://www.visitbelfast.com)

## 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-bricked Elmgrove Primary School, where young Morrison was a pupil (it's still a school) and that features in the video for "The Healing Game." Down at the Connswater River, just beside here, is the famous hollow from "Brown Eyed Girl," Morrison's biggest hit ("Hey, where did we go, days when the rains came, Down in the hollow, playing a new game ..."). The trail passes the tiny two-up two-down terraced house at 125 Hyndford St. where Morrison was born in 1945, and also past the spacious mansions along the tree-lined Cyprus Avenue.

## 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 his bedroom has been re-created 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 BBQ beef ribs or beer-battered fish and chips at neighborhood restaurant Cyprus Avenue, before returning back to the Best house for dreams of Narnia, riverside hollows and cheering football crowds.