

# Travel

# The Titanic reborn



**EPIC:** Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet starred in Titanic, the film about the ill-fated liner, inset above. The new Titanic Centre, below



There's a sense of déjà vu for **Yvonne Gordon** as the past is replicated in Belfast 100 years after doomed liner was built in the city

**T**here's a buzz of activity, with construction workers, ladders and equipment going back and forth, sounds of bolts and rivets being put into place, boxes sitting in neat piles waiting to be unpacked. Slipways are being cleared, the

latest technical innovations are being tweaked and tested and a huge array of rooms, facilities and public areas are being fitted out, painted and decorated. Delivery vehicles have been unloading glassware and crockery and food and drink have been ordered. The final touches are being put

into place before the grand opening of Titanic Belfast in two weeks, and the flurry of preparations going into this brand new €115m tourist attraction all echo the final fit-out of the Titanic ship herself, which was taking place at

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# Looking down from the gantry is dizzying, even if it's a replica

exactly this time, in this place, 100 years ago.

There are many echoes of history, from the fact that the attraction can hold 3,647 visitors at any one time – the same number as the capacity of the ship – to the thousands of pieces of crockery and cutlery arriving, just as they would have done at the busy shipyard in 1912.

The landmark six-floor building, which holds nine galleries and a banqueting venue, has taken three years to build – the same length of time it took to build Titanic.

From the outside, gazing upwards, 3,000 aluminium panels reflect the sky and the pointy bow shapes rise 38m, the same height as Titanic's bow as she sat in the water.

Inside, each gallery takes visitors through a different part of the story. Interactive experiences include a 20m journey in a lift up the Arrol Gantry, a replica of the original 70m-high structure. Looking down from the top, even of the smaller replica, is quite dizzying.

One of the most exciting elements will be a 'shipyard ride', with special effects recreating the sights, sounds and smells of metal burning. It even goes through a giant replica of Titanic's rudder, to give an idea of working on these big ships.

In another area, there are reconstructions of first, second and third-class cabins. Further along, the lights dim and walls narrow as audio visual displays depict the ship's sinking. Another gallery has a replica of a Titanic lifeboat.



**DISASTER:** A reproduction of the Titanic's sinking, which claimed more than 1,500 lives

In the last gallery, there is footage of the shipwreck as it is today on the ocean floor (the wreck was found in 1985). Finally, on the top floor, in the banquet and conference area (open to visitors when there's no event taking place), there is a near-replica of Titanic's grand staircase.

The centre is designed to be a sensory experience rather than a museum. It's hard to sense this yet as not all the galleries are finished but one thing that stands out is the sense of pride that Belfast has in its shipbuilding past.

But it wasn't always so. Until just a few years ago, mentioning the Titanic in Belfast carried a stigma. Those who lived and worked there, even in the maritime industry, were ashamed of the city's association with the ship as they were their fault.

"There was a period of time after the sinking of Titanic that Belfast kept its head low and pushed away any associations," says Belfast's Lord Mayor Niall Ó Donnghaile. "But at last we have woken up to the fact that this city has nothing to be ashamed of. The Titanic was an amazing achievement."

There has always been a global fascination with the Titanic, not only because of her tragic sinking on April 15, 1912, with the loss of 1,517 lives, but because she was the largest man-made moving object in the world. With miles of deck, squash courts, a gym,

heated swimming pool and Turkish baths, she was a symbol of luxury as well as a feat of engineering. A first-class ticket cost £870 – the equivalent of about €63,000 today. Titanic is now a global brand, thanks also in part to the 1997 movie that starred Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

A video presentation in the exhibition of the ship's launch, attended by 100,000 cheering onlookers, gives a sense of the pride and of the impact the ship had. Now 100 years later, Belfast is finally taking ownership of the Titanic story, creating the world's largest Titanic exhibition.

"Titanic belongs to Belfast. I'm very pleased that the city which gave Titanic to the world will now be able to welcome the world to Titanic Belfast," says Dr Robert Ballard, the oceanographer who discovered the Titanic's wreck on the sea bed in 1985.

The Titanic story is also part of a new vision for tourism in the North.

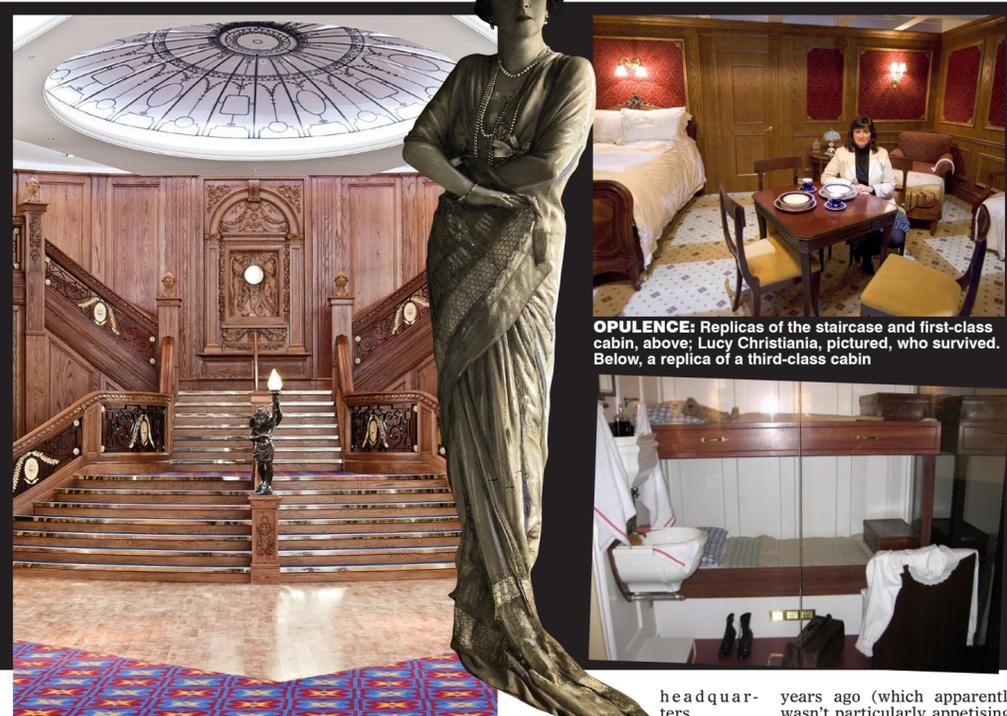
"We are all aware where Northern Ireland has come from in terms of our international image. This is a new story to tell. This is about moving on," says Alan Clarke, chief executive of the North's tourist board.

With an investment of hundreds of millions in infrastructure, the tourist board hopes to double

tourism revenue to £1bn a year by 2020. Titanic is the jewel in the crown.

Already, 80,000 tickets have been sold for the centre and 200 events have been booked. More than 400,000 visitors are expected this year, and although this is not as many as the Giant's Causeway's projected 700,000.

For Titanoraks, this will be a bumper year of activity. As well as Titanic Belfast itself, there are plenty of other attractions around the Titanic Quarter, a 185-acre site, itself undergoing a multibillion redevelopment.



**OPULENCE:** Replicas of the staircase and first-class cabin, above; Lucy Christiania, pictured, who survived. Below, a replica of a third-class cabin

And at the dock and pump-house, visitors can see the massive, 270m-long dry dock in which Titanic was fitted out. Seeing this really gives a sense of the size of the cruise liner, and it will be possible to walk inside the dock next month. In the pump-house, the steam-powered water pumps are still as they were 100 years ago. Next to Titanic Belfast are the twin shipways of the Titanic and her sister ship, Olympic.

Nearby, SS Nomadic, the original tender that was used in Cherbourg to take first and second-class passengers out to the Titanic, is undergoing a £5m restoration in a dry dock. It's currently a building site but it will open to visitors in October.

A Titanic Walking Tour will give enthusiasts access to the drawing offices, where the ships were designed, as well as the former Harland and Wolff

headquarters. At the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra, Holywood, some 10km east of the city, you can see 35 artefacts from the sea bed and there are also audio recordings of eyewitness accounts of the sinking, from ship's officers and survivors. At the adjacent outdoor folk museum, there's a 'living history' recreation of Belfast at the turn of the 20th century. The opening of Titanic Belfast on Saturday week will be followed by the Titanic Festival until April 22.

More than 120 events are planned and highlights include an open-air MTV concert on the Titanic's slipway, one of the world's largest light shows to be projected onto Titanic Belfast, the opening of a memorial garden at Belfast City Hall and international street performers and markets at Titanic Belfast.

There will be plays, concerts and requiem masses around the anniversary date, and already everywhere you go in the city, it seems there's something on for the Titanic centenary. The luxurious Merchant Hotel has designed a Titanic-themed menu with quail eggs, oysters and lamb, a modern take on what was served 100

years ago (which apparently wasn't particularly appetising accompanied by 'gin and tonics'). A Titanic play will open in the new MAC arts centre and there are even Titanic crisps, jam and whiskey. Being Belfast, there's also a Titanic mural on the Newtownards Road.

It is all a welcome echo of the pride that Belfast had in 1912, when the city was an industrial powerhouse, at the forefront of innovation and engineering, with the world's largest linen production, tobacco factory and rope works as well as the world's largest shipyards at Harland & Wolff.

When I heard about the Titanic Festival and the new visitor attraction, I was sceptical about celebrations of a tragic ship sinking, thinking it a little spooky that a symbol of maritime disaster was going to be celebrated with a festival, events and a visitor attraction.

But this is really about Belfast getting back on its feet, telling the world a new story, celebrating its passion and pride.

It's also about regeneration and moving on from its troubles, and being the powerhouse of ingenuity and innovation it was 100 years ago.

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## Honestly Mum... I promise you'll love it!



**THRILLING:** The Indiana Jones attraction at Disneyland in Paris

To travel together, mother and child, is (largely) a joyful thing. As it is, I imagine, for father and child, but today is all about mothers. Sorry, boys.

Some of my most vivid memories are of being off somewhere on my own with my son when he was young, various trips that resulted in those special moments that you store away forever, memories that catch you occasionally in flashback, years later, and still make you smile.

For me, that's things like running flat-out down the beach at Rosnawlagh in Co. Donegal – when we were sharing a room in the Sandhouse Hotel more than a decade ago – just for the sheer



joy of racing each other into the freezing sea; it's persuading him, as an eight-year-old and in a last-ditch attempt to get him through the door, that he'd really love the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris because there were loads of artistic 'nudies' on display inside; it's watching his face as we bounced along at top speed across the lagoon in Venice in the direction of Murano in a sleek speedboat, me humming

the James Bond music and him bursting with delight; it's being persuaded by himself, then aged about 10, that I would love the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland Paris, that, 'honestly Mum', there were no bits where you were in the dark in a tunnel. Cut to screaming mother five minutes later, plunged at high speed into darkness.

There's always an intimacy for parents and children when it comes to sharing things, and it's heightened, I think, when you are away from home in a strange location, left to your own devices, and discovering new sights, new cultures and new experiences together. (As a concession to the dads, I am

prepared to mention Peter and Natasha Murtagh's wonderful experience of walking the Camino together, a real father/daughter experience, perfectly captured in their subsequent book, Buen Camino.)

It's not always easy, of course, for mothers to head off on their own with their children. I have only one child and that has always made things less complicated. For those with a number of offspring it's more difficult but try it if you can.

But don't take my word for it. If you are looking for real examples, then just delve between the covers of a few of Dervla Murphy's books,

where this legendary Irish travel writer heads off to some of the most fascinating places on earth, with her daughter Rachel for company. India, Cameroon, Cuba, Russia.

If you've already read Dervla Murphy, then here's another travel book worth a look. It's co-authored by a mother and daughter, and reflects the adult relationship between them as they travelled across the world in the Nineties.

The book, Travelling With Pomegranates, is written by novelist Sue Monk Kidd and her daughter, Ann, each one writing separate sections so that you get the take of the then 50-year-old juxtaposed

with that of her twenty-something daughter. Greece looms large here, as does Turkey, and France and South Carolina. It's part memoirs and part travelogue – and all laced with that mother/daughter thread that gives the book – and their experience – another dimension altogether.

In the end, though, it's about the memories. With the odd photograph for backup, of course. Like the one on top of the bookcase in my study, featuring a delighted-looking young fella and his terrified, eyes-closed mother on board the Indiana Jones ride in Disneyland Paris all those years ago.

Happy Mother's Day.

**LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK**

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