

TITANIC OFFERINGS

Belfast's shipbuilding legacy has come to the fore, but there's also a fantastic food scene and a fascinating variety of public art, says Yvonne Gordon



IMAGES: GETTY



From left: Titanic Belfast; Giant Harland & Wolff cranes

A thriving food scene, street art tours, new hotels and the Game of Thrones studios have all helped to bring this vibrant Northern Irish city to the forefront as a top travel destination in the last few years. At the end of a day of exploring, try some local beer in historic Victorian pub The Crown, dine in a Michelin-starred restaurant (such as OX Belfast), have a award-winning cocktail in The Merchant Hotel, which used to be an ornate banking hall, or cozy up with a beer in one of the historic pubs in the tiny laneways of the Cathedral Quarter. Culture buffs can check out great theatre and music venues such as the Grand Opera House, Lyric Theatre and Waterfront Hall, along with many more informal live music venues around the city.

FOLLOW THE SHIPBUILDING LEGACY

Set on Belfast Lough on the east coast of Northern Ireland, Belfast is a major port and the legacy of shipbuilding here goes back hundreds of years. Two of the most iconic features on the city skyline are the giant yellow shipyard cranes, nicknamed Samson and Goliath. These belong to the Harland & Wolff shipyard, which was once the world's largest. It's where famous passenger liner *RMS Titanic* was built before

it sank after hitting an iceberg on the way from Southampton to New York in 1912.

The former shipyards are now home to the Titanic Quarter on the Maritime Mile, and it's in this main area that the city's rich shipbuilding heritage is showcased. Start at Titanic Belfast, where the story of the famous ship and also Belfast's maritime history is explained in a series of fun and interactive exhibits over six floors. Follow this with a visit to the vast outdoor dock at Titanic's Dock & Pump-House, to get an idea of the scale of the ship in her dry dock before she went to sea.

Step onto the beautiful *SS Nomadic* to tour the tender that brought first- and second-class passengers out to the *Titanic*. The Titanic Quarter shipyard area is also home to the *HMS Caroline*, a First World War naval vessel that's now a floating museum telling the story of famous battles, as well as revealing what life was like for the crew at sea.

There's no shortage of *Titanic*-themed experiences around Belfast. Check out original artifacts such as crockery and ship's plans at the Ulster Folk and Transport museum in Holywood just outside the city, and enjoy afternoon tea in the elegant surrounds of the Titanic Hotel, a beautiful, faithfully preserved building that was the

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Clockwise from top left: The MAC; sweets at a stall; dragon sculptures, Ulster Museum; The Crown Liquor Saloon



BEST OF THE REST



Cathedral Quarter

The Cathedral Quarter takes its name from St Anne's Cathedral. Behind this is St Anne's Square, home to The MAC and Black Box music and arts venues. For summer alfresco dining in the area, check out 2 Taps Wine Bar for Spanish tapas and wine or drop into Made in Belfast for dishes with a local, sustainable focus served in a quirky atmosphere.

St George's Market

This buzzing, covered market comes alive on weekends when local artists often perform. Stock up on local gifts and crafts, and try some artisan and organic food.

Queen's University, Botanic Gardens and Ulster Museum

The beautiful campus at Queen's dates back to 1845. Next door is Ulster Museum, which is full of treasures such as rare animal specimens and art. Follow a visit with a stroll around the beautiful Botanic Gardens, which is home to exotic species and an old Palm House.

The Crown Liquor Saloon

Set up in a snug for the evening in The Crown pub, a Victorian gin palace which first opened in 1826. The interior features mosaics and tiles, gas lamps, and 10 snug booths.

Belfast Castle

This 1870s baronial-style castle and gardens looks back over the city and Belfast Lough. The grounds are ideal for a stroll – from here walk to Cave Hill Country Park, where Napoleon's Nose is said to have inspired Jonathan Swift to write *Gulliver's Travels*.



former Harland & Wolff drawing offices. For an indulgent treat, sign up for a nine-course Titanic-themed dinner, based on the original menu, at Rayanne House in Holywood.

A new Titanic food tour follows the footsteps of the ship's builders around the Titanic Quarter, with food at Titanic's Dock & Pump-House plus a tasting of local beer and cider on *HMS Caroline*. The Wee Tram brings visitors to the different food experiences, or take the tram as a separate tour of the shipyard with commentary.

EXPLORE THE FOOD SCENE

The food scene in Belfast is best described as buzzing – there are plenty of artisan suppliers and new restaurants to discover. Pop into St George's Market on the weekend to sample tasty treats from the stalls of local suppliers; everything from preserves and honey to baking and seafood, with a background of live music. Or take a seat at the uber-cool, Michelin-starred OX Belfast. On the menu are local scallops, sea trout or duck, prepared according to the seasons.

To get the lay of the land, book into the four-hour Belfast Food Tour, taking in a variety of venues. The tour starts at St George's Market and visits famous shops and traditional bars along the way, finishing at a restaurant in the Cathedral Quarter. Or try the Belfast Bites tour, which visits five different venues including a modern cafe, a charcuterie and artisan cheese shop as well as an urban-style hotel.

The Taste and Tour also starts from St George's Market on Fridays and Saturdays. On offer are gin tours, beer crawls, and whiskey walks, making for a fun way to get to know the city's local flavors.

Those with a penchant for Michelin-starred fine dining should visit The Muddlers Club, hidden away in the Cathedral Quarter's small streets. It serves up a tasting menu of dishes such as halibut and beef with miso. For something a bit quirkier, try Pizza Punks, which offers a full Ulster fry breakfast on a pizza.

New restaurants around the city include Belfast's first container restaurant, Freight,

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// ESSENTIALS



When to go: Summer is the best time to visit Belfast — it's when the weather is warmest and driest. Certain attractions, such as Titanic Belfast, can get very busy during high season, so it's wise to book ahead.

Currency: Pounds sterling. \$1=£0.77

Language: English

Getting around: Belfast has two airports, one of which is international. The city center is compact and easy to walk around. There's also a good public transport system which includes Metro buses, a Glider, which runs across the city, and Ulsterbus and NI Railways for getting to other destinations in Northern Ireland. Taxis are another option, and for getting around the city quickly, try the bike-sharing service, Belfast Bikes. The Belfast Visitor Pass is an integrated card that gives unlimited bus and rail travel for one, two or three consecutive days.

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Mural on the side of a house

in CS Lewis Square, or to a new oyster bar in the historic Whites Tavern, also in the Cathedral Quarter. In east Belfast, neighborhood restaurant Cyprus Avenue has just extended its space, serving up local favorites such as steak burgers and roast duck with twists like truffle fries, crab and pearl barley risotto.

DISCOVER MURALS AND STREET ART

Belfast has always been famous for its street art — mostly in the form of the giant, colorful political murals which appeared on gable walls in the Shankill and Falls Roads during The Troubles of the 1970s and 80s, a period of violence between Republican (Nationalist) and Loyalist (Unionist) paramilitary groups, which ended with the Good Friday Agreement in 1999.

In east Belfast, there are also striking murals dedicated to the sinking of the *Titanic*, and to two of the city's famous sons: CS Lewis, who was born in and grew up in east Belfast before moving to England

and writing *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, and legendary soccer player George Best, who went on to become one of the best players of all time, turning out for Manchester United and the Northern Ireland national team.

The city center, particularly around the Cathedral Quarter, is home to some colorful street art of a more abstract nature. It's celebrated at the annual Hit the North Street Art Festival, which has previously taken place in September each year but from now on will take place in May.

The best way to tour the political murals is to take a black taxi or a mural tour, as some of the locations are quite spread out, especially in north, west and east Belfast. Or, to see street art in the city center, take a walking tour with Adam Turkington of Seedhead Arts on Sundays at midday to see many of the spectacular art pieces in the Cathedral Quarter — such as 'The Chef' by Smug on High Street, or 'The Duel of Belfast' by Conor Harrington on the side of the Black Box. □

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