

# Belfast

## Consummate contradiction



Belfast City Hall

All countries are two places – the place on the map and the one in your head.

 By Sharon Stephenson

The problem with Belfast is the latter: it exists largely in the collective imagination as a grim, conflict-ravaged destination that many of us know only from the 6pm news. Until relatively recently, any visit to the city would have been accompanied by a backdrop of burning cars, balaclava-clad guerrillas and a soundtrack of bomb blasts and sirens.

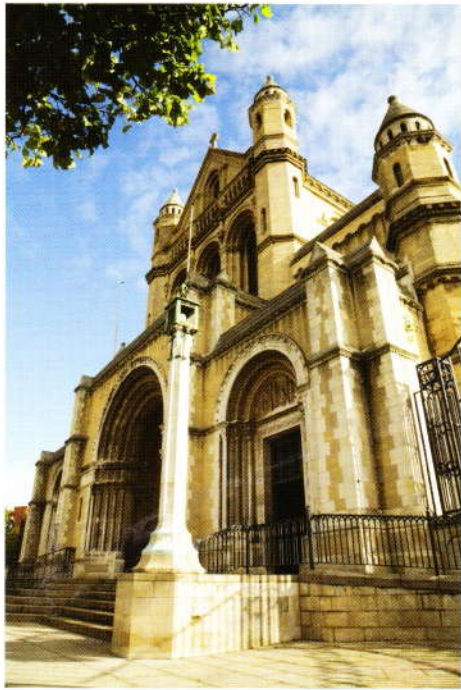
But today the only sounds you'll hear in Belfast are of a vibrant city going about its business. And visitors remarking how attractive, peaceful and charming it is. This is all thanks to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 that ended 30 years of sectarian violence in which 3,600 people were killed. Since then, Belfast's citizens have been quietly reshaping their battle-scarred city into what the *Lonely Planet* recently called one of the world's top tourist destinations.

Surrounded by hills and rubbed by the waters of the River Lagan at the head of Belfast Lough, this city has a new-found confidence and is looking to the future, rather than hanging on to its sorry past. About a third of Northern Ireland's 1.75 million people live here

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but it rarely feels crowded. And despite what many of the locals have been through, it's a sunny-side-up kind of place inhabited by some of the friendliest folk on the planet. Belfast is, for example, a city where tourists are treated as welcome visitors, not as an annoyance to be suffered. We would barely have unfurled our map and someone would be stopping to ask if we needed help.





St Anne's Cathedral

At the heart of Belfast lies the grandly domed City Hall, a logical point from which to start any exploration. As we wander, I marvel at how such a compact city could occupy such a major place in the political landscape. It's hard to imagine that huge swathes of Belfast were once burned, blown up or pockmarked – the elegant streets that radiate out from City Hall sport few battle scars.

We amble north through the main shopping district winding up at the Entries, little cobbled alleyways that make up Belfast's historic quarter. You can't come to Belfast and not visit a historic pub, so we duck into White's Tavern where they've been pulling pints since 1630. The sign above the door says it's the oldest pub in Belfast, but apparently that's disputed by a couple of other places. Oldest or not, White's gives us the chance to sup a Guinness, enjoy the famous Irish 'craic' and check out the framed newspaper clippings that paper the walls and tell a chilling tale of the city's bloody past.

In the neighbouring Cathedral Quarter, the city's cool arts and entertainment hub, everyone seems frighteningly young and trendy; you obviously need the 'right' trainers to fit in here. Which we don't have, but that doesn't prevent us stopping for a coffee and a chat.

Next we pop in to St Anne's Cathedral, from which the quarter takes its name. There's been a place of worship on this spot since 1899 and although it isn't a contender for the 'prettiest church I've ever seen' award, it's still

quite impressive, especially as it features the largest pipe organ in Northern Ireland.

Coming to Belfast and not taking a tour of the republican and loyalist heartlands is like going to New York and not visiting the Statue of Liberty. There are any number of bus tours of the key flashpoints, but a personalised black cab tour allows you to really get your head around the area. Our driver Billy has the fastest larynx in Northern Ireland and provides a fascinating and, at times, blackly humorous view of The Troubles, as the violence was known.

We start at the Protestant Shankill Road where we are immediately confronted by a

**"We're in the process of repainting some of the more aggressive ones [murals], because parents don't like their children walking past them every day."  
Billy [tour guide]**





Colourful taxis in Belfast

**“This is where, 100 years ago, the so-called ‘unsinkable’ *Titanic* was born. It was fine when it left us.”**

*Billy [tour guide]*

giant mural of a man in a balaclava holding an automatic rifle. Nicknamed the ‘Mona Lisa’ because of the way the gunman’s eyes follow you, Billy tells us these elaborate murals are now being changed. “We’re in the process of repainting some of the more aggressive ones, because parents don’t like their children walking past them every day,” says Billy.

Murals also dominate on the Catholic Falls Road, including an enormous one that bears the ironic tag-line ‘This is the Sinn Fein commitment to the Peace Process’ and another of infamous hunger striker Bobby Sands. Billy’s running commentary ticks off death and destruction like a shopping list: “See Frizzell’s Fish Shop? Ten innocent people, including women and children, were bombed to death there. And five were gunned down at that pub on the corner.”

Fortunately, his sense of humour keeps it this side of depressing: “We may not have a UDA, UDF, UFF or an IRA, but there’s a KFC up there on the corner. These days, that’ll do you more damage.”

Next stop is the Peace Wall, a sort of Berlin Wall that slices through the Shankill and Falls Roads. We add our messages of hope but can’t help noticing that the only scribbles mentioning peace are from foreigners.

For history of a different sort, we swing by the Titanic Quarter where the monstrous Harland and Wolff cranes (nicknamed Samson and Goliath) tower over the city. The

biggest dockside development in Europe, more than NZ\$2 billion has been spent on transforming the former shipyards from an industrial wasteland into Belfast’s slickest new residential and tourist district. But no amount of flash shops can detract from the fact that this is where, 100 years ago, the so-called ‘unsinkable’ *Titanic* was born. “It was fine when it left us,” laughs Billy.

By now we’re in serious need of feeding and watering, so Billy takes us to the famous Crown Liquor Saloon on Great Victoria Street. Owned by the National Trust, the pub dates back to 1885 and is a fantastic example of Victorian architecture. We hunker down in one of the cosy partitioned snugs and resist the Ulster Fry (fried food to the power of 10) and instead opt for the delicious Irish stew.

Just up the road is the Europa Hotel which, Billy tells us, has the dubious title of being the most bombed hotel in Europe. Opened in 1971, the Europa was intended to be the last word in international sophistication. The timing, however, wasn’t great: the hotel had only been open a week when internment was introduced and a month or so later it was hit by the first of 29 bombs.

But like much of this remarkable city, there’s little evidence of the bloodshed and hate that fuelled it for so long. As Billy says when he drops us off, a recent United Nations study found that Belfast was one of the safest cities in the world for tourists, second only to Tokyo. I’ll raise my Guinness to that... ■

Rooftop view over Belfast city, showing the two yellow cranes Samson and Goliath, which is where the famous and ill-fated passenger liner ship, the *Titanic* was built. Also shown are Divis Tower and St Peter’s Cathedral.

