

# TRAVEL



Northern Ireland's Carrick-a-Rede Bridge

PHOTO BY JUILENE OSBORNE-MCKNIGHT

## Tales of Northern Ireland

*Where Fionn the Giant leapt to Scotland*

By JUILENE OSBORNE-MCKNIGHT  
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Of course there is a legend. How else could people explain the perfectly octagonal basalt columns that thrust up from the sea? They called it the Giant's Causeway. Here, they say, Fionn the Giant created a bridge to Scotland, where he could leap into the land of even bigger giants (shades of the new animated Spielberg film *The BFG*). The day came, of course, when one of the bigger giants chased Fionn back to Ireland; Fionn was beside himself until his wife told him to climb into the baby's crib. When the bigger giant saw the massive baby, he imagined the size of Fionn his father, and leapt all the way back to Scotland, never to return.

Located in Northern Ireland (the area the Irish call Ulster), the long sweep of basalt does indeed look like a stairway across the water. Nearby, another thrust of basalt looks like the pipes of a great organ, while the sea has

also left a giant's shoe, perhaps a remnant from the bigger giant who fled from Fionn.

The Northern Irish coast is a treasure trove of unique sites like the Giant's Causeway. Northern Ireland consists of six counties who are still considered part of Great Britain. Nearby, sixteenth century Dunluce Castle hangs precariously onto a cliff above the sea. History tells us that the entire kitchen fell into the sea during a terrible thunderstorm in the 1600's. Supposedly, only the potboy survived; the rest of the kitchen staff and the dinner plunged into the briny deep.

If you wish to experience the same gibbering terror, a short ten minute ride will take you to the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, originally built by salmon fisherman in the 1700's (and yes refurbished) but still dangling a

hundred feet above the roiling sea.

In case you prefer something more grounded — even subterranean — the Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark will be just the thing. Here you will travel by boat on an underground lake lit only by torches, after which you will walk through upside-down castles of stone reflected in still underground lakes, punctuated by waterfalls.

Nearby Derry (the British call it Londonderry) is a storied Irish city, scene of the "troubles," the euphemistic term for the sectarian violence rooted in the bad blood between Ireland and England. Those troubles erupted in the 1960's and 70's. In the famous area known as the Bogside, murals on the walls of buildings memorialize those difficult times. The fact that peace has reigned

in Northern Ireland for more than two decades now is considered a miracle and allows Americans to visit Derry in safety.

Derry is completely surrounded by a wide medieval wall, still in wonderful shape and flanked by buildings both modern and medieval. From the wall, you can see the Peace Bridge that now joins Catholics and Protestants, as well as the neo-Gothic Guildhall with its elaborate stained glass windows.

At some point you will cross, almost unnoticed, into the Republic of Ireland. Do not miss the opportunity to climb to the top of the Grianan of Aileach. A mystical ring fort at the top of a windswept hill, the Grianan is supposedly the burial place for Aedh, son of the Dagda, the ancient

Irish god of provision. More likely its historical use was defensive, but from the height of its circular walls, you can see Loughs Swilly and Foyle and the breathtaking Irish countryside of both Donegal and Northern Ireland.

Juilene Osborne-McKnight is the author of four historical novels from MacMillan and of the newly released *The Story We Carry in Our Bones: Irish History for Americans* available at Barnes & Noble or amazon.com.

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