

The TITANIC Experience

There is much to see and enjoy in Belfast, but top of everyone's list should be a visit to the wonderful *Titanic* exhibition. Liz O'Rourke went along to find out why.



First Class travel.



THE flight from Edinburgh touched down at Belfast City Airport after just 50 minutes and we were in Northern Ireland for the first time. The friendly taxi driver greeted us warmly and pointed out features as we drove the short distance into town. Our hotel, the Europa, was very central and the Crown Liquor Saloon across the road beckoned for lunch.

This National Trust property is more than just a public house – it is a piece of history, with its murals, carved walls and ceilings and snugs, which offer the visitor a private little room in which to dine and drink. The resemblance to a confessional is unmistakable and we discovered that the pub was fitted out by Italian craftsman brought over to the country to build churches in the 19th century. No doubt the walls of these snugs have also heard many a confession over the years!

After a delicious lunch we met up with our fellow holidaymakers and enjoyed a walk around the centre of the city. The magnificent City Hall is testament to the ship-building industry which brought money into this city. The poignant memorial in the garden to the men who lost their lives on *Titanic* is another reminder of this city's



Historic moments.

ship-building past.

Having decided to see more of Northern Ireland by coach, we joined up with our fellow passengers for a trip to the *Titanic* Experience.

The sight of the *Titanic* building is very dramatic against the Belfast skyline. Modern in design, with what appear to be ships' bows looming out towards the skyline, the glass and aluminium

building stands on the site of the former Harland & Wolff shipyard beside the water's edge with the original *Titanic* and *Olympic* slipways alongside.

INDOORS, the spacious building is split into galleries and we started with a look at Belfast in the early 20th century before walking through the original Harland & Wolff gates to



Moments on film.

continue the *Titanic* story.

We learned that the two slipways were built and the massive Arrol Gantry erected to prepare for the construction. We ascended a replica of one of the pillars to embark on the Shipyard Ride – an electronic ride that takes the visitor through the hull of the boat as it is being built. The dust, heat and noise were very lifelike and recreated the reality of shipbuilding in the early 20th century.

Stepping out of the ride, we found ourselves about to experience the launch of *Titanic*. Staring out the massive window which looks out on the slipways, a huge image of the boat appears as it did on launch day.

Our favourite section was next, as we inspected the furnishings and fittings. It

was fascinating to see the staterooms recreated, the luxury of the First Class cabins contrasting with the still impressive Second Class and more basic Third Class equivalents.

Who could not be moved by the artefacts that included the menu card from the last luncheon, letters, brochures and china? These personal items – plus information on some of the passengers – bring a personal touch to the exhibition and remind us of the real tragedy that its sinking brought to many families on both sides of the Atlantic.

The sinking of the boat is dramatic and stark – copies of the telegraphs sent out requesting help are particularly poignant and remind visitors of how quickly the ship went down on the night

of April 14, 1912. CQD ... CQD ... SOS ... SOS ...

Many Belfast families lost fathers and sons who were among the workforce travelling on the ship to deal with problems. How sad that the best apprentices were taken on the voyage as a treat for working so well. In all, 22 members of the workforce perished that night. There were tales of heroism, too, and who could forget the reports of the orchestra playing on as the boat went down?

Now, over 100 years on, *Titanic* continues to fascinate people and this experience will certainly whet the appetite for more. The future is not overlooked with an underwater-exploration exhibit reminding us of the conservation work being done by scientists and marine biologists.

Back on the coach, our guide pointed out *SS Nomadic*, the tender to *Titanic* and the last White Star Line ship in the world, the dry dock and pump house which are all open to the public. A good excuse to come back ...



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www.titanicbelfast.com

Liz travelled as a guest of Tourism Ireland www.ireland.com and the Coach Tourism Council, which promotes tours and holidays by coach via www.findacoachholiday.com.

