

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

BY SANDRA EAGLE

A whirlwind trip to Belfast yields warm memories

Until recently, people might think you were a bit touched in the head if you told them you were going to spend a weekend in Belfast. But there I was, along with 10 Canadian incentive-travel company presidents and their partners, winging across the Atlantic for a whirlwind trip to Northern Ireland.

As guests of Burlington, Ont.-based Exclusive Travels, Hastings Hotels, Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Odyssey International, I was about to discover a city and destination that was no longer a “no-fly zone.”

Landing in Belfast, we headed to County Down and the Slieve Donard Hotel, breath-takingly situated on the sweeping strand of Newcastle Bay. My suite overlooked the rugged mountains of Mourne sweeping down to the sea, as beloved by visitors now as when local poet Percy French wrote about them in the last century. The hotel has recently completed a £15-million renovation, which included the addition of new suites, a complete renovation of all rooms, the development of conference facilities and state-of-the-art spa.

That first evening we were warmly welcomed at Hillsborough Castle, the official Northern Ireland residence of the Queen. UK Minister For Tourism Maria Eagle (no relation – honest) hosted a reception and dinner in the Throne room. The next day, we visited the Ballywalter Park Mansion House, near Newtownards, the home of the affable Lord and Lady Dunleath. After welcoming drinks in the art-filled foyer, we took lunch in the dining room overlooking a vast expanse of garden. Ballywalter is available to select corporate groups for receptions and dinners. Deb Niven, president of Wynford Motivates, says she felt “instantly included and immersed in the country, the people and the culture. The hospitality was



From far left, back row: **Bob Macdonald**, president, Maritz Canada; **Ken McElroy**, Northern Ireland guide; **Bernie Koth**, president, Wynford Motivates; **Christian Fox**; **Nancy Dacko**; **Cynthia Richards**, president, Event Spectrum; **Debi Niven**, president, Wynford Motivates; **Ron Warner**, head of operations, American Express Corporate Meetings Solutions; **Pat Crowley**, Odyssey International; **Vicky Macdonald**; **Arthur Richards**; **Jackie Lutz**; **Belinda Hawthorne**, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau; **Alison Metcalfe**, Tourism Ireland; **Willie Loughheed**, Northern Ireland Tourist Board; **Joanne Taylor**, Northern Ireland Tourist Board; **William Humphrey**, High Sheriff of Belfast; **Alanna McQuaid**, Exclusive Travels; **Yvonne Rhynas**; **Sandra Eagle**, M&IT; **Caitriona Lavery**, sales manager, Hastings Hotels; **John Rhynas**, president, Rhynas Incentives International. Not in the picture: **Paul Salvatore**, president, HRG Worldwide North America; **Dean Dacko**, vice-president, Carlson Marketing Ltd.; **Ardith Freethy**, president, Communiqué; and **Liliane Leger**, president, World Wide Meetings & Motivations.

outstanding, real and very warm.”

Closer to Belfast, the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava welcomed us to Clondeboyne Estate, the ancestral home of Lord Dufferin, the third Governor General of Canada. Over tea in the parlour, Lady Dufferin informed us that the inner Courtyard, a series of walled gardens and the 300-hectare woods surrounding the estate are available for group events.

Our group was fortunate to have Ken McElroy, raconteur and playwright, as our guide.

Visits to the Bushmills Distillery and the Giants’ Causeway, a UNESCO world heri-

tage site, and Belfast City Hall rounded out the weekend, which was capped off by a black-tie charity concert by Van Morrison at the Hastings Culloden Estate and Spa.

The Canadian incentive presidents, a well-traveled group, were suitably impressed with the destination and hospitality. Alanna McQuaid, marketing director with Exclusive Travels, says, “this VIP group was reassured that it’s a safe and thriving destination, with tremendous business opportunities for North America. We see a very exciting new chapter opening as Northern Ireland’s light shines bright.” ■