The North’s largest city by some distance, with a population of some 270,000 in the inner city rising to 600,000 across its wider metropolitan area, Belfast has a pace and bustle you’ll find nowhere else in Northern Ireland. For many, however, the city will always be remembered as the focus of the Troublesthat dominated Northern Ireland’s politics for almost three decades from the late 1960s and scarred so many lives. Indeed, as the North continues to come to terms with the aftermath of the peace process, instigated by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the city remains in some ways on a knife’s edge, always expecting some new predicament to emerge. Continue reading to find out more about... Some history Accommodation in Belfast Eating in Belfast Belfast drinking and nightlife LGBT Travel Information for Belfast Sports and outdoor activities in Belfast Donegall Square The Entries and around Belfast's Cathedral Quarter The Laganside The Golden Mile South Belfast Cave Hill West Belfast Belfast’s murals  Festivals Belfast and the Titanic In appearance Belfast closely resembles Liverpool, Glasgow or any other industrial port across the water, and, similarly, its largely defunct docklands– in which, famously, the Titanic was built – are undergoing massive redevelopment. Though the city centre is still characterized by numerous elegant Victorian buildings, there’s been an enormous transformation here, too, not least in the greater prosperity of the shopping streets leading northwards from the hub of Belfast life, Donegall Square. Yet economic improvement is not reflected in every aspect of Belfast life. Some areas of the city display obvious economic decline, most notably North Belfast and the once-thriving so-called Golden Mile (now little more than a silver two hundred yards at each end). On week-nights the city centre can resemble a ghost town, though there’s no doubt that Belfast continues to thrive culturally. Theatre and the visual arts are flourishing, and there are plenty of places to catch the city’s booming traditional-music scene. A couple of days are enough to get a feel for the city, although it is a good base from which to visit virtually anywhere else in the North. In the city centre, concentrate on the glories resulting from the Industrial Revolution – grandiose architecture and magnificent Victorian pubs – and the rejuvenated area from Ann Street to Donegall Street now known as the Cathedral quarter. To the south lies Queen’s University and the extensive collections of the Ulster Museum, set in the grounds of the Botanic Gardens. A climb up Cave Hill, a couple of miles to the north, rewards you with marvellous views of the city spread out around the curve of its natural harbour, Belfast Lough. The River Lagan flows towards Belfast Lough along the eastern side of the city centre and offers riverside walks, and is also the focus for the most radical development in the last few years, the Laganside, focused on the Waterfront Hall and the Odyssey Complex across the water. In East Belfast, across the river beyond the great cranes of the Harland & Wolff shipyard, lies suburbia and very little of interest apart from Stormont, the former Northern Irish parliament and home to the modern Assembly. The city’s once-formidable security presence and fortifications are now virtually invisible, but the iron blockade known as the Peace Line still bisects the Catholic and Protestant communities of West Belfast, a grim physical reminder of the city’s and country’s sectarian divisions – and there are certain flashpoints such as the Short Strand in East Belfast and North Belfast’s Ardoyne area that it is still inadvisable to visit. **Some history** Belfast began life as a cluster of forts built to guard a ford across the River Farset, which nowadays runs underground beneath the High Street. An Anglo-Norman castle was built here in 1177, but its influence was limited, and within a hundred years or so control over the Lagan Valley had reverted firmly to the Irish, under the O’Neills of Clandeboye. In 1604, Sir Arthur Chichester, whose son was to be the First Earl of Donegall, was “planted” in the area by James I, and shortly afterwards the tiny settlement was granted a charter creating a corporate borough. It was not until the end of the seventeenth century though that Belfast began to grow significantly, when French Huguenots fleeing persecution brought skills which rapidly improved the fortunes of the local linen industry – which, in turn, attracted new workers and wealth. Through the eighteenth century the cloth trade and shipbuilding expanded tremendously, and the population increased tenfold in a hundred years. With economic prosperity, Belfast became a city noted for its liberalism: in 1791, three Presbyterian Ulstermen formed the Society of United Irishmen, a gathering embracing Catholics and Protestants on the basis of common Irish nationality, from which sprang the 1798 Rebellion. However, the rebellion in the North was quickly and ruthlessly stamped out by the English, and within two generations most Protestants had abandoned the Nationalist cause. Presbyterian ministers began openly to attack the Catholic Church, resulting in a sectarian divide that as time drew on became wider and increasingly violent. At the same time, the nineteenth century saw vigorous commercial and industrial expansion, and by the time Queen Victoria granted Belfast city status in 1888, its population had risen to 208,000, soon exceeding that of Dublin. With Partition came the creation of Northern Ireland with Belfast as its capital and Stormont as its seat of government. Inevitably this boosted the city’s status, but also ensured that it would ultimately become the focus for much of the Troubles. Though its fortunes now reflected the status of the British economy, Belfast mainly fared well, despite major German bombing raids during World War II. However, the economic status of the Catholic population was deliberately maintained at a low level by the Stormont government, largely consisting of Protestant landowners and businessmen, which saw no reason to challenge existing sectarian employment, housing and policing policies – all fuel to the fire which was to follow. For 25 years from 1969, Belfast witnessed the worst of the Troubles and, by the time the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994, much of the city resembled a battle site. Then followed a sea change in the city’s fortunes as Britain and the EU funded a revitalization programme costing billions of pounds. Major shopping centres were built, swish hotels, bars and restaurants seemed to spring up almost overnight, and buildings such as the Waterfront Hall and Odyssey complex have fundamentally altered the city’s skyline. Young Belfast partied like never before – and to some extent still does – while the atmosphere of the whole city centre changed irrevocably. Nevertheless, Belfast remains a city divided and all evidence suggests that sectarian attitudes are hardening, especially among young people, some of whom, though not old enough to remember the Troubles, regard the Orange Order marching season as an opportunity to confront both their “opposing” community and the police with bricks and petrol bombs. Yet while the peace is fragile, there is still optimism for the future as seen in the ambitious centenary celebrations that commemorated the launch of the Titanic, a product of Belfast’s once thriving docklands. **Accommodation in Belfast** Belfast has a broad range of accommodation, especially at the top end of the market. However, there’s still a relative dearth of budget places. Much of the city’s accommodation is concentrated around Great Victoria Street and south of the centre in the university quarter, particularly on and around Botanic Avenue and in the network of streets running between the Malone and Lisburn roads. Many hotels and guesthouses are geared towards business travellers and so frequently offer significant reductions for weekend breaks; most hotels offer free wi-fi. **Eating in Belfast** Eating out in Belfast is very much a movable feast with new places popping up and others vanishing or relocating. There are plenty of options for food during the day in the centre and at the southern end of the Golden Mile, ranging from new cafés (many of which in the city centre stay open until 8.30pm on Thurs nights) to traditional pubs (which generally only serve lunch but in some cases continue providing food until 9pm). Most of the city’s well-established restaurants are around Donegall Square or in the university area. Bear in mind that they are often fully booked on Friday and Saturday evenings, so reserving a table’s essential unless you’re prepared to eat early. There is a fair choice of cuisine, from modern Irish and European, with French and Italian especially popular, to a smattering of Indian and East Asian restaurants. Standards are generally high and often exceptionally good value for money. The choice is limited for vegetarians but many places include veggie options on their menus. **Belfast drinking and nightlife** Belfast has numerous excellent pubs concentrated in the city centre and the club and music scenes continue to thrive on Fridays and Saturdays, although Sundays can be quiet, with many bars closing early or remaining shut all day. To tap into the city’s pulse, your best bet is to wander around the Entries or up and around Donegall Street, while there’s plenty of action at each end of the Golden Mile. For the latest information on what’s going on, the monthly listings freesheet The Big List is essential, though the Belfast Telegraph also features extensive, if somewhat disorganized, listings. **Pubs** As always in Ireland, the pubs are the heart of the city. The liveliest in the evenings are on Great Victoria Street, on and near Donegall Street, and around the university, and if you start drinking at the famed Crown Liquor Saloon you can manage a substantial pub crawl without moving more than a few hundred yards. Several of the finest pubs also offer regular traditional music sessions, usually free with your pint. If you’re short of time, you could always join the Historical Pub Tour, covering six of Belfast’s best-known bars. For pub reviews, check wwww.belfastbar.co.uk. **Live music** As well as the traditional music on offer in pubs, Belfast also benefits from a thriving indie and rock scene. There are always good up-and-coming bands playing in the city, just waiting to get noticed and the number of visiting international performers has increased dramatically since the opening of the Waterfront Hall and Odyssey Arena. Rock venues may charge between £5 and £20 depending on the act’s reputation. Pre-booked tickets for the biggest names will usually cost much more – between £15 and £75. **Clubs and DJ bars** Belfast’s club scene isn’t what it was ten years ago, but there are still plenty of dance dens, as well as pre-club DJ bars around. Check The Big List for who’s on when; you’ll find most venues run different clubs on different nights. Venues are scattered fairly evenly around the city centre; students – not surprisingly – tend to dominate those closest to the university area. Admission may be free early in the week (and at some places all week) and as low as £2 or £3 up to Thursday nights, while weekend prices are usually around £5 to £15. Many places stay open until 1am Monday to Thursday and till 2am on Fridays and Saturdays. **Classical music, opera and theatre** Almost all classical-music concerts take place in the Ulster or Waterfront halls, while opera fans are catered for by the Grand Opera House. Most of Belfast’s theatres are concentrated in the south of the city. Although the choice is relatively limited, there is still enough to please most tastes. **LGBT Travel Information for Belfast** The main resource of Belfast’s gay scene is Queerspace, part of Cara-Friend, 9–13 Waring Street (wwww.queerspace.org.uk), a collective that aims to serve the needs and raise the profile of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community of Belfast and Northern Ireland; it holds weekly drop-in sessions on the afternoons of the first and third Saturdays of the month (3–6pm). Alternatively, there’s wwww.gaybelfast.net which provides plenty of information on entertainment and nightlife. Helplines include Cara-Friend (t028/9032 2023; Mon–Wed 7.30–10pm) and Lesbian Line (t028/9023 8668; Thurs 7.30–10pm). Belfast’s Gay Pride (wwww.belfastpride.com) week begins on the last Saturday in July. The number of gay bars and venues has increased substantially over the last few years and the majority are geared towards men (check wwww.gaybelfast.net/scene.htm for listings) though there are occasional lesbian club nights organised by The Glory Box (wwww.gloryboxgurlz.com). **Sports and outdoor activities in Belfast** Though watching, discussing and betting on sport is as much of a pastime in Belfast as anywhere else, you’ll find very few locals expressing particularly passionate opinions about the city’s teams and players, with the notable exception of boxing. Indeed, when people watch sport here, it’s usually the televised variety, and attendances for most events are relatively small, an indifference that applies equally to the North’s national teams. Nevertheless, if you’re interested in attending a match of whatever kind, there are plenty of opportunities, and the Belfast Telegraph usually has the details. The Northern Ireland football (soccer) team has enjoyed little success on the international stage over the last twenty years, but lit a blaze of glory in the summer of 2005 when it defeated England 1–0 in Belfast, reignited by a 3–2 victory over Spain the following year. Internationals are played at Windsor Park (the home ground of the Linfield club) near the Lisburn Road (buses #9A and #9B to Lower Windsor Avenue). The biggest club sides in Belfast – paradoxically enough – are Glasgow’s Celtic and Rangers, generally supported respectively by Catholics and Protestants, as well as Liverpool and Manchester United.Since football is the Belfast sport, success at either hurling or Gaelic football has been lacking, and County Antrim (which in this case includes Belfast for sporting purposes) has never won either All-Ireland Senior Final. You can see both sports most weekends at Roger Casement Park, on Andersonstown Road (buses #10A, #10B, #10C and #10D). The provincial rugby-union team, Ulster, plays its games at the Ravenhill Grounds, Ravenhill Park (bus #78), and features in both the Celtic League and the Heineken Cup. Perhaps the most popularly attended matches are the ice-hockey games at the Odyssey Arena, featuring the Belfast Giants. **Donegall Square**The core of Belfast is the stately, though often traffic-clogged, Donegall Square. In its centre stands the City Hall, a vast, Neoclassical bulk. Completed in 1906 and made of bright white Portland stone, its turrets, saucer domes, scrolls and pinnacle pots are all representative of styles absorbed by the British Empire. In front stands an imposing statue of Queen Victoria, the apotheosis of imperialism, her maternal gaze unerringly cast across the rooftops towards the Protestant Shankill area. At her feet, sculpted in bronze, stand proud figures showing the city fathers’ world-view: a young scholar, his mother with spinning spool and his father with mallet and boat, the three of them representing “learning, linen and liners”, the alliterative bedrock of Belfast’s heritage. **The Entries and around** The predominantly pedestrianized streets north from Donegall Square lead you into downtown Belfast. The main shopping street, Donegall Place, continues into Royal Avenue and houses familiar chain-store names. Castle Place, off Donegall Place, was once the hub of Victorian Belfast, and the grand old department stores here, in creams, pinks and browns, have been transformed into a plethora of voguish shops, though happily only the ground-floor frontages have been converted, leaving the lofty grandeur of the storeys above undisturbed. East along Castle Lane or Castle Place leads to Ann Street and the High Street, interlinked by the narrow alleyways known as the Entries. You’ll stumble across some great old saloon bars down here, like The Morning Star in Pottinger’s Entry, with its large frosted windows and Parisian-café-like counter, and White’s Tavern in Winecellar Entry, which dates from the seventeenth century. Crown Entry was where the Society of United Irishmen was born, led by the Protestant triumvirate of Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken and Samuel Nielson. Nielson also printed his own newspaper in this area, the Northern Star; heavily influenced by the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, the newspaper’s inflammatory material led to his being hounded out of town. From the High Street, a similar set of Entries used to run through to Waring Street to the north, but was destroyed by bombing in World War II. Still, this end of the High Street, with the River Farset running underground, is the oldest part of the city, its atmosphere in places redolent of the eighteenth century. **Belfast's Cathedral Quarter** The area north of Waring Street has seen much redevelopment in recent years, with plenty of new restaurants and bars opening up – some of which offer a wide range of entertainment, such as the excellent John Hewitt – leading to its acquisition of the term Cathedral quarter to suggest a Parisian ambience, though one as far removed from the Left Bank as it’s possible to imagine. A couple of hundred yards up Donegall Street you’ll find the most monolithic of all the city’s grand buildings, the Protestant St Anne’s Cathedral, a neo-Romanesque basilica started in 1899, but not fully completed until 1981. Entrance is via the huge west door, immediately to the right of which is the baptistery, with an intricately designed representation of the Creation on its ceiling consisting of 150,000 tiny pieces of glass. Most significant, however, is the cathedral’s only tomb, marked by a simple slab on the floor of the south aisle, which contains the body of Lord Edward Henry Carson (1854–1935). The symbol of Partition, he’s seen either as the province’s saviour or as the villain who sabotaged Ireland’s independence as a 32-county state. **Lord Edward Carson** Lord Edward Carson is a name that Northern Ireland has never forgotten. A Dubliner of Scots-Presbyterian background, he took the decision in 1910 to accept the leadership of the opposition to Home Rule, which in effect inextricably allied him to the Ulster Unionist resistance movement. Yet, though this association is about the only thing for which he is remembered, his personality and integrity went far deeper than this. He abhorred religious intolerance, and behind the exterior of a zealous crusader was a man who sincerely believed that Ireland couldn’t prosper without Britain and only wished that a federalist answer could have involved a united Ireland. Nonetheless, this was the same man who, as a brilliant orator at the bar, and in the role he loved the most, brought about the humiliating destruction of Oscar Wilde at the writer’s trial in 1895. **The Laganside** On Donegall Quay is the ambitious Laganside development project, the first component of which to be completed was the Lagan Weir, designed to protect the city against flooding. Millions of pounds have been pumped into dredging the river to maintain water levels and revive the much depleted fish population – successfully it seems: there was salmon fishing on the weir’s inauguration day. However, little can be done to restore the river’s erstwhile crucial role in the successful development of the city as a centre for industries as diverse as linen, tobacco, rope-making and shipbuilding – a glance across the river to the Harland & Wolff shipyard confirms that the last-named still survives. If the sea air’s twitching your nostrils, head a few hundred yards further north towards the ferry terminals, where you’ll find the restored Harbour Office and nearby Sinclair Seamen’s Church on Corporation Square. The latter is yet another Lanyon design, but it’s the contents that are most intriguing. Sailors must have felt truly at home among the cornucopia of maritime equipment – an old-fashioned wooden wheel, the bell from HMS Hood, assorted navigation lights and a ship’s prow for a pulpit. The most obvious changes to the city’s skyline can be seen from almost any river viewpoint: further south along Oxford Street sits the glittering two-thousand-seater Waterfront Hall concert venue, a housing development and a Hilton hotel. **The Odyssey** Across the river on Queen’s Quay, the massive Odyssey leisure complex features a ten-thousand-seater indoor arena, cinemas and a complex of bars, restaurants and shops. Also here is the Whowhatwherewhenwhy scientific discovery centre, known as W5 with over 150 interactive exhibits, aimed primarily at children. Best of these is the See/Do section in which you can create your own animated cartoon and have a go at composing on a laser harp. From mid-July to August, W5 also runs a series of special workshops for children – the subjects change annually. **The Golden Mile** The strip of Belfast running south along Great Victoria Street to Shaftesbury Square and thence to the university area and beyond is ascribed the name of the “Golden Mile”, though in its present state its middle is, in truth, mostly a pretty depressing stretch of boarded-up businesses and building sites. It begins at the grandiose, Victorian Grand Opera House, which sits just a short distance west of Donegall Square at the northern end of Great Victoria Street. At the northern head of the street, almost opposite the Europa Hotel, stands one of the greatest of Victorian gin palaces, the Crown Liquor Saloon. The saloon has a glittering tiled exterior resembling a spa baths more than a serious drinking institution, while inside the scrolled ceiling, patterned floor and the golden-yellow and rosy-red hues led John Betjeman to describe it as his “many coloured cavern”. Once armed with drinks (and if it’s not too crowded, or lunchtime when they’re reserved for diners only), grab one of the snugs and press the button to receive service. If the snugs are all busy, it’s still a great experience to sit or stand at the bar, with its carved-timber dividing screens, painted mirrors and frieze-decorated oak panelling. Before heading into the university quarter, sidestep off Great Victoria Street into Sandy Row, which runs parallel to the west. A strong working-class Protestant quarter (with the tribal pavement painting to prove it), it’s one of the most glaring examples of Belfast’s divided world, wildly different from the city centre’s increasingly cosmopolitan sophistication, yet only yards away. In Blythe Street and Donegall Road, off to the west, are some of the murals that characterize these sectarian areas (see Belfast’s murals). Sandy Row used to be the main road south and, although hard to credit today, it was once a picturesque stretch of whitewashed cottages. **South Belfast** Towards the Golden Mile’s southern extremity lies the university area, the focal point for South Belfast’s attractions (wwww.visitsouthbelfast.com). You’re likely to spend much of your time in the area, since it boasts plenty of eating places, pubs and a range of accommodation. Near Queen’s University are the lush Botanic Gardens, within which sits the vast Ulster Museum, displaying everything from dinosaur bones to contemporary art. Heading south from here along Stranmillis Road it’s a relatively short step east to the Lagan Towpath, running several miles southwest to Lisburn, while a detour along the way leads to the Neolithic earthwork known as the Giant’s Ring. **The university quarter** Towards the Golden Mile’s southern extremity lies the university quarter. You’re likely to spend much of your time in the area, since it boasts plenty of eating places, pubs and a range of accommodation. Just south of Shaftesbury Square stand three churches – Moravian, Crescent and Methodist – whose distinctive steeples frame the entrance to the university quarter. From here, leading up to the university buildings, the roads are lined with early Victorian terraces that represent the final flowering of Georgian architecture in Belfast. The Upper Crescent is a magnificent curved Neoclassical terrace, built in about 1845 but sadly neglected since; it is now used mainly for office space. The Lower Crescent, perversely, is straight. Queen’s University is the architectural centrepiece of the area, flanked by the most satisfying example of a Georgian terrace in Belfast, University Square, where the red brickwork mostly remains intact, with the exception of a few bay windows added in the Victorian era. The university building itself was constructed in 1849 as a mock-Tudor remodelling of Magdalen College, Oxford, to a design by Lanyon, and houses a visitor centre, which provides information about the university, hosts a series of art exhibitions, and runs guided tours. Across the road from here is the Students’ Union, a white 1960s design. The Italianate Union Theological College, nearby on College Park, also by Lanyon, was temporarily the site of the Northern Ireland Parliament until 1932 when Stormont was built. A little further south down University Road, the university bookshop is especially good for Irish history and politics and has particularly impressive fiction, drama and poetry sections. **The Ulster Museum** Within the Botanic Gardens is the Ulster Museum which reopened in 2009 after a long redevelopment programme. Retaining its original eighty-year old shell, the Museum now incorporates a bold modernist design and sheds light both literally and figuratively on subjects from the North’s troubled history to Ireland’s geological past. The grand open-plan ground floor, which also features a much-improved café, introduces some of the museum’s themes via its “Window on the World” displays which include everything from an impressive dinosaur skeleton to an Alexander McQueen dress. From here it’s best to head up to the third floor to explore the art exhibits. The undoubted highlights here are the modern art collection (featuring Francis Bacon’s macabre Head II, Bridget Riley’s unnerving Cataract IV and Stanley Spencer’s parochial The Betrayal), and the stunning landscapes and rural scenes by painters such as Belfast’s Sir John Lavery, plus Turner’s highly symbolic Dawn of Christianity. The second floor features the “Nature Zone”, depicting the Earth’s origins and Ireland’s development up to the Ice Age. Far more engrossing are the first floor’s history galleries which begin with Neolithic remains and Bronze Age finds (including a remarkable three-foot wide decorated shield), before taking a detailed look at the medieval period – two exhibits to look out for here are the somewhat skew-whiff stone inauguration chair of the O’Neills of Clandeboye and the silver gilt arm-reliquary supposedly created to house St Patrick’s hand. The Armada gallery includes plenty of relics from the ill-fated Girona which sank off the Antrim coast in 1588, while the Ascendancy section includes a remarkable rag-bound tally-stick, used to record the number of prayers said during the then illegal outdoor Catholic service, as well as highlighting the effects of the Great Famine. From here the exhibits quicken up a pace, especially when focusing upon the War of Independence and the North’s resistance to Dublin rule, before looking at Belfast during World War II and concluding with a disappointingly bland space devoted to The Troubles. **Cave Hill** For an unsurpassable overview of the whole city and lough, a climb up Cave Hill, to the north, is a must. Several paths lead up from Belfast Castle’s estate to the hill’s summit – a rocky outcrop known as “Napoleon’s Nose”. From here you can’t help but appreciate the accuracy of the poet Craig Raine’s aerial description of the city in his Flying to Belfast as “a radio set with its back ripped off”. Cave Hill was once awash with Iron Age forts, for there was flint (for weapon making) in the chalk under the basalt hill-coverings. In 1795, Wolfe Tone, Henry Joy McCracken and other leaders of the United Irishmen stood on the top of Cave Hill and pledged “never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our Independence”. **West Belfast** Though the nexus of the Troubles for 25 years, today West Belfast is as safe as anywhere else in the city to visit. However, there’s little of architectural note among the mainly residential streets and most of the “sights” are associated with the area’s troubled past. Much of the old terraced housing has been replaced in recent years by rows of modern estates, but it’s impossible to miss examples of the partisan mural paintings that decorate walls and gable ends in both Catholic and Protestant areas. Tourist information about the area is available from the West Belfast Tourist Information Point. **The Troubles in West Belfast** The Troubles in West Belfast have their origins in the nineteenth century, when the city’s population expanded dramatically as people flocked from the countryside to work in the booming new flax and linen industries. Many of these migrants were crammed into jerry-built housing in the grids of streets which still today define this part of the city. Conditions were deplorable and did nothing to ease tensions between Catholic and Protestant residents. There were numerous sectarian riots – the worst was in 1886, during the reading of the Home Rule Bill, when 32 people died and over 370 were injured – leading to the almost inevitable definition of two separate neighbourhoods, as Protestant and Catholic families alike began to migrate to more secure surroundings. In 1968 and 1969, this division was pushed to its limit when, across the city, sectarian mobs and gunmen evicted over eight thousand families from their homes, mainly in Catholic West Belfast. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, or RUC, called for government assistance, and British troops arrived on the streets on August 15, 1969. A month later the makeshift barrier dividing the Catholic Falls from the Protestant Shankill had become a full-scale reinforced “peace line”. British intervention may have averted a civil war, but it failed to prevent an escalation in sectarian conflict. Indeed, the army soon came to be viewed as an occupying force and a legitimate target for a reviving IRA, though local sympathies for its aims were much diminished by the 1972 Bloody Friday bombings. In return, Loyalist paramilitaries sought to avenge Republican violence, often through indiscriminate killings, such as the atrocities carried out by the Shankill Butchers in the 1970s, so called because they used butchers’ knives to first maim then murder their Catholic victims. These in turn sparked Republican “tit-for-tat” attacks against Loyalists and commenced a cycle which finally reached its nadir with the Shankill Road bombing, a botched attempt to blow up Loyalist paramilitary leaders supposedly meeting above a fish shop on the Shankill Road in 1993, which instead killed customers and the shop’s owner. Over the next 25 years, West Belfast remained the major battleground of the Troubles. The busy Westlink motorway separates West Belfast from the rest of the city, and at the height of the conflict the various overhead bridges and roundabouts were used by the police and army as virtual border crossings to control access to and from the area. **The Falls** From the city centre, Divis Street, a westward continuation of Castle Street, leads to the Falls Road, which heads on for a further two miles west past Milltown Cemetery and into Andersonstown. The first part of the Falls Road is known as the Lower Falls where most of the land to the left (south) consists of modern red-brick terraced housing estates. The right-hand side of the road is more of a hotchpotch and features some of the local landmarks: the bright blue swimming baths and the DSS (the Department of Social Security, known as “the Brew” – a corruption of “bureau”), cooped up in an awning of chicken-wire. Down Conway Street (by the DSS), stands the old Conway Mill, revitalized by a concerted community effort. Inside you can investigate the wares of the numerous small businesses and local artists who operate from here, as well as an art gallery and a small exhibition depicting the mill’s history. All the way along the Falls Road you’ll spot, blocking the ends of the streets to the right, walls of iron sheeting. These comprise the “Peace Line”, and directly behind them is the Protestant working-class district of Shankill. Further west lie the red-brick and more recent buildings of the Royal Victoria Hospital, at the junction with Grosvenor Road. During the Troubles, the Royal, as it’s known locally, received international acclaim for its ability to cope with the consequences of the violence. Just beyond it, in a disused Presbyterian church at 216 Falls Rd, is the Cultúrlann MacAdam Ó Fiaich, a cultural centre for Irish-speakers, housing an extensive bookshop (also selling traditional-music CDs), an excellent café and a thriving theatre, often the host to musical events. Although you are unlikely to hear it being spoken on the streets or in most pubs, the Irish language is flourishing in Catholic areas of Belfast and throughout the North. **Shankill** The Protestant population of West Belfast lives in the area abutting the Falls to the north, between the Shankill Road and the Crumlin Road. As with the Falls, there’s little here of special interest, apart from an array of Loyalist murals (some even including web addresses). Along the Crumlin Road, in particular, are a number of evocative sites symbolizing the worst years of the Troubles. From the Westway you’ll pass between the courthouse and the notorious Crumlin Road Gaol, the two connected by an underground tunnel; former inmates include Éamon de Valera, Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley and it closed in 1996. The gaol is currently being refurbished with a view to reopening in 2011 with visitors’ tours and occasional cultural events planned. Despite many other obvious signs of redevelopment and renovation – the most apparent being the recently constructed leisure centre – the area is in decline, its population shrinking in inverse proportion to the Catholic population on the other side of the Peace Line. **Belfast’s murals** As much a marker of an area’s allegiances as painted kerbstones or fluttering flags and bunting, the politically inspired murals of Northern Ireland are among the most startling sights not just in Belfast, but of the whole country. This ephemeral art form, which recycles the images and slogans of the Troubles, characterizes the violent struggles of the last few decades. Though many have been in place now for a decade, some of the slogans and murals mentioned here may have vanished by the time of your visit: new murals are painted over old ones or the houses they adorn are demolished. A detailed archive of Northern Ireland’s murals is maintained by the University of Ulster at wcain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick and another large collection of photographs can be found at wwww.belfast-murals.co.uk. **Loyalist murals** For most of the twentieth century, mural painting in Northern Ireland was a predominantly Loyalist activity. The first mural appeared in East Belfast in 1908 and, like many of its successors, celebrated King Billy’s victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Loyalist murals have tended to use imagery symbolic of power, such as the clenched scarlet fist, known as the Red Hand of Ulster, or flags, shields and other heraldic icons. However, the Loyalist response to the Troubles translated into what is now the most common form of painting, the militaristic mural. If King Billy appears at all, it is often with a guard of balaclava-clad, weapon-toting paramilitaries, accompanied by a threatening slogan. Inspired by the desire for “no surrender” and preservation of the status quo, Loyalist mural-painting is certainly less dynamic and diverse than its Republican counterpart. A typical example, on Hopewell Crescent in the Lower Shankill, shows two masked gunmen crouching beside a clenched red fist which is surrounded by the Union Flag and the flags of Ulster, the UFF and UDA – part of the slogan reads “Lower Shankill UFF. Simply the best.” Recently, Loyalist murals have sought to undermine Sinn Féin’s role in the peace process by attacking the IRA – a striking five-panelled example on the Shankill Road recalls a number of IRA bombings of Loyalist targets and carries the slogan, “30 Years of Indiscriminate Slaughter by So-Called Non-Sectarian Irish Freedom Fighters”. The greatest concentration of Loyalist murals is to be found on and around the Shankill Road, especially the Shankill Estate, to the north, and Dover Place, off Dover Street, to the south. Other areas are Sandy Row and Donegall Pass in South Belfast, and Newtownards Road, Martin Street and Severn Street in East Belfast. **Republican murals** Republican murals were at first limited to simple sloganeering or demarcation of territory, the best-known example being the long-standing “You are now entering Free Derry” in that city’s Bogside district. As with much else in Republican politics, however, the 1981 hunger strikes had a significant influence. Murals in support of the ten hunger strikers abounded and the (usually smiling) face of Bobby Sands – the IRA commander in the Maze prison who led the strike – remains an enduring image. Murals soon became a fundamental part of the Republican propaganda campaign and an expression of the community’s current cultural and political concerns, though militaristic images have never really dominated Republican murals as much as they have done Loyalist ones. Prominent themes have been resistance to British rule, the call for the withdrawal of troops and questioning the validity of the police. More recently, however, Republican muralists have turned increasingly to Irish legends and history as their sources of inspiration and the only militaristic murals tend to be found in flashpoints such as the Ardoyne. Equally, artists have paid tribute to other international liberation movements, as in a striking series of murals on Divis Street just before the beginning of the Falls Road. Further Republican murals can be found nearby on Beechmount Avenue, on Lenadoon Avenue in Andersonstown, and on New Lodge Road in North Belfast. **Festivals** Belfast has numerous festivals throughout the year and a full calendar can be found at [www.belfastcity.gov.uk/culture/festivals.asp](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/culture/festivals.asp). **Feb/March** Guinness Belfast Nashville Songwriters Festival wwww.belfastnashville.com.The North’s love of country music is reflected by this citywide weeklong event in late February, featuring local talent and major US names. St Patrick’s Day wwww.belfastcitygov.co.uk/events. Carnival parade on 17 March, followed by a major open-air concert in Custom House Square. **April** Titanic Made in Belfast Festival wwww.belfastcity.gov.co.uk/events. More than a week of events early in the month celebrating the city’s maritime culture. Belfast Film Festival t028/9024 6609, wwww.belfastfilmfestival.org. The second half of April sees a host of left-field movies and related events with screenings in cinemas, pubs, clubs and other venues. **May/June** Festival of Fools www.foolsfestival.com. Five-day international street theatre festival, held over the first weekend in May, with events around the city centre. Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival wwww.cqaf.com. Lively arts festival, featuring Irish and international acts, spread over ten days in early May. Belfast City Carnival [www.belfastcarnival.com](http://www.belfastcarnival.com). Annual themed festival in mid-June centred around a parade and live music in Donegall Square. **July–Aug** Orange Order Parades Orange Order Lodges throughout Belfast commemorate the Battle of the Boyne with parades on 12 July. Féile An Phobail wwww.feilebelfast.com. Week-long music and dance festival at the beginning of August based in West Belfast. Belfast City Blues Festival wwww.belfastcityblues.com. Three days of 12-bar honky-tonk and foot-stomping riffs at the end of August. **Sept–Oct** Open House Festival wwww.openhousefestival.com. Rock, folk and traditional music festival held at various venues around the Cathedral Quarter early in September. Belfast Festival at Queen’s wwww.belfastfestival.com. Fortnight-long event held in late October which claims to be Britain’s second-biggest arts festival after Edinburgh. **Belfast and the Titanic** Much of Belfast’s waterside heritage is associated with English engineer Edward James Harland (1831–1895) who together with his German-born assistant Gustav Wilhelm Wolff (1834–1913) founded the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding company here in 1861. Starting from a small shipyard on Queen’s Island, the company grew rapidly and over the following decades had gained a reputation for innovations such as iron (rather than wooden) decks and flatter, squarer hulls designed to maximise capacity. The firm continued to flourish after Harland‘s death and Wolff’s retirement, most notably when it constructed three steamships for the White Star Line – the Olympic, the Britannic and, most famously, the Titanic. Completed in 1912, the Titanic, then the world‘s largest passenger-carrying steamship, sank on April 14 of the same year, just four days into her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, having collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic. More than 1500 of the 2200-plus passengers and crew drowned, a tragedy that continues to hold a macabre fascination today.