



By **Gareth Huw Davies**

**T**ourist boards want us to believe the places they promote are blessed with unending sunshine. When did you last see an umbrella in a travel brochure?

I'm sure Ireland wouldn't stoop to such meteorological subterfuge.

What's the point pretending they bask under skies of cerulean perfection, when we know the rain they had this morning is lashing down on everyone else across the Irish Sea in the afternoon. We share their pain.

With that in mind, how come all my holiday photos are filled with sunshine? Had our motorhome holiday taken us to the Caribbean in error?

The truth lies in technology. No, I did not Photoshop the images: we simply let the hour-by-hour weather forecasts on our mobiles be our constant companion. We chose a destination, and if there was a less than 25 per cent of rain in any given hour, we went there.

They promised unbroken sunshine on the beach at Murlough, from 4pm onwards, although it seemed not many others were using that app.

We shared the glorious sweep of sand with fewer than 20 people, just as a family member was texting us news of the multitude on her North Devon beach. And it was pouring.

We were on the benign, east coast of Northern Ireland, in the Murlough National Nature Reserve. Owned by the National Trust, it has some of the best sand dunes in Ireland. It held a big surprise.

A mile along the beach we thought we heard a children's playground. Or was it the Ulster rugby team in vigorous training? The truth was stranger. As we came closer the plump, writhing figures came into focus. It was a phalanx of seals drawn up on the sand, bleating and scolding and hauling themselves laboriously down to the water.

We took the boardwalk back to the car park through a natural carpet threaded with the colour of vetches, trefoils, spurge, hawkweeds, cat-ears, gentians and ling heather. But this wasn't the sort of park you leave

in a hurry. An old cottage had been given the ideal career change, as the most perfect little red-shuttered and white-walled tea room. But they only took that old-fashioned commodity, cash, and we didn't have any. So we had to make do with a fully equipped cafe of our own – our motorhome. Tea was served in less than five minutes.

We stayed on campsites where the showers were hot, the toilets clean and the nights quiet. And we spent our days hunting down National Trust tearooms.

Expensive rooms in grand hotels are a fine thing, but even former palaces have a back side with views of the early morning garbage truck. It's different with a motorhome: it's your own observation post on wheels, easily positioned for the best view of any beauty spot.

So it might be breakfast in the Tolymoor Estate, near Newcastle, Co Down, among some of the finest decorative trees on the island, as the sun lit up the shimmering green foothills of the Mourne. Then,

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maybe, lunch under the formidable Binevenagh Mountain. And finally supper on the quiet banks of Lough Erne at Castle Archdale.

Like many people, I'm sure, I had long rejected the idea of holidays in Northern Ireland, even after the peace settlement. But one good thing to come out of Northern Ireland's troubled past is the high number of fine old estates, many of them created by the original 'planters', rich settlers from England and Scotland. Today they are a shining asset of the province, and the National Trust owns a good number of them.

It also looks after a rich haul of landscape and other natural features. Strangford Lough, internationally renowned for its bird life, is one. Another is that geological sensation the Giant's Causeway.

But we had been there before, so on our first morning, after picking up the motorhome in a welcoming deluge, we had somewhere else in mind. The weather app predicted bright skies on the north coast late that afternoon, and by the time we reached Benone Strand, the tempest had given way to white fluffy clouds drifting across an inviting blue sky.

Next day our eleveses stop was on the newly landscaped waterfront on the River Foyle in Derry – one of the finest walled city in Europe. We walked past elegant Georgian terraces, a prime example of a planned townscape, designed and laid out by London craftsmen.

We had the BBC to thank for our last call, in County Fermanagh. The National Trust's Crom estate, encircled by a scatter of islands and ancient trees on the shores of Upper Lough Erne, was the main location for Blandings, an adaptation of the PG Wodehouse stories. They also filmed at another of the trust's properties, nearby Florence Court, a grand 18th-Century pile.

Unfortunately, there has to be a winner out of these two. I would give the prize to Crom. In its tea-room I found the biggest and most scrumptious range of cakes in the whole of Northern Ireland.

**GETTING THERE**

**Stena** ([stenaline.co.uk/ferries-to-ireland](http://stenaline.co.uk/ferries-to-ireland), 08447 707070) offers one-way fares from Liverpool to Belfast from £89 for car plus driver and £20 for foot passengers. To hire a motorhome, visit [bunkcampers.com](http://bunkcampers.com). Rates from £35 per day. For more information, see [discovernorthernireland.com](http://discovernorthernireland.com). For advice on motorhome, holidays visit [freedomtogo.co.uk](http://freedomtogo.co.uk).

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