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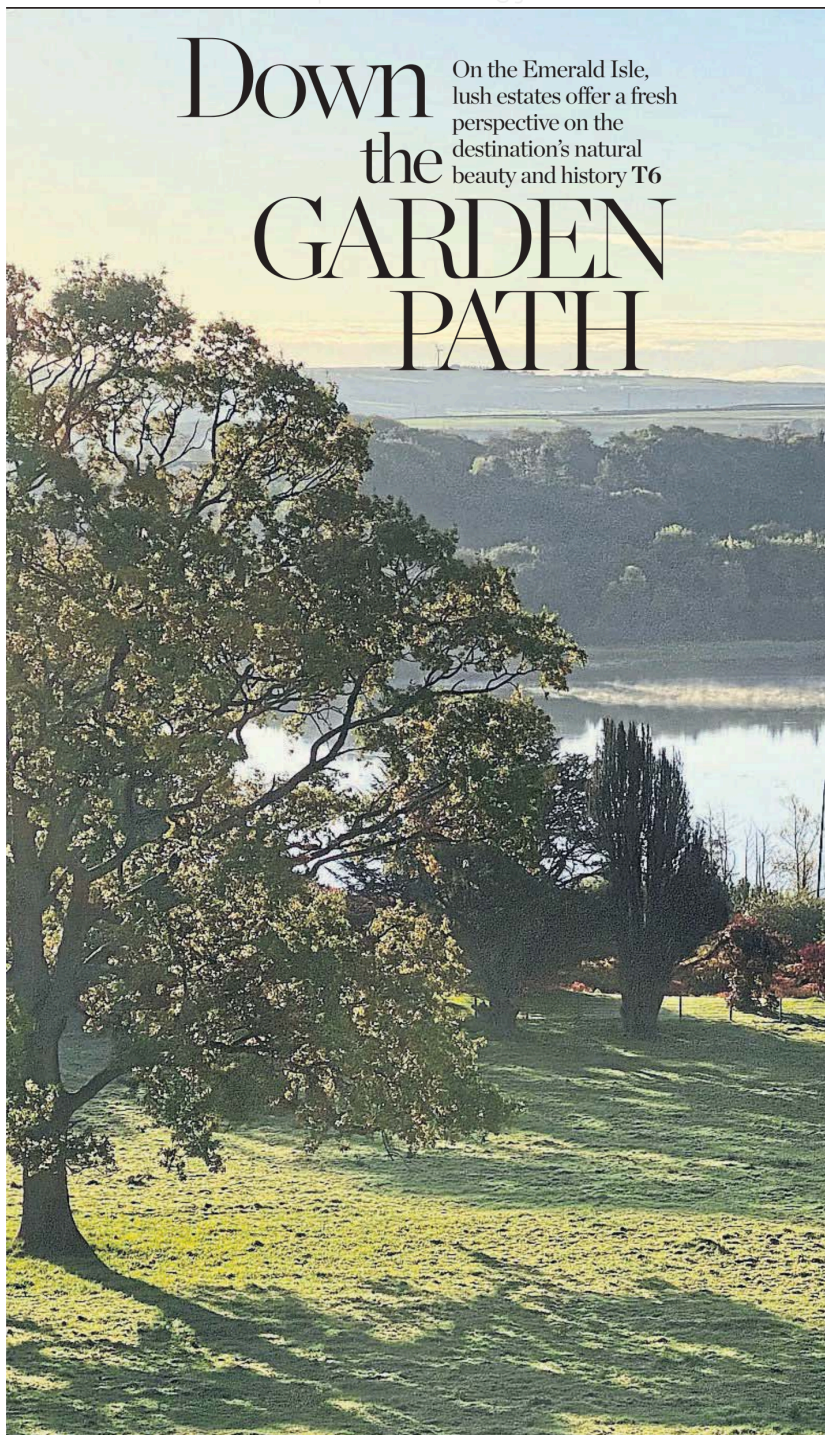
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# TRAVEL

## Down the GARDEN PATH

On the Emerald Isle, lush estates offer a fresh perspective on the destination's natural beauty and history **T6**



## COVER STORY



ART WARD/TOURISM IRELAND

The neoclassical stone manor house at Mount Stewart is surrounded by 950 acres of woodlands, lawns and orchards.

Northern Ireland's historic castles and estates, lush with foliage and flora, have become popular tourism attractions

REBECCA L. RHOADES  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

As I make my way past the white Georgian mansion on the northern banks of the River Foyle, rows of towering oaks give way to rounder, cascading evergreens. Vivid bursts of pinks, reds and purples peek through the lush foliage, hinting at the botanical beauty beyond.

Located about five kilometres from the city of Derry, Brook Hall Estate & Gardens is one of Northern Ireland's top arboreta. Established in the early 1600s, it was a stronghold for King James II during the Siege of Derry in 1689. And its walled garden, one of the largest on the Emerald Isle, played a key role in feeding the people of Derry during the lengthy military operation, as well as during the Great Famine in the mid-1800s.

Now, thanks to a growing interest in garden tourism, Brook Hall fulfils another role: as a popular visitor attraction.

Each year, more than five million people come to Northern Ireland. They walk the 17th-century Derry Walls around the historic centre; hike the famous Giant's Causeway coastal path, a UNESCO World Heritage site with unique basalt formations; explore the tragic story of the Titanic, the doomed luxury liner built in Belfast; and swing for par at one of more than 90 world-

#### MORE OF NORTHERN IRELAND'S GARDEN VARIETY

**Drenagh Estate and Gardens** in Limavady spans more than 1,000 acres and includes a walled kitchen garden, rhododendron garden, conifer arboretum, terraced Italian garden and ancient woodlands. It has been owned by the McCausland family since 1640.

**Glenarm Castle** in County Antrim is a 17th-century Jacobean-style mansion. Its 2.5-acre walled garden, built in the 1820s, was restored in the early 2000s. Garden "rooms" display ornamental fruit trees; a rainbow of tulips; and collections of hostas, peonies and roses. In 2023, Glenarm won the prestigious U.K. Historic Houses Garden of the Year Award.

**Rowallane Garden**, just outside of Saintfield, is the headquarters of the National Trust in Northern Ireland. The 50-acre garden showcases towering conifers; rare handkerchief trees; and extensive collections of azaleas, rhododendrons and penstemons.

class golf courses.

But today's travellers are also seeking new ways to experience the destination, and they're finding a connection to its heritage through nature and the local landscapes.

SEE NEXT PAGE



DONAL MALONEY/TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

In 2023, Glenarm Castle won the prestigious U.K. Historic Houses Garden of the Year Award.

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# 'We want people to come and explore'

## FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

For the U.K. as a whole, it's estimated that garden tourism generates almost three billion pounds in GDP.

"Northern Ireland sees more economy from garden tours than golf," says horticulturalist Trevor Edwards, director of the Northern Ireland Heritage Gardens Trust. He's also my guide as we explore the country's green spaces.

At Brook Hall, David Gilliland conducts personalized tours. His family acquired the estate in 1856, and over the years, they filled the 140-acre grounds with more than 1,200 rare and unusual trees and plants. More than 600 species are unique to the property. "The majority of specimens here aren't native. I call it a zoo for plants," says Gilliland.

The diverse plantscape is courtesy of Gilliland's great-grandfather Frank, a passionate collector of conifers, and his grandfather George, a renowned dendrologist with a love of flowering shrubs and trees from Asia and South America.

Frank's pinetum showcases more than 100 species of conifers, including the island's first dawn redwood, endangered dove trees, and a giant redwood planted in honour of Frank's birth in 1884. George, a world authority on rhododendrons, added more than 80 species of the woody plants, noted for their striking colourful tubular blossoms, as well as dozens of species of magnolias and camellias.

"There's a big push for native planting, which has its place, but when you're trying to showcase the beauty of plants around the world, that's when arborescences and gardens such as ours become important," Gilliland says.

The next morning, I head to Newtownards, about 90 minutes east of Derry, to tour Mount Stewart. The ivy-clad, neoclassical stone manor house, seat of the Marquesses of Londonderry for more than 200 years and now owned by the National Trust, is surrounded by 950 acres of woodlands, lawns and orchards. Much of its formal gardens was developed by Edith, Lady Londonderry, wife of the 7th Marquess, in the mid-20th century.

"She created what is arguably one of the best gardens you'll ever visit," says head gardener Mike Buffin. In spring, the landscape is blanketed with more than 15,000 tulips. The rhododendrons explode in May and June, in a kaleidoscope of yellows, reds, oranges and purples. Plant hunters introduced the ornamental species to the estate in the Victorian era.

"Because of Northern Ireland's high rainfall and mild, temperate climate, we can grow a range of plants you can't grow in gardens in the rest of the U.K.," Buffin points out.

Sweet-smelling bay trees, roses and hydrangeas infuse the landscape with their fragrance. Rare Chilean hazelnut trees, tropical tree ferns and New Zealand broadleaved flax stand side by side with 800 giant Himalayan lilies, the largest display in the world. Mythological creatures and endearing animals in concrete, stone and topiary add whimsy to the stately surroundings.

One of Northern Ireland's most acclaimed heritage sites is Hillsborough Castle and Gardens, in the picturesque village of the same name. Located about 20 minutes southwest of Belfast, the 18th-century Georgian mansion is an official residence of the British Royal Family.

A reminder of the estate's historic status can be seen at the garden's west entrance, where stone gates are topped with gilded pineapple finials. Hillsborough boasts one of the U.K.'s earliest pineries, dating to

the 1770s. During the 18th century, fashionable families would display the tropical fruit as centrepieces during dinner parties. A single pineapple could cost the modern equivalent of 5,000 pounds.

"Growing your own pineapples was a sign of extreme wealth," says garden manager Claire Woods. It was also a testament to a gardener's skills. Edwards notes that families would compete to see who could cultivate the best and biggest pineapples. The 3.83-acre walled kitchen garden, built in the 1750s and



DONAL MALONEY/TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND

Hillsborough Castle and Gardens is an official residence of the British Royal Family.

renovated in the mid-2010s, first opened to the public in 2018. Manicured hedges, geometrically aligned pathways and pristine plant beds sprout with Irish-bred fruits, vegetables and flowers. Golden daffodils, purple-blue monkshood

and lavender crocus bloom beneath ornamental quince trees.

A soft mist permeates the air as we wander the castle's 100-acre grounds. Orchards brim with Irish heritage apples. Purple bluebells, fragrant yellow azaleas and showy rhodod-

dendrons add bold splashes of colour. An allée of Irish yews cuts a forest-green pathway to the castle. "This time of year, we get the bright colours. In summer, we get much softer flowers and foliage. That gives way to lots of lovely autumn hues. And in the winter, you see the bones of the garden, the real structure," Woods explains.

"A lot of these gardens were about showing off your collection of plants. The same holds true today," Woods continues. "We want people to come and explore. And we hope they will go away inspired to grow plants as we do, to use ideas they find here, or to simply want to visit other gardens or castles."

REECEAL RHOADES TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

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