

King of the road

From the real Kingsroad to the new studio tour, **Sasha Wood** gets behind the wheel in Northern Ireland to visit the top *Game of Thrones* locations

A dusting of snow covered the green hilltops and a rainbow arced across the sky as we hit the craggy Causeway Coast. The location scouts for *Game of Thrones* (GoT) started scouring the land for scenic backdrops before the show first aired more than a decade ago, and now we were following in their wake – with the opening of the GoT studio tour last month providing the perfect excuse.

Based on *A Song of Ice and Fire* books, GoT is heavy with elemental imagery, making the raw landscape of Northern Ireland a natural fit. And today, it looks the picture of the frosty North – domain of fan favourites, the Stark family. Exposed to the full force of the northern Atlantic, the dramatic ancient Antrim coast has a starring role in the show, doubling as Storm's End, the Iron Isles and Dragonstone.

From my base at Ballygally Castle, it was just 20 minutes along the coastal road to the filming location at Camlough harbour: there's an information board marking the location, as there are at all the GoT spots in Northern Ireland. The weathered stone steps are the exact spot where Arya emerges from the water after escaping from an assassin, though it would take a brave soul to re-enact that scene today.

Next stop was the rocky bay of Cushendun and the storybook village of Cushendall. We rambled across the little stone bridge past a billy goat grazing on the grassy

verge. Picking our way over mounds of seaweed buzzing with flies, we found the chasm in dark cliffs where the red witch creates a shadow baby in GoT. Inside the damp cave, the sight of a makeshift throne made from an old armchair and fake metal swords lightened the mood. Back at the village, we stopped in at the cute Corner House for a homemade lunch and noticed a signed photo on the wall of GoT stars Allie Allen and Gemma Whelan posing with the owner.

IRON ISLES

From here, the picturesque Nine Glens of Antrim intersect the shore, while towering cliffs push the route inland along rollercoaster lanes with steep right turnoffs to several bleak but beautiful GoT sites. At windswept Ballintoy Bay, it's easy to see why this timeless stone enclave, studded with little fishermen's cottages, appealed to location scouts. Along with the old rope bridge at Carrick-a-Rede, it doubled as the Iron Isles in GoT. Though the bridge was closed when we visited, the awe-inspiring location between vast cliffs on the far northeastern tip of Ireland encapsulates the raw natural beauty of this place.

But all of it is upstaged by the Giant's Causeway. Though it's too recognisable to have been part of the mythical Westeros, it made an epic endpoint to the day, proving Earth's landscapes are just as stunning as anything special effects could dream up. ➤

The Dark Hedges in County Antrim, setting for the Kingsroad in *Game of Thrones*

PICTURE: Shutterstock / shihw123

DESTINATIONS

UK & IRELAND | NORTHERN IRELAND



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Carnlough Harbour; Cushenden; The Corner House, Cushenden; Game of Thrones Studio Tour

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Puripat Lertpunyaroj; Colin Williams Photography/Colin Baillie



Courtesy of mother nature, the wind-whipped waves and sea foam frothing over hundreds of neatly stacked dark geometric columns provided as many thrills as the Game of Thrones Studio Tour at Linen Mill Studios.

GREEN SCENE

The new tour was the ideal centrepiece to the trip. The experience is constructed around the original Winterfell set, allowing visitors to step inside the medieval Great Hall and Crypts where so many major scenes play out. Exploring the Hall of Faces, Dragonstone and the ruins of the Throne Room, not to mention getting up-close to costumes and props such as Jon Snow's Longclaw and Arya's Needle, is an absolute treat.

It also offers immersive entertainment for non-fans including interactive exhibits such as battle games, and virtual reality screens that fit visitors with prosthetics and armour, then let you practise your combat skills. Green screens scattered throughout the experience provide the chance for memorable photos amid mythical landscapes.

Mixing myth and reality amplified the magic of the places we visited. Heading north again, we navigated our way towards the Dark Hedges, an avenue of giant entwined beech trees that doubled as the Kingsroad for Arya's escape north. The bewitching tunnel of clasped trees has become one of the most photographed spots in Northern Ireland.

A short drive away, we ended the day at atmospheric old coaching inn Bushmills, which dates back to the 1600s. Dinner was served in the original part of



BALLYGALLY CASTLE

With a haunted 16th-century tower perched on the edge of a bay, the hotel is an apt base for a *GoT* adventure. It has embraced its location between several *GoT* landscapes with a themed afternoon tea, dinner and a beautifully carved dining room door made from fallen beech trees from the Dark Hedges. The Westeros-themed tea is served in front of a large window on the ocean, and for *GoT* fans it feels a bit like we could be taking tea at Highgarden with Lady Olenna. Hodor's pulled beef brioche rolls and Sansa Stark's lemon cakes are among the treats inspired by various characters. A climb up the small tower to the hotel's Ghost Room is an absolute must, at least to hear the story of the trapped spirit and how the castle was first built. The tower also contains two guest rooms with original period features – ideal for people who want to feel like they're staying in Westeros. Rooms cost from £60, with breakfast included.

hastingshotels.com/ballygally-castle

the building and drinks in the 18th-century gaslit bar. Our long journey had given us an appetite, and the fillet steak was cooked to perfection.

Touring *GoT* locations allowed us to follow an itinerary that showed off Northern Ireland's scenery in all its glory, making the road trip perfect for fans and non-fans alike. Indeed, Game of Thrones Studio Tour marketing manager Gail Warke said they wanted to make the experience family-friendly with an immersive theme park feel that's fun for everyone. And although my travelling companion hadn't seen the show, we both found the trip exhilarating. **TW**

BOOK IT

The **Game of Thrones Studio & Locations Tour** starts from £499 including flights, transfers, three nights' half-board accommodation, Game of Thrones Studio Tour, guided filming locations tour by coach and an excursion to the Giant's Causeway. justgoholidays.com/agents