

Transcript of Podcast 053: Off-Season Almost-Post-Pandemic Last-Minute Travel

{Intro -

KIRA: Not that I'm saying you should entirely trust me either because it's not like I have that much of an idea what I'm doing. I just have some idea. I'm following base guidelines and intuition. Which ... may not be ... may not be the best thing. But it might. Who knows? Nobody knows. I don't know.

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello!

This isn't the podcast I intended to make this week. I mean, obviously, I didn't know what podcast I *would* make this week, but I'm fairly sure this wasn't it. It's going to be a shorter episode than usual, and there are reasons for that which will become evident but for once I wanted to get *an* episode out rather than letting a week of fallow come around again. If I want this podcast to be successful, I need to be as regular as someone who's on a diet of all-bran cereal.

I've had some lovely feedback about my podcast recently. One of the people I know on Discord asked me if I was 'the same barefoot backpacker who has a podcast' and they said they'd been listening to it recently and it's been really helpful to them because they're coming at things from a similar background to me so they can relate to what I say. Another person said to me on Twitter that they really liked my podcast because they liked my voice and found it soothing and relaxing. I am 100% convinced there's a market for me to narrate chill tapes for restful sleep.

Tho possibly not with my current voice. I have a cold. Or rather, I had a cold earlier this week - a quick passing one that caused a blocked nose and a few sneezes, not a covidy one. I'm pretty sure I can identify when and where I caught it too - I was at a very crowded pub for a couple of hours on Saturday evening, with little ventilation and fewer masks. It's not just Covid that mask-wearing prevents, and is why in some cultures, notably East Asia, the wearing of masks has been commonplace for years. I always thought, when I visited, it was a pollution-preventing thing but no, its real purpose has become very clear over the last couple of years. As an aside, sneezing when you're wearing a mask is a particularly ikky feeling and situation.

I would talk about what I've been doing since my last pod, in my usual housekeeping type introduction, but that's kind of the subject of this episode, so, uhm, yeh. But as an introduction to that, let's talk about the weather. As I type this episode out, it's dry here in Glasgow, and today (Thursday 17 February) has been really bright and sunny. Yesterday, well, yesterday was not. Tomorrow, equally, will not be. We're in the lull between two named storms, and though yesterday's Storm Dudley is likely to have been stronger and more violent than tomorrow's Storm Eunice (up here at least; Eunice seems to be predicted to be far far stronger 'Down South' - the MetOffice forecast for Harrow has gusts predicted of 67mph at lunchtime - I have genuinely never seen a forecast gust that high, and remember that recorded gusts are often far in excess of the forecasted average), tomorrow up here is expected to be gusts in the 30mph range, sub-zero temperatures, and there's a yellow warning for snow. Fortunately I have no need to leave my flat.

Storm Dudley. I know, I know, Dudley is a name, but from my background, Dudley is a place, and as someone on Twitter pointed out, it suggests the wind would rattle through the town in a Black Country accent.

We never have enough winds in our storm season to get to a Storm Zoe. Rarely even to a Storm Malcom.

Anyway. Both of those facts mean I'm unlikely to do Parkrun on Saturday, which I did last Saturday, even though I was on holiday. And maybe, just maybe, I chose to stay in an AirBnB over the weekend that was within staggering distance of a Parkrun venue. But let's continue talking about the weather and take you back a week, to the start of my recent adventure.

It'd been a while since I'd gone away properly. Apart from my couple of days in London and Merseyside at the end of October, the last holiday I'd taken was back in May, to Orkney, the subject of several blog posts and my podcast episode 44. I felt it was about time I went away somewhere. I had a think about places I could go that were a) interesting, b) didn't need to involve much outside exploration because, you know, it's early February, and c) didn't involve excessive amounts of 'admin'. Even though the general consensus in much of the UK is 'Covid is last year's news', other countries may not think the same and I didn't fancy travelling somewhere with onerous and expensive additional factors to take into account. The place that marked itself out as the most obvious then was Northern Ireland, given it's literally 'just over there', and apart from a day and a half in Belfast in about 2001, when it rained the whole time, I'd never been there.

When I was plotting out my adventure, insofar as I do do any planning, my thought process was 'well I could go for a long weekend, but while I'm there it makes sense to go to this place as it's not far away, and I guess if I'm going there I might as well go to there as well...', and before you know it my four days in the Belfast area had become pretty much nine days - a week and two weekends either side.

I don't know what you know about Northern Ireland. The whole Brexit debacle has revealed not many people in the rest of the UK know an awful lot about Northern Ireland, that's for sure. Or care, in all honesty. My knowledge of the place is clouded by the fact I grew up in the 1980s and it was always on TV. For largely bad reasons; I don't think I ever heard a 'happy' story come out the place. Given my penchant for somewhat darker history, and given that it was a place that loomed large in my childhood, it seemed the perfect destination for a bit of exploration.

Now (and this is partly a memo for myself), this podcast episode isn't about Northern Ireland. As a location, that deserves its own entire dedicated episode, and that might not be for some time. Rather, it's about how it felt to travel, to go backpacking again in an urban environment for the first time since pre-pandemic days. But it's going to be hard to talk about how I felt about travelling without talking about the where and the why I travelled there.

Anyway. There's coaches from Glasgow that go straight through to Belfast (or not, but the ticket is a through-ticket, at least), and so I bought a ticket for the Friday afternoon. I bought it on the Wednesday, proving that my last-minute travel decisions were unaffected by any pandemic. That said, obviously my travels were still domestic, and overland - if I were flying to somewhere like Portugal for instance, I doubt I'd have been able to be quite as randomly sudden. Surprisingly, the coach was quite full, maybe two-thirds. As an aside, I wasn't sure when the schools half-term holiday was (as it's at different times across the UK) but I was sure I'd plotted this in a week before many of them. The theory being fewer people would be doing the same things as me.

Two people who were doing the same things as me, at least for a couple of days, were my Twitter friend Clazz (An Orcadian Abroad, you'll've heard her on this pod a couple of times) and her hubby Ash. Coincidentally they'd decided to pop over to Belfast for a night on the Saturday night I was there, so we planned to meet up and, well, do stuff as a threesome. Not that sort of stuff, Full Swap Radio, don't get excited.

But, first. My first three nights in Northern Ireland were in a backpacker hostel in Belfast. It was cool that they were open; chatting to one of the staff on duty revealed things were slowly returning to the pre-pandemic ways but there was still a long way to go - theirs was one of only two or three hostels open, whereas back in 2019 there were at least 8 in that part of Belfast alone. Even when I booked it, it was clear there were restrictions; the hostel itself was only open at weekends, and there were no dorms available, only private rooms - or at least you could only book rooms privately. I had a two-bed bunk to myself, for instance, but I guess if you were a group of 3 or something, you'd've had private use of a 4- or 6-bed dorm. [As an aside, when I met Clazz in Edinburgh in September, I'd stayed one night in a hostel in a 4-bed dorm that had three other random people in, so either NI is stricter, that hostel is stricter, or regulations had become stricter since then]. In addition, while you could

bring food in to eat in a communal dining room, the kitchen itself was closed for use because of Covid precautions (again, unlike that hostel in Edinburgh).

Incidentally, I'm aware this podcast episode is, unusually for me, time-specific. People listening to this episode in 2026 won't be able to relate to this episode at all, but the point of this ep isn't to guide people as to what to expect from travel - I'm not a news podcast after all -, rather it's to provide almost a historical document that shows what things were like 'at the time'. I sincerely hope my experiences here were more restrictive than what you, my dear listeners, will experience on your next holiday or backpacking trip. [That implies a backpacking trip isn't a holiday. I'd love to deny that, but ... if you know, you know.]

Clazz and Ash snaffled a far far better room in a nearby hotel for, I mean a far higher price but still much cheaper than it probably should have been. She sent me pics of that room. I've not been in a hotel room that lush. Maybe that was the pandemic. Maybe that's what you get when you choose to go to Belfast in early February. I guess this this the absolute definition of off-season travel.

If off-season travel can be summed up in one day, that would be the Saturday they arrived. I met them at the airport and they hired a car to do a bit of a tour up to the North Coast for the afternoon. The Causeway Coast Road is one of those really popular and very scenic drives that the UK does reasonably well - like the NC500 in Scotland. I'd imagine at certain times of the year, it looks really spectacular. Early February, however, is not that time. Granted, off-season travel mixed with fewer people travelling because of Covid meant that we often had the road to ourselves. Which would have been nice had we been able to see it through the rain on the windscreen.

We even stopped off at the Giants Causeway, which still had quite a few people despite the time of year, weather, and pandemic situation. Because well-known tourist spots are eternally popular. And it's not just a Game Of Thrones thing; like Dubrovnik in Croatia, even when I was a child doing map-themed jigsaw puzzles of parts of the world, both appeared as notable spots then. On our visit, however, the Giants Causeway was just about visible through the 40-50mph wind gusts that barely allowed us to stand up, and the hailstorms. And honestly, it was barely worth the walk & visit. It's not as underwhelming as Times Square, but it's a lot smaller than I expected. And you can see the same kind of rock formation on the coasts of some Scottish Islands. But hey, we went.

And we managed to grab lunch at a pub in Ballintoy that's very much themed with Game Of Thrones memorabilia (including one of the doors, and an Iron Throne); the sort of place that in the height of season and outwith a pandemic would have a waiting list for lunch stretching into months; we just breezed in and got a table. Food was much better than you'd expect from an apparent tourist trap too.

On the Sunday, before we met up again in a cool pub somewhere in the hipper part of the city, Clazz and Ash visited the Titanic Museum, which they'd had to book entry for in advance. This is something I too had to do later on in my adventures for other museums, although possibly to different effect and with different notice period than they did. Because the Titanic Museum is one of the most popular and most famous museums in the whole of Northern Ireland. So obviously I didn't visit it. Look I know it's Dark History, but I have my 'beyond the brochure' brand image to think of! [actually, in truth, it's because I know I'll come back to Belfast and I'd rather go when I'm less intensely busy. Plus it's in the same side of the city as two other museums I want to see so it makes sense to come back and base myself that side so it's easier to see them all on one trip].

But what this leads me into is one of the less usual aspects of my travels that the Covid pandemic, and it is specifically the Covid pandemic, has forced me to compromise on. There were two museums I did visit that specifically requested that you pre-book online for to visit. The way this worked is that you went to their website and chose a timeslot, usually a half-hour timeslot, that you committed to arriving during, and you paid in advance. The reason for this was so that, for social distancing reasons, they could control the number of people in any one place at any one time, meaning they could always say they were doing their best to prevent the transmission of any viruses between disparate groups of people.

And this would be fine in high season when these museums would be popular places; indeed it makes sense as it prevents queuing and makes for a more efficient arrival. However, in early February it felt a little like overkill. In both cases I booked my tickets the day before, having had to plan a day or two in advance to make sure I was going to be in the area at the right time on the right day, and yet ... for the Ulster American Folk

Park in Omagh I saw three other parties in my entire three hours there, and as for Navan Fort ... there's one tour a day, at 1.30pm (or 1.50pm, the instructions are slightly vague), and how many people were on my tour? Yep. One. Me. That it was only operating at 1.30pm was irking me. See, I could either book it for the Wednesday - the day I'd arrive, but then I'd have to carry my backpack with me - or the Thursday which would be awkward as I'd planned a Twitter Space event for the Thursday lunchtime, at 12.30 but they usually last just under an hour. I could have visited at any time without the tour, but I figured the tour would help make it all make a bit more sense, so I actively wanted to go on it so I knew what I was looking at.

There's a connection here with travel too, though that's not one that's season or pandemic related (as far as I'm aware); there's only one direct bus a day from Derry to Armagh, and it leaves Derry at 9.50am. I still had things I wanted to see in the Derry area and didn't want to be rushed getting up in the morning. But all the other connections would mean I wouldn't get to Armagh until not long before everything I wanted to see in the city closed for the day, so would that mean having to see them all on Thursday morning, go to wherever I was staying, rush through the Twitter Space, and then head out to Navan Fort.

In the event though, that's what I chose to do, though to help matters I made sure I'd overnighed in a place very close to Navan Fort in order to make it on time at 1.30pm - but I'll talk a bit more about that side of things later. Admittedly this was one of those moments where I chose to make a last-minute planning decision that I may not have been able to do in higher seasons or normal touristic times, but it was triggered by having a limited selection of tour to book in the first place.

That all makes it sound pretty negative. In fact the opposite is true. My angst is 100% about my having to change the nature of my travel style and plan ahead, making sure I'm in a certain place at a certain time, rather than any objection to why the museums are doing what they're doing. It's something that's entirely on my head, and indeed the idea of pre-booking makes perfect sense, logically and logistically, it's just something that because I'm so not used to doing, it's an alien way of travel for me.

I will talk about Navan Fort in a future podcast episode I have planned about "Myths & Legends"; suffice to say it's an iron-age era hill fort just outside Armagh that was the capital of the ancient Irish Kingdom of Ulster, and as such is central to the Ulster Cycle of Irish Mythology. Arguably the most famous and notable of the Irish mythologies, it involves cows. [take good care of your cows] They didn't.

The Ulster American Folk Park btw was really interesting. It's one of those 'living museum' type places, where you walk around a place and people in period costume in period buildings talk to you, often in period ways. It's as close to being in a D&D environment surrounded by NPCs as you can get, really. But this particular museum is specifically interesting as it looks at the journey made by many Irish people from their homeland over to the New World (mostly, what is now the USA), with both replica and genuine buildings from the period from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, as well as representations of shops on either side and the boat that took them from one to the other. Technically it plots the journey of the Mellon family, who became Big Shots in the USA in the early 20th Century, but of course it can't help but mention the Irish Famine, which, uhm, yeh ... better, more knowledgeable, and more affected people than me talk about that far better than I could ever hope to. But if you bear in mind that, at the time, Ireland and England were the same country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1801 to 1922), and that's a result of our domestic policy, imagine what the British Empire was like.

The smaller museums I visited, the hyperlocal ones, like the Free Derry Museum in Derry, the Armagh County Museum in Armagh, and the Irish Republican Museum in, er, Belfast, didn't require pre-booking, but they still maintained Covid precautions, like having a sign-in procedure with your name and contact details, and social distancing procedures. Or at least they would have done the latter had there been anyone to socially distance from. And again, I don't know if this was just because I was visiting out-of-season, or if it was because Covid was making people feel like they oughtn't travel, but almost all of those smaller museums weren't that busy or full. I didn't have any waiting time for any of them, I was 'straight in and go'. One museum, the railway museum at Whitehead, a short train ride north of Belfast, I again had a solo personalised guided tour from the only volunteer on duty, and that I had to wait for it was less to do with Covid protocol or crowds, and more to do with the fact I'd arrived while he was on lunchbreak. I was the first tourist to visit the place for a couple of days and he was quite glad of the break from cleaning up one of the engines, to be honest.

The museums dedicated to The Troubles I'll talk about another time, but the railway museum was interesting actually, and it helped that the chap who took me round was very passionate about the railways and the engines in particular. One of the big museums in Belfast that I didn't end up going to is the Transport Museum, and he had great words to say about that place as well, but this museum in Whitehead is specifically dedicated to railways. Apart from going into a bit of the history about railways in Northern Ireland, there's a functional signal box and any number railway engines and carriages, from late 19th-century steam engines to 1970s inter-city carriages, via things like train carriages built to house early 1900s business meetings and a tramcar that ended up in a nunnery as a kind of gazebo. One of their primary roles is in restoration, taking rusted hulks and making them presentable, even sometimes useable - in normal times they run special steam express trains between Belfast and Dublin. Being the only tourist there that day - the cafe in the old railway station was popular but it apparently often is and you can visit the cafe without going to the museum - meant I kind of got taken on a, not quite a bespoke tour, but certainly an off-script one. That's another thing I found about travelling at this time; apart from again being the only person there (as at Navan, and also on a walking tour of Bogside I did in Derry), this meant that the tours and museum visits I had tended to be more 'personal', less formalised and more 'chatty'. Time pressures became less of an issue and we were able to discover things in more detail.

The only museum that felt in any way popular and busy was the Crumlin Road Gaol museum. This is a museum set in the old jail, built in the 1840s and over time housed people as diverse as murderers, suffragettes, and agitators on both sides of The Troubles. I wanted to buy tickets in advance but my bank appears to have come to the conclusion their website was a scam and refused to allow it, but turning up on-spec did work and I had no, er, troubles getting in. It was quite a squeeze in much of it, but I guess that's what happens when you go on a Saturday afternoon. The website again had 'entry times', 10 minute blocks, and it was possible for those blocks to be filled [on the Saturday, I'd've been unable to pre-book tickets for mid-morning or last thing in the afternoon], but while I assume they were monitoring entries and would have prevented access if it were too full, in the first part of the museum it certainly didn't feel like that.

In truth though, museums were the only thing I had to really plan in advance, although obviously there was a knock-on effect with travel and accommodation, in the sense that knowing I had to be in a certain place at a certain time meant I had to vaguely plan my route to ensure that would happen. The travel itself wasn't so much of an issue; I had my eye on the Northern Ireland travel website (translink) and plotted a few routes, but one of the really lovely things I realised about Northern Ireland is their local bus stations, buses, not coaches, have ticket offices,. So I could buy tickets from, say, Derry to Armagh in person, and chat to them about the best way of doing said journey, at the time I wanted to travel, and not have to book them in advance. There thus was still scope for last minute decisions. This is always true of local transport of course (my decision to visit the railway museum at Whitehead was prompted by arriving in Belfast and noting the train to Whitehead would depart in five minutes and I had nothing better to do), but for inter-city transport it was incredibly freeing. Neither the buses nor the trains were anywhere near capacity anyway; my bus out of Derry towards Belfast had maybe seven or eight people on it and it was a double-decker coach thing.

The only time this was an issue was leaving Armagh, and that was only because 'due to illness' no-one was staffing the ticket office, and, interestingly, the buses don't (yet) take card payments. Fortunately the driver on that leg was happy for me to get to Belfast and wait for me to draw cash out from a cashpoint in the bus station.

That my coach on the way over was quite full worried me a bit about my return, which I hadn't booked at the same time as I wasn't quite sure whether I'd need more time in Belfast on the last day or not. In the event I needn't have worried; I took the early-afternoon coach (I fancied a casual lie-in) and there were only 10 people on it.

With regard to accommodation, my first three nights in Belfast were the only ones I spent in a hotel or hostel-type environment. I had two nights in Derry and my last two nights in Belfast in AirBnBs, specifically in spare rooms in other people's houses. That tends to be the way I use AirBnB; like a more advanced form of couchsurfing. It's great to get to meet and chat with people local to the area, and I approve of the concept - if you have a spare resource, why not make the most use of it?

Both of these were booked a few days in advance, not many but I'll concede not the night before. In both places I seem to have had a fairly decent choice, even in the price range I was looking at, so I was able to hone my search down to specific areas of both cities, hence my ability to stay about a mile from a Parkrun. That

particular Parkrun is at Falls Park, in West Belfast. Falls Park is at the bottom end of Falls Road, usually called The Falls Road, and is noted mainly for, uhm, shall we say 'other things'. One street away from my AirBnB indeed was a huge mural with people with guns on it that pretty much said 'vote Gerry Adams, vote Sinn Fein'. Murals are a whole thing, a whole subject for, I could do an entire Instagram account purely on the political murals in Belfast. But, Parkrun, so I'd looked beforehand on Parkruns in Belfast and a couple stood out as being quite nice. I settled on Falls Parkrun because not only did it claim to be run entirely on tarmac paths, which is useful for barefoot runners, but also the average weekly turnout was relatively low, and I prefer smaller fields for Parkruns, I just find them easier to find my pace and my space. And it was a great course; one small and two large laps around the varying styles of the park, from straight lines through the trees to a long but shallow curved incline up to open-land football fields. The hill wasn't anything near as severe as the ones I'm used to at Glasgow Queen's Park and Sheffield Castle, and I felt like I had a really good run. Fastest time of the year as well by over a minute, tho still slower than I was going when I moved to Glasgow. Definitely getting unfit. The marshalls were very interested in me, and even wanted a photo with me after the event - I even got mentioned in dispatches, as it were, on their Facebook page, because evidently barefoot parkrunners don't turn up very often there. Will definitely go back to do that course if I'm ever in Belfast on a Saturday morning, which is quite likely if the plans with my friend in France to road-trip the Republic of Ireland come to fruition in late May / early June.

Anyway. Back to accommodation.

The one place I had trouble was Armagh; there were pretty much no AirBnBs available during my stay, and only one hotel in the centre had rooms and it was bloody expensive. The lack of places to stay I felt a bit odd given it was midweek in a February; it's not like there was any major event going on and it's not a place you'd expect to see a large number of people. I'm guessing because it's not as much a tourist city as the likes of Derry or Belfast, most of the B&Bs, hotels, etc, had closed temporarily because of the season or the pandemic, and won't open up again until the summer? This meant I booked my place in Armagh - found through one of the online hotel booking sites - before pretty much anywhere else, just in case because I literally wouldn't have had an alternative. That it was very close to Navan Fort meant I *could* be more flexible with my travel choices.

I didn't have any issues with eating out. That said, I tended to stick to pubs and cafes. Some of them were quite busy places - on the last Saturday in Belfast I figured 'it's 4pm on a Saturday in February, I'll just find a nice quiet craft beer pub or two to while my time in, it'll be grand'. As it happens, the incorrect word there was 'quiet' - the first pub I went into was absolutely rammed but they managed to find me a seat next to the entrance with a barrel as a table, and I stayed there the whole afternoon because finding a seat somewhere else on an afternoon when Ireland were playing France in the rugby union was obviously going to be quite a tough ask.

I'm 85% sure, by the way, that's where I picked up my cold from.

Another quite full pub was the one I went to in Derry on the Monday evening; I got there just before last orders for food so I timed that quite well I think, and the place was maybe three-quarters full. That pub was notable because I got a free pint of beer. I wasn't expecting one, and there was no reason to have one, but while I was eating, one of the bar staff came over and gave me one - they said someone had bought it for me. I was ... largely confused and never found out who it was or why. No-one approached me afterwards. I was partly 'woo, free beer', and partly 'what do they want, is there something in that beer, should I be worried'. Drank the beer. Survived. Didn't go back on the Tuesday evening though.

Other than that, most places seemed to be open, at least; it's not like a year and a bit ago when things were open only part-time, if at all. In many ways, travelling around Northern Ireland didn't feel any different from pre-pandemic travel really, it just occasionally required a bit more forward planning. There might be fewer options than there used to be, but in general it's not something that should affect you too much unless you're going to a smaller town. And apart from having to sign the 'we need your contact details just in case there's a covid outbreak while you're here' form in most pubs/restaurants and the occasional museum, there wasn't really any admin to deal with. One tourist site - the Guildhall in Derry - wanted to check I was fully vaccinated before they allowed me in, but pretty much everywhere else was just 'wear a mask, keep distanced from everyone else, otherwise enjoy yourself'. It felt pretty easy to travel around in all honesty, and enough places were open for long enough that made tourism feel like it had returned; bear in mind too I'm travelling very much off-season so that some museums closed early was more a February thing than a Covid thing.

Derry doesn't have a Greggs. I was perturbed by this.

{standard end jingle}

Well that's about all for this episode. Join me next time when I take another trip Beyond The Brochure. Until then, don't take drinks from strangers, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure was written, presented, edited, and produced in the Glasgow studio by The Barefoot Backpacker. Music in this episode was "Walking Barefoot On Grass (Bonus)" by Kai Engel, which is available via the Free Music Archive, and used under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}