

NORTHERN IRELAND

BELFAST



Once a powerful ship-building center, Belfast is the capital city of Northern Ireland and the birthplace of the famous doomed ocean liner, *RMS Titanic*. Mention Belfast and, to a certain generation, images of conflict may spring to mind. It would be wrong, however, to jump to such conclusions these days. In recent years, the peace process and power-sharing government mean that Belfast, along with the rest of Northern Ireland, has undergone a rebirth and remarkable transformation.

Visitor numbers continue to increase year-on-year, and with good reason. Expect a warm welcome, a wicked sense of humor, and an enthralling history, including the impressive must-see Titanic Quarter. Excellent shopping can be found at Victoria and Donegal Squares. Other things to see include superb Victorian architecture (check out the famous Albert Memorial Clock in Queen's Square) and many noteworthy museums. To make the most of your time here, be sure to consult our list of the top tourist attractions in Belfast.

DARK HEDGES



The Dark Hedges is an avenue of large mature beech trees, which were planted by James Stuart to frame an avenue to his home. The trees were planted around 1775 when he built nearby Gracehill House. The trees are on both sides of the road, forming a "tunnel" that is between 6 and 10 meters in width.

The Stuart family planted the beech trees (about 150 of them!) with the goal to impress visitors arriving to the house. It reminded us a lot of the beautiful oak alleys you find at Oak Alley Plantation and many of the other River Road plantations in Louisiana USA. Today, the Dark Hedges (as they have become known) now stop just before the current gates of Gracehill House.

The tree alley is no longer part of the Gracehill estate, but Gracehill House, a Georgian manor house that was originally built as the Stuart family home, is still standing today. The Gracehill House is privately owned and operates as a bar & restaurant, wedding venue, and golf course. So you can still visit the estate for a drink, meal, or to play a round of golf.

Game of Thrones (GoT) fans in particular may also want to visit the Gracehill House during opening hours to take a look at the GoT themed door (one of 10 around Northern Ireland based on the 6th season of the show). This door was carved from a tree that fell due to Storm Gertrude at The Dark Hedges in January 2016.

The trees, which are now nearly 250 years old, are very atmospheric. The stunning organic tunnel made famous by *Game of Thrones* attracts thousands of visitors from all around the world. Time, storms, and damage has caused many of the trees to be lost but around 90 of the original 150 trees are still surviving.

Why are they Called the Dark Hedges?

It is unclear when exactly or why they got the name of the Dark Hedges, but there are two likely explanations. First, the most obvious explanation is that the massive trees block a lot of the light, resulting in a "dark" tunnel that looks like a hedge.

The other explanation is a bit more spooky. The hedges are said to be haunted by a spirit known as the Grey Lady, who wanders the avenue of trees, always disappearing at the last beech tree. It's said that on Halloween, she is joined by spirits from a nearby forgotten graveyard!