

NORTHERN IRELAND

CARRICK-A-REDE BRIDGE



High above the waves

The creak of wooden slats in the rushing wind. The waves swirling in beneath your feet. The salty spray in your nostrils. Can you handle Carrick-a-Rede?

The Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge has woven its way between Carrick Island and the County Antrim mainland for over 250 years. Swaying 30 metres above the ocean might not seem like the most relaxing way to undertake this 20-metre journey, but things have come a long way.

Back in the 1970s, this crossing comprised just one handrail and a handful of gapped wooden planks. Today, although there's a subtle shake to this sturdy bridge - just enough to thrill you - you're in far safer hands.

A fisherman's tale

So why, you might ask, does this bridge exist at all? There was method to the madness: generations of fishermen once relied on Carrick-a-Rede as the best spot for catching salmon.

The scenic drive to the rope bridge, the hike up to the bridge, and the views from the bridge itself were more than spectacular...

After the fish's migratory patterns changed, the age of fishermen on the island came to an end in 2002. Today, their legacy is an

isolated, whitewashed cottage perched on Carrick: the very definition of a precarious location.

Crossing Carrick-a-Rede

In recent years, the bridge has become a focal point on the Causeway Coastal Route, which winds its way from Belfast to Derry~Londonderry.

However, crossing the bridge still requires serious nerve. If you make it, though, you'll be rewarded by stunning views across to Rathlin Island and even Scotland. As well as that, you'll be a stone's throw from UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Giant's Causeway. Take it all in before you step back on the bridge - just make sure you don't look down!

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THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY



The **Giant's Causeway** is an area of about 40,000 interlocking basalt columns, the result of an ancient volcanic fissure eruption. It is located in County Antrim on the north coast of Northern Ireland, about three miles (4.8 km) northeast of the town of Bushmills.

It was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986, and a national nature reserve in 1987 by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland

According to legend, the columns are the remains of a causeway built by a giant. The story goes that the Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn MacCool), from the Fenian Cycle of Gaelic mythology, was challenged to a fight by the Scottish giant Benandonner. Fionn accepted the challenge and built the causeway across the North Channel so that the two giants could meet. In one version of the story, Fionn defeats Benandonner. In another, Fionn hides from Benandonner when he realises that his foe is much bigger than he is. Fionn's wife, Oonagh, disguises Fionn as a baby and tucks him in a cradle. When Benandonner sees the size of the 'baby', he reckons that its father, Fionn, must be a giant among giants. He flees back to Scotland in fright, destroying the causeway behind him so that Fionn would be unable to chase him down. Across the sea, there are identical basalt columns (a part of the same ancient lava flow) at Fingal's Cave on the Scottish

isle of Staffa, and it is possible that the story was influenced by this.

In overall Irish mythology, Fionn mac Cumhaill is not a giant but a hero with supernatural abilities, contrary to what this particular legend may suggest. In *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) it is noted that, over time, "the pagan gods of Ireland [...] grew smaller and smaller in the popular imagination, until they turned into the fairies; the pagan heroes grew bigger and bigger, until they turned into the giants". There are no surviving pre-Christian stories about the Giant's Causeway, but it may have originally been associated with the Fomorians (*Fomhóraigh*); the Irish name *Clochán na bhFomhóraigh* or *Clochán na bhFomhórach* means "stepping stones of the *Fomhóraigh*". The *Fomhóraigh* are a race of supernatural beings in Irish mythology who were sometimes described as giants and who may have originally been part of a pre-Christian pantheon.

