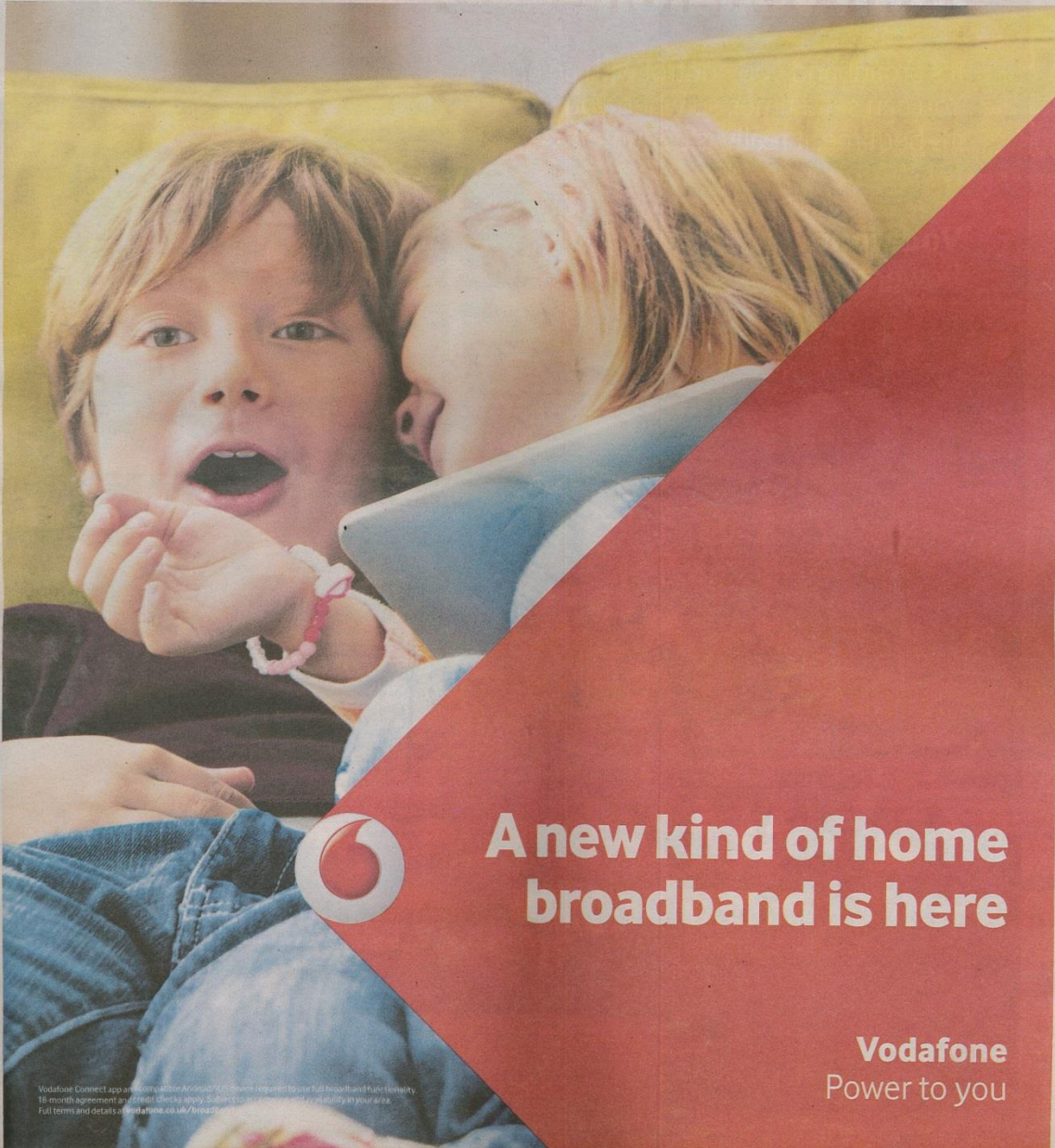


CITY A.M.

BUSINESS WITH PERSONALITY



 **A new kind of home broadband is here**

Vodafone
Power to you

Vodafone Connect app available on the App Store for iPhone and Google Play for Android. Full terms and conditions apply. 18 month agreement and credit check may apply. Subject to availability in your area. Full terms and details at vodafone.co.uk/broadband

TRAVEL

40
HOURS IN...

DAYLESFORD,
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

WHERE TO STAY
If it's luxury village farm life you're after, there's nowhere better than Lady Daylesford's fresh food and relaxation farm, **Daylesford Organic**, staying in one of their stone-clad holiday cottages. daylesford.com



WHERE TO GO
Step out into a glittering blast of autumnal colour at the 56-acre **Batford Arboretum**, home to one of the country's finest botanical collections and giant trees that are extinct in the wild. batford.co.uk



WHERE TO EAT
The Wild Rabbit, aka "the poshest pub in Britain", is a short walk away. Head chef Adam Cusker prepares dishes of humble French classics with an Italian twist in a cosy setting with fireplaces aplenty. thewildrabbit.co.uk



WHERE TO DRINK
Sample the array of homemade Frizzante Prosecco, prosciutto, cider and best bitters, with a slice of fresh pizza from the outdoor pizza-oven in the main courtyard of the **Daylesford Farm Café**. daylesford.com

Play your own Game of Thrones in northern Ireland

A whole spin-off tourism industry has developed in Northern Ireland off the back of the hit series. **Daniel Scheffler** investigates – beware, spoilers lie ahead



Thrones, as they call themselves, have known for an age that the city of Belfast, and Northern Ireland in general, is the place to spot Game of Thrones film locations. Now even casual viewers (and readers) are following in the footsteps of the mythological characters, with popularity soaring for these epic, windswept landscapes.

Based on the fantasy book *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George RR Martin, it follows several families and their various intrigues – which includes plenty of sex, violence and moody Northern Irish landscapes. The dark, stormy, windswept perfect with the hostile landscape on the east coast of the country and it's here I start my own adventure. A BMW picks me up at Culloden Estate & Spa and a die-hard Throneer greets me with excitement – "Hi, I'm Philip McComb from McComb Tours. I hope you're ready to geek out." I half expected him to be in a Game of Thrones costume; maybe it was laundry day. We started in Belfast's Titanic Quarter, where the first signs of the show make themselves visible.

Although off-limits to anyone who doesn't work on set, a giant shipping shed was converted into film studios and stands next to the famous recreated Titanic hull. We drive past again and again, hoping catch a peek of what's happening inside but on this rainy Belfast day everyone seems to be indoors – "It wasn't for some weepers" ("Is that an axe?") and equipment hanging outside. Will, the deserter from the Night's Watch at Knock Drui.

Despite its varied landscape, the fact it often experiences four seasons in a single day and its generous tax incentives, Northern Ireland wasn't the first choice for Game of Thrones – that honour goes to Scotland. Luckily they wanted too much money and so HBO looked elsewhere. Confirmed for seven seasons, this part of the British Isles has a few more years of being part of one of the most popular TV series of all time.

The stars of the show are often seen walking around Belfast, providing a sneaky indication of what's happening in the show. "After all," says McComb, "the show is notorious for killing off its main characters."

But I don't have time to play this



guessing game today. "We need to get away from our little city for you to really feel like you're on the show," says McComb. Winding our way along the coast, the dark cliffs and sandy beaches contrast with green fields inland. The sky, blackening as we drive, seems more than happy to play along with the Game of Thrones narrative. Finally the windswept freeway arrives at a little town called Ballygally. Here Ballygally Castle, which isn't really a castle but more of a tower linked to all kinds of ghostly mysteries, is where Gaelic and Celtic fables and legends are divulged by locals. The new Thrones are all ears.

Throwing your gaze up the escarpment behind the tower and beyond Cairncastle (again, not a castle) are the mountains where "spoiler alert" Ned Stark executed Will, the deserter from the Night's Watch at Knock Drui.

"People visit as they want to see if they can see behind the scenes, spot some extra features or find secrets that no one else has discovered," says McComb. And that's exactly how this slow cruise around the country feels. The magical landscapes, recognisable if you watch the show and just plain beautiful if you don't, are so otherworldly that it's a wonder it took this long for someone to shoot a fantasy series here.

My drive continues. Hills and valleys in greens and gold, with dramatic clouds moving swiftly across the dull sky, lends a serene sense of calm. Next up is a rocky beach, Cushendun, where a now infamous cave was the location of choice



STARK FACT
Fort Hill Farm, near Gort's shooting location in Co Antrim, bred rare Iron Age pigs for the show and owner Kenny Gracey says the new venture has saved his business

for "more spoilers – last warning" the priestess Melisandre (Carice van Houten's character) to give birth to a shadow assassin. McComb explains how they shot the scenes, the angles and views, and how the priestess had to be naked in this freezing, watery cave.

The show has enjoyed unprecedented success, largely down to its unpredictable plotlines, vast cast of intriguing characters and the dramatic landscapes. It's created an entire spinoff industry – in Belfast banquets reenact the gluttonous feasts; Stensons jewellers in Ballygally create special pieces for the show, which are now also available for purchase.

Not far from the caves is Ballintoy Harbour (forming part of what the show calls the "Iron Islands") and this is where Theon Greyjoy had his homecoming and baptism, and also where the pirate

People visit as they want to see if they can see behind the scenes, spot some extra features or find secrets that no one else has discovered

“

CITYAM.COM

CITYAM.COM



NEED TO KNOW

Hastings Hotels (hastingshotels.com, 028 9047 0666) offers accommodation at The Culloden Estate & Spa from £150 per room per night on a B&B basis. Private Game of Thrones tours are available through McComb's Executive Travel & Tours (mccombscoach.co.uk, 028 9031 5333). Cheapflights offers return flights to Belfast from London Gatwick from £56 return. Visit cheapflights.co.uk to book. Daniel travelled courtesy of Tourism Ireland (tourismireland.com, 0800 035 7000).



Salladhóir Sann met Davos and pledged his loyalty and support to Stannis Baratheon. If those were too many names for you to remember I must admit I'm feeling the same about the show and its convoluted plotting. But even when you forget who's who, the beauty of the scenery keeps you hooked.

The day's most memorable moment is the Dark Hedges. Not that they're dark or indeed hedges, but rather a path of interlocking beech trees (see main picture), brought to life in Season 2 when Arya Stark (a royal girl pretending to be a boy, played by Maisie Williams) flees her enemies in a cart. It's now one of Northern Ireland's most visited sites, where the mystique of days of yore hangs heavy.

Celts, Gaels and even Vikings roamed these lands, hopping the heads off their enemies. A crow flies through the gnarled trees and watches the onlookers. The crows are everywhere and fans of the show will certainly recognise them.



Clockwise from main: The famous Dark Hedges; Melisandre, the "Red Woman"; Dunluce Castle; Allister Thorne, Ballintoy Harbour; inset Sean Bean's Ned Stark

They perch around every location I visited, cawing ominously. Very atmospheric.

The day ends, as it often does in Northern Ireland, with whiskey. The town of Bushmills, with its famous distillery, is, according to some, where whiskey was invented, and it attracts avid drinkers. This little town comes not only with a world class whiskey hole but also has an intriguing history – Winston Churchill was second citizen (an honorary title here, although he was upstaged by the first citizen, Paddy the homing pigeon, who brought news of the D-Day success to these shores).

Dunluce castle (a real one this time) is a slightly run-down building nearby. It's yet to be used on the show but if you ask a Throneer they'll tell you their top pick to make an appearance in the upcoming season.

All you need to do is book a flight and you too could join in this Game of Thrones.



THE INTERESTED. It's your choice whether you prefer a dreamy wander around North Wales' romantic countryside, or a punishing hike up some of the UK's most challenging mountains. The rest of this weekend will be spent recharging by a crackling log fire and getting to grips with the local beers in a nearby pub.

WHERE. South Wales may be pretty, but it's been done to death. Dioni, owned by farmer Gwion Llwyd, is bringing North Wales to the John Lewis classes via its perfect self-catering accommodation.

THE COTTAGE. We stayed in Cwmain, a remote farmhouse down a rocky track near the town of Bala (it was navigable in our hatchback but we'd advise a 4x4). Having shunned the prospect of a hike up Snowdon, an hour's drive away, we spent the morning exploring the local countryside, coming face-to-face with curious (but friendly) herds of sheep and cows. Later, we drove into Bala to stock up on Welsh Cakes and bara brith, then whilst away the afternoon watching rugby and trading good-natured jibes with the locals in the Bull's Head pub.

We finished the day with a hearty dinner of leg of roast Welsh lamb from TJ Roberts & Son, Bala's butcher, followed by a nightcap by the fire. Though the cottage had Wi-Fi, we didn't go near a smartphone all weekend. A proper rural retreat.

THE FOOD. The following day we headed to Tyddyn Llann, just outside Llandrillo, a Michelin-starred restaurant in an 18th-century house set in manicured gardens and just half an hour's drive from Bala. Visit tyddynllan.co.uk or call 01490 440264.

While its usual prices are pretty standard for Michelin fare, it also offers a set menu on Sunday lunchtimes. The only challenge is choosing between the 200 wines on its menu...

ASK ABOUT. Bala is best known for the four-mile-long Llyn Tegid lake, once Wales' largest body of water. Bala Adventure and Watersports, based on the northern shore of the cigar-shaped lake, offers kayaking, rowing and windsurfing. If you're feeling adventurous, ask about its climbing, abseiling and mountain biking expeditions.

AND AFTER THAT? Explore further afield. Abersoch, an hour and a half away by car, has become a distinctly upmarket enclave in recent years, with high-end restaurants and boutique hotels. Although Peak Abersoch may already have arrived, one beach hut in the town sold for more than £100,000 this summer.

SLEEPING. Cwmain sleeps 10 (including bunk beds for two kids), although Dioni offers self-catering accommodation around North Wales for every sized group, from ultra-chic yurts for two, to enormous barn conversions, which come complete with hot tubs.

NEED-TO-KNOW. Cwmain is available to rent from £950 – book at dioni.co.uk. Sunday lunch at Tyddyn Llann costs £25 for two courses, or £30 for three (not including wine). Make a reservation at tyddynllan.co.uk, or by calling 01490 440264. Bala Adventure and Watersports offers a half-day of kayaking from £40. Visit balaadventurewatersports.co.uk or call 01878 9201959.

@cityamlife

W.P.S. CIP 3, 187, 207

CWMAIN COTTAGE, BALA, NORTH WALES

Emma Haslett on a scenic beauty spot far from the madding crowd

TOP TIP
Order some meat from TJ Roberts & Son, one of Wales' top-rated butchers