

TRAVEL TIMES Martin Laing discovers the delights of Portpatrick

Coastal idyll is a breath of fresh air

THE house sits high on the bluff above Portpatrick, and the views are spectacular. Away in the distance, across the Mull of Galloway in the gloaming, the lights of Donaghadee twinkle on the Ards peninsula of County Down and, in daylight, the entrance to Belfast Lough can be easily picked out.

All roads south and west stop here, and it feels like the end of the land, the coast tumbling into the Irish Sea in rocky cliffs. As the splendid vista makes only too clear, from here the next stop is the coast of Northern Ireland.

This is the most westerly point of the Scottish mainland, and almost the most southerly, but it is well worth the effort to reach this remote

village. From my perch on the first floor balcony of our holiday home, this panorama is stunning. The low-lying Ulster coast seems far away in the early evening twilight, reflections sparkle on the water that separates the two land masses and the lovely little village of Portpatrick huddles beneath my eyrie.

But, while feasting one's eyes on the panorama is sustenance for the soul, victuals of another sort are needed after a day of rambling along these rugged cliffs. A steepish path from our holiday home cuts between the cottages and bungalows and leads down into the main street.

Any number of hostels provide a warm welcome and excellent fare to restore our energy levels. We choose, on this occasion, the Mount Stuart Hotel, where the food is excellent and the staff bright and



■ The bustling and picturesque harbour forms the heart of Portpatrick, and is welcoming for visitors

friendly. But there is a palpable tension in the air as the lifeboat has just been seen slipping its moorings to head out into the night. Everyone here, it seems, has a link to the crew – brother, son, father, husband or friend – and all are anxious to see these brave volunteers return. Later, thank goodness, the vessel makes port safely once again.

The harbour, of course, is the focal point for a coastal village such as Portpatrick. Hotels, pubs, restaurants, shops and guest houses line its curve from the lighthouse that

dominates the entrance at the southern end to the lifeboat station at the other.

Once a bustling fishing port, today the harbour is home only to a few working and pleasure boats, but there is no sense of decline here. Buildings have been refurbished and are now put to new uses.

And above the harbour are new housing developments with a mix of luxury villas and affordable homes to tempt younger locals to stay in the area. The message is clear: Portpatrick's future is bright.

Walking is a popular activity here, and a climb from the village centre leads to the historic Dunskey Castle to the south, the ruined keep dating back to the sixteenth century. To the north begins the Southern Upland Way, its 212 miles heading across country to Cockburnspath on the east coast.

● Martin Laing stayed as a guest of Portpatrick Holidays. For more information visit www.portpatrick-holidays.co.uk or contact 01776 810 555.

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