

Don't pass the Port



ROOMS WITH A VIEW...Relax in style in a beautiful house overlooking the harbour

BY NEIL SHAND

Previous visits to the Stranraer area have all too often been tainted with angst and peppered with mild bouts of panic as we bravely battled our poor organisational skills – and stupidity – in a scramble to make our sailing on the ferry bound for Northern Ireland.

A timely visit to the bar on board, along with the gentle, soothing motion of the crossing, usually calmed frayed nerves before we disembarked in Belfast or Larne.

This time, however, our trip to Stranraer was very different. After an unusually relaxing and enjoyable drive, we waved bye-bye to the big boats in the rear-view mirror and began our descent though the craggy cliffs to the harbour town of Portpatrick.

One of Dumfries and Galloway's most popular destinations, it sits just seven miles beyond Stranraer at the end of the A77, only a 2.5-hour drive from Glasgow and just about as far South West as you can go in Scotland.

We arrived to find the seafront a lively little hub of pubs, restaurants and quirky craft shops. Just the right mix of tourists, day-trippers and locals had spilled from pubs such as The Crown, The Waterfront and The Harbour and taken up residence at chairs and tables outside. This gave a continental feel and we quickly grabbed our own seat in the sun.

The locals were incredibly friendly and seemed genuinely pleased to have us in their town. We sat outside and popped on the sunglasses for the first time this year, while the cheery staff brought us fantastic lobster, crab claws and mussels, all caught locally. These were washed down with a cold pint and a large glass of red as we observed the comings and goings, including a couple of boats over from Ireland for the day.

Our home for the weekend was No9, a five-bedroom house on the hills above Portpatrick, with sea views to the harbour and over to Ireland's mountains of Mourne.

Downstairs had a superb open-plan kitchen/living area with double patio doors leading to a terrace and barbecue area. Upstairs, another huge living area with a large balcony and walls of glass gave the whole place



Friendly locals, great food and plenty to see and do make Portpatrick the ideal getaway

a light, airy feel. We agreed we could be very happy here and the two plasma TVs meant the soaps vs Champions League debate need never blight our lives again. Plus the choice of four bathrooms lent itself to a more harmonious and stress-free morning.

While the house was a beautiful space to spend time as a couple, it struck me that it would be a fantastic venue for family gatherings and celebrations. So much so that I'm considering taking both No9 and No10, the identical house next door, for my "significant" birthday next year (if I can raise the friends).

The company have three other properties in the area. They are more your traditional, cosy, cottage feel and sleep between six and nine people. The cost is surprisingly reasonable, starting at £16 per person, per night.

The holiday homes are proving very popular with golfers looking to play a few rounds on the surrounding courses, two of which are visible from the balconies of the houses.

But golf is only one of the many local activities. The Southern Upland Way begins at Portpatrick and its 212 miles allow fantastic walking and cycling all the way to Dunbar.

For the keen fisherman, there are sea angling trips and there's plenty to keep the kids amused at the nearby Ryan Centre and Marine Life Centre. Culture vultures have plenty of castles, monuments and gardens.

The first week in August each year sees the town turn out in force for lifeboat week to support the local rescue team and have a right good knees-up into the bargain.

I was told by locals of carousing and dancing late into the night – and the odd Irish sailor stranded in the harbour and swimming

to shore for a few beers. This sounds like a date for my diary, along with the folk festival.

We woke on Saturday to bright sunshine and, after a coffee on the balcony, wandered down to Campbells, a beautiful, family-run restaurant at the far end of the harbour.

The tower of langoustines was outstanding, as was the beautifully tender sirloin steak and Chablis. The remainder of the day was spent happily sipping our drinks as we watched the day-trippers come and go.

Sunday brought more sunshine and a walk round the craft and pottery shops. Lighthouse Pottery and the Copper Wheel are well worth a visit, while The Smugglers Cove is not to be missed with its amazing carvings.

I attempted to reason with Roz that her purchase of a necklace should allow me to purchase the giant wooden gorilla that caught my eye. Needless to say there was only one winner in the argument. The top of the TV at home will always look very bare to me now.

We then scaled the small hill to The Mount Stuart Hotel for a great lunch on the terrace. We gleefully consumed the seafood pancakes and grilled swordfish and soaked in the amazing views the elevated position allowed.

One the reluctant road home, the promise to each other that we'd be back soon made the journey a little more bearable.

Portpatrick left us feeling excited about coming back. It's a friendly wee place that ticks all our boxes and is a fantastic place to unwind on a day trip, a short break or family holiday. We're already planning a trip back.

And with the knowledge that Portpatrick's just round the corner, I really fear for our next boat trip to Belfast.



Factfile

● Portpatrick Holidays, www.portpatrickholidays.co.uk
Tel: 01776 810555. Email: info@portpatrickholidays.co.uk
Prices start from £16 per person per night.