



## INTERNATIONAL TOURIST GUIDE DAY 19<sup>TH</sup> - 21<sup>ST</sup> FEBRUARY 2022

### PRESS RELEASE

#### **Northern Ireland Tourist Guide Association celebrates 30 years of excellence**

The Northern Ireland Tourist Guide Association is celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a weekend of free tours open to the public.

The organisation has planned this series of events, all led by their members, over the weekend of 19-21 February to coincide with International Tourist Guide Day.

NITGA Chairperson Catherine Burns said: “We are celebrating the impact that professional tourist guides have had in the growth of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. Tourist guides are great ambassadors for our country, able to bring alive the culture, history and stories that make us unique. We are often the first local people that visitors may meet and it’s important that we give a lasting impression and a warm welcome.”

Tourism is a big part of the Northern Ireland economy with 2019 figures showing that there were 5.3 million overnight trips generating £1 billion in revenue. While the industry was badly hit by Covid, many tourist guides are beginning to see signs of recovery.

Catherine added: “We’re now looking forward to a re-surgence in tourism as visitors return in greater numbers and NITGA members will play a very important role in this post-Covid economic recovery.”

There are now more than 100 NITGA members, all professionally qualified guides covering every region and many who can speak a wide range of languages including Japanese, Russian, German, French and Chinese.

One of the founding members, Virginia Moriarty explained that the organisation grew out of the very first Blue Badge tourist guide course run at Queen’s University in 1991/92. “About a dozen of us took this course and when it finished, we wanted to keep working together to develop tourism and professional guiding in Northern Ireland,” she explained.

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Virginia added: “We started at just the right time. In the 90s Northern Ireland was changing and more visitors were coming, which gave us the chance to tell them our story. Many people had perceptions about what they were coming to see. This was our chance to show them around and tell them about our history and culture. We tried to answer every question and explain the background. The reaction was simply fantastic. The beauty of our country and the standard of our visitor attractions is second to none. I’ve loved every single second of my work as a tourist guide.”

A number of factors helped boost visitor numbers: the arrival of the cruise ships in the mid-90s, the increased numbers of visitors doing tours of the whole island, the new attractions like Titanic and of course the interest in Game of Thrones.

The NITGA members rose to the challenge of the changing market and developed new tours and skills. Some of those tours will be offered free to the public this weekend (Feb 19-21).

This includes tours of Armagh Mall, Carrickfergus, the history of Comber, Derry and beautiful Ballycastle. There are also a number of tours around Belfast including Stormont woodland, Knockbreda Church and Graveyard, the Queen’s Quarter and a Belfast City Centre’s popular people and curious creatures. Check the website for dates, times and how to book a place.

Professional and continuous development is an essential part of the organisation’s philosophy with ongoing familiarisation trips and professional training with the Blue Badge being joined by a level 4 and Green and White badges. The members who have decided to retire after many years like to remain as members to continue to enjoy the friendships built over many years.

At 34, Derry tourist guide Charlene McCrossan is currently the youngest Blue Badge guide in the UK. Her father started running tours in the walled city early 1990s. He ran a newsagent and any visitors, mainly journalists, would call in and quiz him on local history. He came up with an idea to run tours part-time, which later grew into a full-time business.

“People thought he was crazy, running tours of Derry back then. But he could see the potential and he kept at it,” NITGA member Charlene said.



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He passed away in 2015 and Charlene joined the business to work alongside her mum. Charlene believes the Blue Badge qualification is important because it brings a level of professionalism and historical understanding to those that qualify.

“It’s been such a privilege to be a part of so many visitors’ trips to Northern Ireland and being a member of NITGA has been essential to us. Not only for professional development but also the camaraderie and friendships we’ve formed with other guides,” she said.

NITGA has developed links to the wider tourist industry and represents Northern Ireland at the European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (FEG) and the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA).

To find out more about NITGA or the free tours on offer over the weekend of February 19-21, go to [www.nitga.co.uk](http://www.nitga.co.uk).