THE ULTIMATE

IRELAND

TRAVEL GUIDE



THE WHOLE ISLAND • 32 COUNTIES • ROAD-TRIP ITINERARIES

2026 EDITION · FULLY REVISED

FROM LOVETOVISITIRELAND.COM

Everything you need to plan, drive and enjoy the whole island — from Dublin's Georgian squares to the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coast. Fully revised and fact-checked for 2026.

From the team behind Love Ireland — travel guides, authentic recipes and stories from the Emerald Isle, loved by 65,000 readers. Join the free daily newsletter at lovetovisitireland.com/newsletter.

The Ultimate Ireland Travel Guide

2026 Edition · Fully revised and fact-checked

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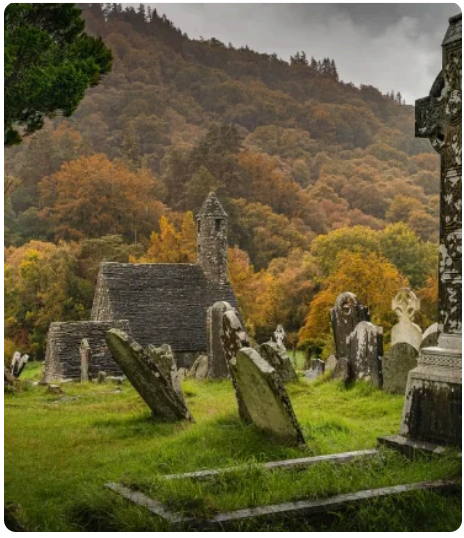
Ireland in pictures



THE ATLANTIC EDGE



THE LIVING ROOM OF IRELAND



FIVE THOUSAND YEARS OF STONE



THE ROAD AHEAD

PART ONE

Before you go

Paperwork, money and packing — the unglamorous decisions that make the rest of the trip easy. Entry rules changed in 2025–26, so read this part even if you've visited before.

Passports & visas

The island holds two jurisdictions: the **Republic of Ireland** (an EU member) and **Northern Ireland** (part of the UK). There are no checkpoints on the land border, but each side sets its own entry rules — plan for both if your route crosses it, and most good routes do.

Most visitors need a valid passport. EU/EEA citizens can enter the Republic with a national identity card, and UK citizens can use official photo ID, though airlines usually want a passport regardless. Citizens of the EU/EEA, UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — among many others — need **no visa** for short stays in the Republic. Check your nationality against the official list at **ireland.ie/dfa** (Department of Foreign Affairs) well before booking.

NEW FOR 2026 — UK ETA FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Visa-exempt visitors (including Americans, Canadians, Australians and EU citizens) now need a **UK Electronic Travel Authorisation** to enter Northern Ireland — even when crossing by road from the Republic. It costs **£16**, is applied for online or via the UK ETA app (usually approved in minutes), links to your passport and lasts two years. British and Irish citizens are exempt. Since **25 February 2026** the requirement is strictly enforced, so sort it before you fly if the Giant's Causeway or Belfast is on your list. Apply only at **gov.uk**.

Money & currency

The Republic uses the **euro (€)**; Northern Ireland uses the **pound sterling (£)**. Neither is accepted on the other side of the border, so carry a little of each if your route crosses it. Euro notes come in €5–€200 denominations (the €500 note is no longer issued) and the euro divides into 100 cents; it's worth changing a small amount at your home bank before travelling for the first taxi or coffee.

In practice you'll rarely need much cash: Ireland is heavily card-first, and **contactless card or phone payment is accepted almost everywhere**, from Dublin restaurants to rural petrol stations. Visa and Mastercard are universal; American Express is patchier outside hotels. ATMs are plentiful in towns — check your bank's foreign-withdrawal fees before you leave, and when a terminal offers to charge you in your home currency, always choose to **pay in euro** (dynamic currency conversion rates are poor). Traveller's cheques are effectively obsolete; don't bring them.

Travel insurance

A comprehensive policy typically runs **4–8% of your trip cost** and covers cancellation, medical care, and baggage. Buy it soon after paying for flights and accommodation — that's when cancellation cover starts working for you. Before buying, check what you already have: many credit cards and home-insurance policies include travel cover. Compare third-party insurers rather than defaulting to the airline's checkout add-on, and read the exclusions, including the fine print on pre-existing conditions and operator insolvency — if you book a package or use a tour operator, insurance is essential, since an unexpected company failure can leave travellers stranded. Optional add-ons (medical evacuation, pandemic cover) raise the premium; add only what you'd actually claim. EU visitors should also carry a **European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)**, which covers necessary public healthcare in the Republic.

When to visit

Ireland's climate is mild, damp and famously changeable — there is no bad season, only different trade-offs. **May–June and September** are the sweet spot: long days, softer prices, and headline sights without peak crowds. **July–August** brings the warmest weather and the biggest festivals, but also peak prices and full car parks at the Cliffs of Moher. **October–April** is quiet, green and moody — ideal for city breaks, pubs and photography, with some rural attractions on shorter winter hours.

The weather, month by month

Month	Typical high	Daylight (Dublin)	Feel
Dec–Feb	7–9°C / 45–48°F	7½–10 hrs	Short, moody days; fires and pubs at their best; storms lash the west coast
Mar–Apr	10–13°C / 50–55°F	12–14 hrs	Lambs, daffodils, showers; sights reopen and crowds haven't arrived
May–Jun	15–18°C / 59–64°F	16–17 hrs	The sweet spot: hedgerows in bloom, light until after 10pm
Jul–Aug	18–20°C / 64–68°F	15–16 hrs	Warmest and busiest; festivals everywhere; book everything
Sep–Oct	13–17°C / 55–63°F	10–13 hrs	Golden light, harvest festivals, softer prices — the photographer's season
Nov	9–11°C / 48–52°F	8–9 hrs	The quiet month — city breaks, museums, early Christmas lights

Rain falls year-round — 10–15 wet days most months — and the Atlantic counties get roughly twice Dublin's share. It rarely rains all day; it visits, and leaves rainbows.

What to pack

Ireland can serve four seasons in a day. The strategy is **layers plus a proper rain jacket** — assume some rain on any given day, and you'll only be pleasantly surprised.

NEVER LEAVES YOUR SIDE

- Passport (+ ETA if visiting NI)
- Cards & a little cash in € and £
- Prescriptions & daily medicines
- Phone, chargers, adapter
- Insurance documents

FOR THE WEATHER

- Waterproof jacket with hood
- Warm layers (wool works)
- Sturdy closed shoes + a spare pair
- Hat, scarf, gloves (Oct–Apr)
- Compact umbrella

TECH & POWER

- Type G plug adapter (230 V)
- Power bank & spare cables
- Camera + spare cards/batteries
- eSIM or roaming plan sorted
- Offline maps downloaded

What Ireland costs

Ireland is not a budget destination — Dublin especially — but it rewards planning. Rough per-person daily figures, excluding flights and car hire:

Style	Per day	Looks like
Budget	€60–90	Hostel dorm or camping, buses, supermarket picnics, one pub meal

Style	Per day	Looks like
Mid-range	€130–200	B&Bs, a shared rental car, attraction tickets, restaurant dinners
Comfortable	€250+	Boutique hotels and the odd castle, guided experiences, tasting menus

WAYS TO SPEND LESS

- Ireland's **National Museums are free** — archaeology, natural history and decorative arts in Dublin, country life in Mayo.
- Eat your main meal at **lunch** — the same kitchens, two-thirds the price; "early bird" menus stretch the trick into evening.
- The **OPW Heritage Card** pays for itself by the third castle; trains booked weeks ahead cost a fraction of walk-up fares.
- Travel **May–June or September**: peak scenery, shoulder prices.
- B&B breakfasts are enormous — **skip lunch**, nobody will judge you.

PART TWO

Ireland at a glance

A small island with an outsized story — know a little of it and every ruin, pub and place name gets more interesting.

5.15m
people in the Republic (2022 census) — 7.1m across the island

32
counties — 26 in the Republic, 6 in Northern Ireland

2
official languages in the Republic: Irish and English

0
snakes. Genuinely none — thank the Ice Age, or St. Patrick

The Emerald Isle

Ireland sits in the North Atlantic, west of Great Britain. The rain that earns its reputation also earns its name: the landscape is improbably, persistently green — rolling pasture, peat bog, rugged mountains and a coastline of dramatic cliffs. The capital, **Dublin**, holds well over a quarter of the Republic's population; Northern Ireland's capital is **Belfast**. Ireland is one of Europe's great modern economic stories too: the European headquarters of Google, Apple, Meta, Microsoft and many other technology and pharmaceutical giants cluster in and around Dublin and Cork.

A few things worth knowing at the pub quiz

- **Halloween is Irish.** It descends from Samhain, the Gaelic harvest festival marking summer's end on 31 October.
- **So is Dracula.** Bram Stoker, a Dubliner, published the novel in 1897.
- Ireland has won the **Eurovision Song Contest seven times** — a record it now shares with Sweden.
- **Sean's Bar in Athlone**, founded around 900 AD, holds the record as Ireland's — and possibly the world's — oldest pub.
- **Hook Lighthouse** in County Wexford is one of the world's oldest working lighthouses, on a site lit since the 5th century.
- The word **"boycott"** entered English in 1880 when Irish tenants collectively shunned land agent Captain Charles Boycott.
- John Philip Holland of County Clare designed the **first submarines** adopted by the US Navy and Royal Navy.
- Some **80 million people worldwide claim Irish descent** — more than fifteen times the island's population, including over 30 million Americans and more than 20 US presidents. If one of your grandparents was born in Ireland, you may be entitled to citizenship yourself.

Irish firsts & inventions

- In 1907 Guglielmo Marconi built the world's first permanent **transatlantic radio station** at Derrigimlagh Bog near Clifden, County Galway; nearby **Valentia Island** had already landed the first transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866.

- Physicist **John Tyndall** was the first to demonstrate the greenhouse effect — and to explain why the sky is blue.
- **Richard Martin** of Galway co-founded the world's first animal-welfare organisation (the SPCA, 1824).
- Dublin's **Rotunda Hospital** (1745) is the world's oldest continuously operating maternity hospital.
- The **Irish Houses of Parliament** (1729) was the world's first purpose-built two-chamber parliament building — it now houses a Bank of Ireland branch on College Green.
- The world's first recorded **open yacht race** was sailed in Dublin Bay in 1663, and the Royal Cork Yacht Club (1720) is the world's oldest.
- **Cork** was once the largest butter exporter on earth — the old Butter Exchange now houses a museum.

The oldest places in Ireland

Humans have lived here for at least 12,500 years — a butchered bear bone found in a Clare cave carries the earliest evidence. The record-holders are still in business: **Sean's Bar** (c. 900 AD) pours pints in Athlone; the **Woodenbridge Hotel** in County Wicklow has hosted guests since 1608; **Kilkea Castle** in Kildare, built in 1180, is Ireland's oldest continuously inhabited castle — and now a hotel; and **Trim Castle** in Meath remains the largest Anglo-Norman castle ever built in Ireland, its 30,000 m² of walls the backdrop to the film *Braveheart*.

Public holidays & festivals

Irish holidays braid Celtic and Christian traditions. **St. Brigid's Day** (celebrated on 1 February; a public holiday on the first Monday of February since 2023 — the first named for a woman) marks the coming of spring. **St. Patrick's Day, 17 March**, is the big one: parades, music and green everything, celebrated harder in Ireland than anywhere. **Bloomsday, 16 June**, sees Dubliners in Edwardian dress retracing James Joyce's *Ulysses*. **Lúnasa** opens the harvest season on 1 August, and **Halloween** comes home to its birthplace on 31 October — Derry's festival is Europe's biggest. Shops and attractions close or shorten hours on public holidays; book ahead around St. Patrick's weekend especially.

Language

English is spoken everywhere, but **Irish (Gaeilge)** is the Republic's first official language, alive on every road sign and thriving in the **Gaeltacht** regions of the west — Connemara, Donegal and the Dingle Peninsula. Around 1.9 million people report some ability to speak it. A few words earn instant goodwill:

Sláinte (SLAWN-cha)
"Health!" — the universal toast

Dia dhuit (JEE-a gwitch)
Hello

Go raibh maith agat (guh rev mah AG-ut)
Thank you

Slán abhaile (slawn a-WOL-ya)
"Safe home" — a farewell to someone travelling

Craic (crack)
Fun, news, good times — "What's the craic?"

Eejit (EE-jit)
An affectionate fool — you'll hear it constantly

Culture & etiquette

Humour is the national currency. Irish wit runs self-deprecating and ironic, and gentle teasing — "slagging" — is a sign of affection. Take it well and give a little back. Conversation matters: a transaction that would take thirty seconds elsewhere may come with weather commentary and a life story, and that's the good part.

Ireland modernised fast, but two older institutions still shape it. The **extended family** remains the dominant social unit — the Irish who move away keep ties to home that would surprise most visitors. And while the **Catholic church's** once-commanding voice in politics and society has faded sharply since the 1990s, its imprint survives in the calendar, the schools and the landscape of parish churches and holy wells you'll pass everywhere.

A handshake and a hello suit any occasion, with eye contact. If invited to a home, arrive on time and bring chocolates or a bottle of wine — but skip lilies and all-white bouquets, which are associated with funerals. Table manners are continental: fork left, knife right, elbows off. In the pub, **rounds are sacred** — if someone buys you a drink, you're buying the next one. And tipping is modest by American standards: 10–12.5% for good restaurant service, round up a taxi fare, no tip expected at the bar.

Five thousand years in one page

c. 8000 BC — first hunter-gatherers cross to Ireland after the ice retreats.

c. 3200 BC — Newgrange is built: older than Stonehenge and the pyramids of Giza.

c. 500 BC — Celtic culture and language take hold; Ireland enters the age of its myths.

432 AD — St. Patrick begins his mission; within a century Ireland is "the island of saints and scholars," its monks re-copying Europe's learning.

795 — Viking raids begin; the invaders stay to found Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick.

1169 — the Anglo-Norman invasion opens eight centuries of English involvement in Ireland.

1690 — the Battle of the Boyne; the Protestant Ascendancy and the Penal Laws follow.

1845–52 — the Great Famine: a million die, two million emigrate, and the population never recovers to its 8-million peak — the wound behind the worldwide diaspora.

1916 — the Easter Rising is crushed in Dublin, but its executed leaders ignite the independence movement.

1921–22 — the island is partitioned: the Free State (a republic from 1949) and Northern Ireland within the UK.

1998 — the Good Friday Agreement ends three decades of the Troubles; the border fades to a road sign.

2015–today — Ireland votes for marriage equality by referendum — the world's first — and the "Celtic Tiger" economy matures into a European tech and pharma hub.

Myths & legends you'll keep meeting

Irish mythology isn't museum material — it's written onto the landscape you'll drive through. **Finn McCool**, the giant of the Fíanna, built the Giant's Causeway to fight a Scottish rival (and gained his wisdom as a boy by tasting the Salmon of Knowledge). **Cú Chulainn**, Ulster's boy-warrior, single-handedly defended the north in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* — against Queen **Maeve** of Connacht, whose seat you can stand on at Rathcroghan. The **Children of Lir** spent 900 years as swans on Irish loughs, which is why harming a swan still feels taboo. The **banshee's** cry foretells a death in the family; the **leprechaun** is a cobbler with a temper, not a cereal mascot. And note the lone hawthorn trees standing untouched in the middle of tilled fields: **fairy trees**, which many farmers still will not cut. Motorways have been re-routed for less.

Words, music & games

For a small island, the shelf is absurd: **four Nobel Prizes in Literature** (Yeats, Shaw, Beckett, Heaney), plus Wilde, Joyce, Swift, Stoker and a thriving present tense — Sally Rooney and Claire Keegan are Irish exports as surely as whiskey. **Traditional music** lives in the pub session: fiddles, flutes, uilleann pipes and the bodhrán drum around a corner table. Session etiquette: listen more than you talk, never touch an instrument uninvited, and applaud the set, not each tune. **Gaelic games** are the national obsession — hurling (the world's fastest field sport, 3,000 years old) and Gaelic football, both fiercely amateur: county heroes go back to their day jobs on Monday. A summer championship match anywhere in the country is the cheapest great spectacle in Ireland.

PART THREE

Getting there & around

Ireland is compact — nowhere in the Republic is much more than four hours' drive from Dublin. The choices are how you arrive and whether you drive it or ride it.

Airports

Dublin Airport (DUB), 10 km north of the city, is the island's main gateway, with two terminals — most long-haul flights, including all North American routes, use Terminal 2. **Shannon (SNN)** on the west coast is the smart arrival point for a Wild Atlantic Way trip, **Cork (ORK)** serves the south, and **Belfast** has two airports for Northern Ireland. Aer Lingus and Ryanair dominate the schedules, joined by the major US carriers (Delta, United, American), Air Canada and the big European airlines. A bonus for US-bound travellers: Dublin and Shannon both offer **US Preclearance** — you clear American immigration and customs before boarding and land in the US as a domestic passenger.

DUBLIN AIRPORT – CITY CENTRE

Option	Fare (approx.)	Time	Good to know
Dublin Express (782/784)	€10	25–40 min	Frequent, luggage racks, Wi-Fi; book online to guarantee a seat
Aircoach (700)	€9	25–40 min	Runs 24 hours; also serves south Dublin and other cities
Dublin Bus 16 / 41	€2.60 cash / ~€2 Leap	45–70 min	Cheapest, but limited luggage space; 41 runs all night
Taxi / app	€30–40	20–35 min	Ranks at both terminals; Free Now and Uber both dispatch licensed taxis

There is still no rail link to Dublin Airport — the MetroLink line is years from opening. The old Airlink 747 service no longer operates.

Arriving by ferry

Bringing a car from Britain or France? Ferries run to **Dublin Port** from Holyhead (Irish Ferries, Stena Line) and Liverpool (P&O), to **Rosslare** from Wales, France and Spain, and to **Belfast** from Cairnryan in Scotland. From Dublin Port, the city centre is a short taxi ride or a hop on the Luas Red Line from nearby East Wall Road.

Driving in Ireland

First and most important: **Ireland drives on the left.** Give yourself an easy first hour — collect the car, breathe, and let the roundabouts (clockwise, yield to the right) become natural. On motorways the left

lane is for driving, the right lane only for overtaking. (Comparing rental deals? Start at lovetovisitireland.com/car-rental.)

Speed limits in the Republic are in **km/h** — typically 120 on motorways, 100 on national roads, 80 on regional roads (many rural local roads dropped to 60 in 2025), and 50 or 30 in towns. Cross into Northern Ireland and the limits silently switch to **mph** — the road signs are your cue that you've crossed. Watch for toll roads around Dublin: the M50 uses barrier-free tolling that must be paid online by 8pm the next day at **eflow.ie** — rental companies charge steep admin fees if you forget.

Rural roads are the reason you rented the car and also the reason to slow down: narrow, walled, and shared with tractors and sheep. **Rent the smallest car you can live with** — you'll bless it on the Ring of Kerry. Most rentals are manual; automatics exist but sell out, so book early. Licences from the US, Canada, Australia and EU states are valid without an International Driving Permit. Note that many US credit-card collision policies exclude Ireland — check, and price the rental company's cover honestly.

Trains, buses & taxis

Irish Rail (Iarnród Éireann) links Dublin with Cork, Galway, Limerick, Killarney, Belfast and other major hubs — comfortable and scenic for long hops, cheapest booked online in advance. The network doesn't reach much of the rural west, so pair it with buses or a short car rental. **Bus Éireann** covers the national network, with private

operators like Citylink and Dublin Coach competing on intercity routes — long-haul fares are very affordable and coaches have Wi-Fi.

In Dublin, the **DART** coastal rail, the **Luas** tram (Green and Red lines) and an extensive bus network cover the city. Get a **TFI Leap Card** (or use the TFI app): fares are roughly a third cheaper than cash, and the 90-minute fare makes transfers free. **Taxis** are metered and plentiful; **Free Now** is the dominant hailing app, and Uber operates but dispatches licensed taxis at taxi rates.

DUBLIN'S NETWORK AT A GLANCE

- **DART** — the coastal commuter rail, Howth to Greystones; the cheapest sea-view ride in the city (irishrail.ie)
- **Luas** — two tram lines, Green (north–south) and Red (east–west), nearly 70 stops; tickets at any platform (luas.ie)
- **Dublin Bus** — 100+ routes plus 24-hour and night services (dublinbus.ie)
- **Dublin Bikes** — cheap station-based bike share for the flat, compact centre
- **Leap Card** — buy once at the airport or any Spar/Centra; it works on all of the above

Drive times worth memorising

Motorway hops are quick; coastal roads are not. Add 30–50% to any scenic route for stone walls, sheep and photo stops — that's the good part.

Route	Time	Note
Dublin – Belfast	2:00	Motorway all the way; also a direct train
Dublin – Galway	2:15	M6 motorway; coast-to-coast in an afternoon
Dublin – Cork	2:45	M8; the Rock of Cashel is right off it
Dublin – Killarney	3:30	Break the trip in Cashel or Cork
Cork – Killarney	1:30	Via Macroom; Blarney is a 20-min detour
Killarney – Dingle	1:10	Return over the Conor Pass if it's clear — highest road in Ireland
Galway – Cliffs of Moher	1:30	Go via the Burren coast road (R477)
Galway – Westport	1:15	Or 3+ glorious hours looping through Connemara
Belfast – Giant's Causeway	1:15 direct	Take the coastal route instead: allow a full day

PART FOUR

Exploring Ireland

Six regions, one loop. Read them in order and you've read the classic clockwise route around the island.

01 Dublin



The capital is compact, literary and very good company. Give it **at least three days**, stay central, and book the headline attractions online before you arrive — the Book of Kells and Kilmainham Gaol regularly sell out.

- **Trinity College & the Book of Kells** — the 1,200-year-old illuminated gospels and the breathtaking Long Room library, in a campus that taught Swift, Wilde and Beckett. The grounds are free to wander.

- **Guinness Storehouse** — seven floors around a pint-glass atrium at St. James's Gate, ending with a Guinness in the 360° Gravity Bar. Dublin's most-visited attraction; book a timed slot.
- **Kilmainham Gaol** — the prison at the heart of Ireland's revolutionary history, told by superb guides. Book weeks ahead.
- **Dublin Castle & Dubh Linn Gardens** — eight centuries of power in the heart of the city, with a quiet garden behind for when you need one.
- **EPIC, the Irish Emigration Museum** — a genuinely moving, fully interactive telling of the diaspora story, in the Docklands vaults.
- **Jameson Distillery Bow St.** — whiskey tastings on the site of the 1780 original; the working distillery is now in Midleton, Cork.
- **Glasnevin Cemetery & the National Botanic Gardens** — the graves of O'Connell, Parnell, Collins and de Valera, next door to 19.5 hectares of Victorian glasshouses. An underrated half-day.
- **Croke Park** — the 82,000-seat cathedral of Gaelic games. Better than any tour: tickets to a summer championship football or hurling match.
- **Christ Church & St. Patrick's Cathedrals** — a thousand years of ecclesiastical Dublin ten minutes apart; Jonathan Swift was Dean of St. Patrick's.
- **The literary city** — the Museum of Literature Ireland (MoLI) on St. Stephen's Green and the James Joyce Centre in a Georgian townhouse on North Great George's Street; on 16 June the whole city becomes a Joyce museum for Bloomsday.
- **Dublin Zoo & Phoenix Park** — Europe's third-largest enclosed city park, home to the zoo, the President's residence and a resident herd of wild fallow deer. Rent a bike for it.

- **Mountjoy Square & the Georgian city** — Dublin's five Georgian squares; Merrion Square's doors are the postcard, quieter Mountjoy the connoisseur's pick.

Neighbourhoods: Temple Bar is the postcard — cobbles, buskers and wall-to-wall pubs; enjoy it, then drink where locals do around **Grafton Street and St. Stephen's Green**, in Georgian **Portobello** along the canal, or out in villagey **Rathmines and Ranelagh**.

DUBLIN'S FESTIVAL YEAR

Jan TradFest (trad music in historic venues) · **Feb–Mar** International Film Festival · **Mar** St. Patrick's Festival — book beds months ahead · **May** International Literature Festival · **Jun** Bloomsday · Taste of Dublin · Pride · **Aug** Big Grill Festival · **Sep** Fringe Festival · the Liffey Swim · **Sep–Oct** Theatre Festival · Festival of History · **Nov** Book Festival · **Dec–Jan** New Year's Festival. Summer is warmest (and busiest); winter is festival-thin but the pubs are at their cosiest.

EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — DUBLIN

Eat: Chapter One (Michelin-starred, north side) for the splurge; The Winding Stair over the Ha'penny Bridge for modern Irish with a bookshop below; Gallagher's Boxty House in Temple Bar for the traditional potato pancakes; the queue outside Grogan's is for the toastie.

Drink: The Long Hall and Kehoe's for Victorian-pub perfection; The Cobblestone in Smithfield for the city's best nightly trad session — "a drinking pub with a music problem," as its own sign admits.

Sleep: The Shelbourne or the Merrion if the budget stretches; otherwise a Georgian townhouse hotel or guesthouse within walking distance of St. Stephen's Green beats a bigger room in the suburbs.

02 Ireland's Ancient East



Five thousand years of history packed into the gentle counties between Dublin and Cork — the perfect first leg of a road trip.

- **Brú na Bóinne (Newgrange)** — a 5,200-year-old passage tomb older than the pyramids, aligned to the winter solstice sunrise. Access by guided tour from the visitor centre; book well ahead.
- **Glendalough** — a 6th-century monastic city in a glacial valley in the Wicklow Mountains, with a famous round tower and superb walking trails.
- **Kilkenny** — Ireland's best medieval mile: castle, cathedral, craft breweries and narrow slips between them. An ideal overnight stop.
- **The Rock of Cashel** — a spectacular crown of medieval towers on a limestone outcrop, seat of the kings of Munster and, legend says, site of St. Patrick's conversion of the king in the 5th century. The lonely ruin of **Hore Abbey** in the field below makes the classic photograph.
- **Cobh** — the Titanic's last port of call in 1912, with a moving museum in the original White Star Line offices, a hillside of "Deck of Cards" houses and a great harbour to idle around.
- **Waterford** — Ireland's oldest city (founded by Vikings in 914), with a millennium of history in the Viking Triangle's three museums and the House of Waterford Crystal factory tour.
- **Hook Head, Wexford** — the 800-year-old Hook Lighthouse, among the world's oldest still working, at the tip of a lovely, little-visited peninsula of beaches and fishing villages.

- **Clonmacnoise** — a detour west to the Shannon: Ireland's greatest monastic city, its round towers and high crosses beside the slow river since 544. Pair it with a night in Athlone and a pint at Sean's Bar.

> **EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — THE ANCIENT EAST**
>
> **Kilkenny** earns its overnight: Campagne for a Michelin-starred dinner, Kyteler's Inn — serving since 1324, with a witch trial in its history — for the atmosphere. In **Cashel**, Mikey Ryan's gastro-bar feeds you well within sight of the Rock. **Sleep:** Kilkenny's townhouse hotels, or a manor stay like Mount Juliet (Kilkenny) or Castle Durrow (Laois) to do the region in style.

03 Cork & the Southwest



Cork city calls itself Ireland's culinary capital with some justification — graze the **English Market** (one of the oldest covered markets in Europe), then follow the food to the pubs. Twenty minutes away,

Blarney Castle offers the famous stone (kiss it for eloquence, if the queue and the backbend appeal) and gardens that are honestly the better half of the visit.

County Kerry is the crescendo. The **Ring of Kerry** loops 179 km around the Iveragh Peninsula — drive it counter-clockwise to avoid meeting tour buses head-on, allow a full day, and take the narrow, jaw-dropping **Skellig Ring** extension past Portmagee. Offshore, **Skellig Michael's** 6th-century beehive monastery (and Star Wars film set) can be landed on by a strictly limited number of boats May–September — book months ahead. **Valentia Island**, where the first transatlantic telegraph cable came ashore, remains one of Kerry's best-kept secrets.

Killarney National Park wraps mountains, lakes and Ireland's highest range — the MacGillycuddy's Reeks — around lively Killarney town. Don't miss **Torc Waterfall**, **Muckross House**, and **Ross Castle** on Lough Leane. Then the **Dingle Peninsula**: 48 km of Gaeltacht coast where the **Slea Head Drive** passes beehive huts, Iron Age forts and the Blasket Islands view. **Dingle town** itself — pop. 2,000, roughly fifty pubs, half of them doubling as hardware shops — is one of the best nights out in Ireland.

Kerry actually holds **three peninsulas** — Dingle, Iveragh and, quietest of all, the **Beara Peninsula** shared with Cork, where the Healy Pass switchbacks reward anyone fleeing the Ring of Kerry traffic. Between them sits **Kenmare**, a heritage town with food far above its weight — the smart southern base if Killarney feels too busy.

EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — CORK & KERRY

Eat: in Cork, lunch at the Farmgate Café above the English Market stalls it cooks from; in Dingle, Out of the Blue serves only what the boats landed that morning (no fish, no dinner — they mean it); Murphy's sea-salt ice cream was born here too.

Drink: Dick Mack's in Dingle — half pub, half leather workshop, whiskey wall in between; Foxy John's pours pints across a hardware counter. In Cork, the Franciscan Well brewpub by the river.

Sleep: Killarney and Dingle B&Bs are the classic play (book early in summer); the Park Hotel Kenmare and Ballyseede Castle outside Tralee cover the splurge end.

04 The West — Clare, Galway & Connemara



The **Cliffs of Moher** rise over 200 metres sheer from the Atlantic along the Clare coast — Ireland's most visited natural wonder. Come early or late in the day, pre-book the timed parking slot, and walk a stretch of the clifftop trail toward Doolin or Hag's Head to lose the crowds. **Doolin** itself is the traditional-music capital of Ireland; a session here is non-negotiable. Inland lies the **Burren**, an eerie limestone moonscape where Arctic and Mediterranean wildflowers grow side by side, dotted with dolmens like 5,800-year-old **Poulnabrone**.

Galway is Ireland's bohemian heart — a walkable knot of busker-filled lanes between Eyre Square and the Spanish Arch, at its giddiest during the July arts festival and September's oyster festival. It's also the gateway to **Connemara**: bog, mountain and shoreline in constantly shifting light, with **Kylemore Abbey** and the **Sky Road** above Clifden as headline stops. From Rossaveal or Doolin, ferries reach the **Aran Islands**, where the cliff-edge fort of **Dún Aonghasa** on Inis Mór is worth the crossing alone.

North again into **Mayo**: the pilgrim mountain of **Croagh Patrick** rises above Clew Bay and its (reputed) 365 islands — the summit climb takes three to four hours and repays every step. Georgian **Westport** below is repeatedly voted Ireland's best place to live, and feels it; beyond, the corniche road onto wild **Achill Island**, Ireland's largest, ends at the improbable white sand of Keem Bay.

EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — THE WEST

Eat: Galway punches far above its size — Aniar holds a Michelin star for wild-Atlantic tasting menus, while McDonagh's has fried the city's fish and chips since 1902. Oysters and a brown-bread pint at Moran's on the Weir, south of the city, is a rite of passage.

Drink: Tigh Neachtain's snugs in Galway's Latin Quarter; the Crane Bar for sessions; Gus O'Connor's in Doolin for the tunes that made the village famous.

Sleep: Galway city or Clifden as bases; Ashford Castle on Lough Corrib for the once-in-a-trip night; Westport's guesthouses for Mayo.

05 The Northwest — Sligo & Donegal



The quietest, wildest stretch of the Wild Atlantic Way. **Sligo** is Yeats country — his grave at Drumcliffe sits under the unmistakable flat-topped profile of **Benbulben**. In **Donegal**, the sea cliffs at **Slieve League** fall nearly 600 metres — almost three times the Cliffs of

Moher, with a fraction of the visitors — and the road over **Glengesh Pass** to Ardara is one of Ireland's great drives. Surfers should detour to **Bundoran**; beach connoisseurs to the Blue Flag strands of **Portsalon** and **Marble Hill**. At Ireland's very top, the sea stacks and lighthouse of **Malin Head** — the island's northernmost point — close the Wild Atlantic Way with appropriate drama.

> **EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — THE NORTHWEST**
>
> **Hargadon Bros** has anchored Sligo town since 1868 — dark snugs, open fires, proper food. Donegal's coastal villages do superb seafood chowder almost by default; Ardara and Dunfanaghy make the best overnight bases, and **Lough Eske Castle** outside Donegal town covers the romance. Teelin's pubs, below Slieve League, hold summer sessions worth planning a day around.

06 Northern Ireland



Remember: most non-Irish, non-British visitors need a UK ETA before crossing the border — see Part One.

Belfast has transformed into one of these islands' most compelling city breaks. **Titanic Belfast**, on the slipways where the ship was built, is among the world's best museums; pair it with a black-cab tour of the political murals, the Victorian splendour of the **Crown Liquor Saloon**, and the buzzing Cathedral Quarter. Two hours west, **Derry~Londonderry's** intact 17th-century walls and Bogside history make it well worth an overnight.

The **Causeway Coastal Route** between Belfast and Derry is one of the world's great shore drives: the clifftop ruin of **Dunluce Castle**, the swaying **Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge**, the nine glens of Antrim, and the star turn — the **Giant's Causeway**, 40,000 interlocking basalt columns poured into the sea 60 million years ago, or by Finn McCool, depending which guide you ask. Whiskey drinkers can finish at **Bushmills**, licensed in 1608.

> **EAT · DRINK · SLEEP — NORTHERN IRELAND**
>
> **Eat:** Mourne Seafood Bar is Belfast's reliable star; St. George's Market (Friday–Sunday) gathers the province's producers under one Victorian roof; Ulster fry for breakfast — the soda farl and potato bread make it distinct from its southern cousin.
>
> **Drink:** the gas-lit Crown Liquor Saloon (a National Trust property you can drink in); Kelly's Cellars, pouring since 1720; Peadar O'Donnell's in Derry for nightly music.
>
> **Sleep:** The Merchant in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter for grandeur; the Bushmills Inn as the Causeway Coast's classic stopover.

PART FIVE

Ireland county by county

All 32 counties, arranged by the four ancient provinces. No county is a wasted day — this is what each one does best.



Leinster The east · 12 counties

Dublin · the capital county

The city gets Part Four; the county deserves a day of its own. Ride the DART north to **Howth** for the cliff-path loop and fish and chips on the pier, or south through Joyce's Martello tower at Sandycove to **Dalkey**, a medieval village turned celebrity enclave, and the Sorrento views over Killiney Bay. **Tip:** the Howth market and a Dublin Bay prawn lunch make the best cheap Sunday in Leinster.

Wicklow · the Garden of Ireland

An hour from Dublin, a different world: the granite dome of the Wicklow Mountains, the monastic valley of **Glendalough**, and **Powerscourt** — gardens routinely ranked among the world's finest, with Ireland's highest waterfall nearby. Drive the military road over **Sally Gap** through bog scenery Hollywood keeps borrowing. Base in pretty Enniskerry or harbour-town Greystones. **Tip:** at Glendalough, walk past the crowds at the round tower to the Upper Lake — the Spinc boardwalk loop is the county's best two hours.

Wexford · the sunny southeast

Statistically Ireland's sunniest corner, and it feels it: the endless dunes of **Curracloe** (Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan*), the 800-year-old **Hook Lighthouse**, and Wexford town's October **Festival Opera**, improbably world-class. The Kennedy ancestral homestead at Dunganstown welcomes the curious. **Tip:** take the five-minute Ballyhack–Passage East car ferry to hop into Waterford — the back-road route the tour buses miss.

Kilkenny · the medieval capital

Ireland's best-preserved medieval city: the restored **castle** above the Nore, the **Medieval Mile** to St. Canice's Cathedral (climb the 9th-century round tower), the Black Abbey, and Kyteler's Inn with its 1324 witch-trial history. The county adds **Jerpoint Abbey's** carved cloister and the craft village of Thomastown. **Tip:** Kilkenny's Cat Laughs comedy festival (June bank holiday) is the locals' favourite weekend of the year — book or avoid accordingly.

Carlow · the quiet achiever

Ireland's second-smallest county rewards the unhurried: the **Brownshill Dolmen's** capstone is Europe's heaviest at roughly 100 tonnes, **Altamont Gardens** are a horticultural pilgrimage, and the towpath of the **Barrow** — Ireland's second-longest river — gives flat, lovely walking and kayaking through granite-bridge villages like Leighlinbridge and Graiguenamanagh. **Tip:** Duckett's Grove, a burnt-out Gothic Revival shell with walled gardens, is the county's most photogenic secret and it's free.

Kildare · horse country

The limestone grass of the Curragh plain built the Irish thoroughbred industry. Tour the **Irish National Stud** at Kildare town (with its century-old **Japanese Gardens**), catch a race at the **Curragh** or jump-racing at Punchestown, and visit **Castletown House**, the country's grandest Palladian mansion, at Celbridge. St. Brigid's cathedral and fire temple anchor Kildare town itself. **Tip:** the Kildare Village outlet is beside the Stud — useful rainy-day leverage with mixed-interest travel parties.

Laois · the midlands surprise

Most traffic passes through on the M7; the reward for stopping is the **Rock of Dunamase**, a shattered hilltop fortress with sunset views over five counties, and the **Slieve Bloom Mountains** — among Europe's oldest hills — laced with waymarked walking and mountain-bike trails. Emo Court adds a Gandon-designed neoclassical house in parkland. **Tip:** Ballyfin Demesne here is regularly voted one of the world's best hotels — the ultimate one-night splurge if the occasion ever justifies it.

Offaly · monks & telescopes

Clonmacnoise, the great monastic city on a bend of the Shannon, is the headline — arrive early or late to have its high crosses and round towers in silence. **Birr Castle** balances it with science: the 1845 "Leviathan of Parsonstown" was the world's largest telescope for seven decades, and the grounds hold formal gardens and a science centre. **Tip:** walk or cycle a stretch of the Grand Canal Greenway near Tullamore — and D.E.W. tastings await at the town's distillery.

Westmeath · the lake county

Athlone anchors the county at the Shannon's midpoint: a Norman castle, a lively left-bank quarter, and **Sean's Bar**, pouring since roughly 900 AD. Boat trips run north onto glassy **Lough Ree**, and the "Seven Wonders" of **Fore Abbey** — water that flows uphill, a tree that won't burn — reward the detour east. **Tip:** Lilliput on Lough Ennell (yes, Swift holidayed here and borrowed the name) has quiet lakeshore swimming locals keep to themselves.

Longford · slow Ireland

Ireland's least-touristed county is the connoisseur's calm: the **Corlea Trackway** centre preserves an Iron Age oak road laid across the bog in 148 BC, and the **Royal Canal Greenway** — Ireland's longest — runs flat and traffic-free clear across the county for cyclists. Granard's motte marks a Norman frontier. **Tip:** Center Parcs' forest resort here is the family rainy-week insurance policy of the midlands.

Meath · the royal county

The Boyne Valley is Ireland's Nile: **Brú na Bóinne's** passage tombs (Newgrange, Knowth, Dowth) predate the pyramids, the **Hill of Tara** crowned the High Kings, and **Trim Castle** is the largest Anglo-Norman fortress ever raised here. Add the Battle of the Boyne site at Oldbridge and Loughcrew's hilltop cairns. **Tip:** Newgrange access is by timed tour from the Brú na Bóinne centre and sells out — book the first slot and do Tara after; the winter-solstice chamber lottery is free to enter.

Louth · the wee county

Ireland's smallest county packs a border-country punch: medieval **Carlingford** under the Cooley Mountains (oysters from the lough, a whiskey distillery in town), the great high crosses of **Monasterboice**, and Drogheda — where St. Oliver Plunkett's head is venerated in St. Peter's. Cú Chulainn's epic cattle raid was fought across these hills. **Tip:** the Carlingford–Greenore greenway plus the ferry to Down makes a grand car-free half day between two jurisdictions.

Munster The south · 6 counties

Cork · the rebel county

Ireland's largest county could fill a week alone: the city and its English Market, **Cobh's** Titanic and emigration story, gourmet **Kinsale** at the head of the ragged **West Cork** coast — Clonakilty, Skibbereen, ferry-hop islands like Cape Clear and Sherkin — out to the cable car at Dursey and the lighthouse cliffs of **Mizen Head**, Ireland's land's end. **Tip:** Ballymaloe House near Midleton is where modern Irish food was born; Sunday dinner there explains everything that followed.

Kerry · the kingdom

The postcard county, covered in depth in Part Four: Killarney's lakes and reeks, the **Ring of Kerry** and Skellig Ring, **Dingle's** Gaeltacht coast, and **Skellig Michael** offshore. Beyond the icons: the beach at **Inch**, Ireland's darkest night skies over the Iveragh's Dark Sky Reserve, and Cnoc na dTobar's pilgrim path. **Tip:** Kerry Airport at Farranfore lands you 15 minutes from Killarney — a smart open-jaw trick paired with a Dublin or Shannon departure.

Limerick · city of sieges

King John's Castle and the medieval quarter face each other across the Shannon; the weekend **Milk Market** is among Ireland's best food markets, the Hunt Museum holds a startling private collection (a Picasso, a da Vinci horse), and rugby at **Thomond Park** is a religious experience. Fifteen minutes out, thatched **Adare** claims the title of Ireland's prettiest village. **Tip:** Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* walking tour shows a rawer, truer Limerick than any brochure.

Clare · cliffs & tunes

The **Cliffs of Moher** and the limestone **Burren** share a county with Ireland's deepest traditional-music culture — sessions nightly in **Doolin**, Ennis and Miltown Malbay. Add **Loop Head's** quiet lighthouse peninsula (dolphins in the Shannon estuary), Bunratty's folk park, and surf lessons at Lahinch. **Tip:** drive the Burren's R477 coast road at low light, stop at Fanore, and eat at the Burren Smokehouse in Lisdoonvarna — the salmon travels home well.

Tipperary · the golden vale

It's a long way to, and worth it: the **Rock of Cashel** crowns Ireland's richest dairy country, **Cahir Castle** guards its river island, and the thatched Swiss Cottage idles downstream. The **Glen of Aherlow** under the Galtee Mountains gives gentle walking with big views; Clonmel and the Suir Blueway add kayaking. **Tip:** photograph Cashel from **Hore Abbey** in the fields below at dusk — free, empty, and the better view.

Waterford · the Viking city

Ireland's oldest city (914 AD) tells its story in the **Viking Triangle's** three museums, then hands you a factory tour at the **House of Waterford Crystal**. The **Copper Coast** Geopark strings cliff-backed coves west toward Dungarvan, early-Christian **Ardmore** holds a perfect round tower over the sea, and the 46 km **Waterford Greenway** cycles from city to coast over viaducts. **Tip:** a "blaa" — the city's soft white breakfast roll, EU-protected — is obligatory; locals debate the best filling as fiercely as politics.

Connacht The west · 5 counties

Galway · the west's capital

Part Four covers the essentials — the busker-filled city, **Connemara**, Kylemore, the **Aran Islands**. The county keeps giving: oysters at Clarinbridge, the abbey village of Cong on the Mayo border, Ireland's only fjord at **Killary Harbour** (mussel-farm boat tours), and Joyce Country's lonely lakes. **Tip:** in the city, time an evening for the Latin Quarter first, then cross the Corrib to the West End — where Galwegians actually eat and drink.

Mayo · the wild northwest of the west

Croagh Patrick rises above Clew Bay's drowned drumlins; Georgian **Westport** below is the west's most liveable town, and the corniche road onto **Achill Island** ends at Keem Bay's improbable turquoise. On the empty north coast, the **Céide Fields** preserve the world's oldest known field systems under 5,000 years of bog. Knock's basilica draws a million pilgrims a year. **Tip:** cycle the **Great Western Greenway** (Westport–Achill, 42 km, car-free) and let the minibus shuttle bring you back.

Sligo · Yeats country

The poet's landscape is intact: flat-topped **Benbulben**, his grave at **Drumcliffe** ("Cast a cold eye…"), the lake isle of Innisfree on Lough Gill. Prehistory runs deeper still at **Carrowmore's** megalithic cemetery, with Queen Maeve's unopened cairn crowning Knocknarea above. **Strandhill's** surf and seaweed baths close the day. **Tip:** Voya's hot seaweed bath after a cold Atlantic surf lesson is the west of Ireland in one afternoon.

Roscommon · where Halloween began

Rathcroghan was the royal seat of Connacht and warrior-queen Maeve — and its cave of **Oweynagat**, "gateway to the otherworld," is the credible birthplace of Samhain, and so of Halloween. **Strokestown Park** holds the National Famine Museum, the country's most affecting; **Lough Key Forest Park** adds treetop walks and boating. **Tip:** book the Rathcroghan centre's guided tour — the earthworks mean little from the road and everything with a storyteller.

Leitrim · the unhurried one

Ireland's least-populous county, and increasingly its best-kept secret: **Glencar waterfall** (in Yeats's "The Stolen Child"), kayaking and barge-hiring on the **Shannon–Erne Blueway**, and Carrick-on-Shannon's easy riverside charm. Lough Rynn Castle supplies the four-poster night. **Tip:** hire a cruiser at Carrick for a weekend — no licence needed — and pub-hop the Shannon by water; it's Ireland's most underrated way to travel.

Ulster

The north · 9 counties — 3 in the Republic, 6 in Northern Ireland

Donegal · the wild north

Covered in Part Four — **Slieve League**, Glengesh, Malin Head — but the county rewards a week: **Glenveagh National Park's** castle and golden eagles, the quartzite cone of **Errigal** above the Poisoned Glen, **Fanad Head** lighthouse (stay in the keepers' cottages), and Tory Island's painters offshore. Donegal tweed still comes off Magee's looms in the town. **Tip:** Donegal has Ireland's best beaches and nearly nobody on them — Portsalon's Ballymastocker Bay makes the world's-best lists yearly.

Cavan · the lake county

Locals claim a lake for every day of the year, and anglers believe them — this is Ireland's coarse-fishing capital. The **Cavan Burren's** glacial-erratic sculpture park and the **Marble Arch Caves** Geopark straddle the Fermanagh border, and the Shannon rises as a pot-spring on **Cuilcagh** mountain. **Tip:** the Cuilcagh boardwalk ("the Stairway to Heaven") is best climbed from the Fermanagh side at 8am, before the crowds and the cloud.

Monaghan · drumlin country

Rolling "basket of eggs" hills produced Ireland's great poet of the ordinary, **Patrick Kavanagh** — his centre at Inniskeen honours the "stony grey soil" he immortalised. **Castle Leslie** supplies country-house grandeur (Paul McCartney married here), Rossmore Forest Park its rhododendron walks. **Tip:** Monaghan town's Tuesday livestock-market energy plus lunch at a proper old hotel dining room is border Ireland unfiltered — no tour bus has ever seen it.

Antrim (NI) · the causeway county

The **Giant's Causeway**, **Carrick-a-Rede**, Dunluce and the nine **Glens of Antrim** string along one coastal road (Part Four), with most of **Belfast** at its foot and **Bushmills** pouring since 1608. Inland: the Dark Hedges avenue and Slemish, where the enslaved Patrick herded sheep. **Tip:** Causeway crowds peak 11–4 — the site is open dawn to dusk and free on foot (you pay for parking/visitor centre), so walk in at 8am from Bushmills via the cliff path.

Down (NI) · Narnia's home county

"Where the **Mountains of Mourne** sweep down to the sea" — and where C.S. Lewis said he first imagined Narnia. Sail or kayak **Strangford Lough's** island-scattered waters, pay respects at St. Patrick's reputed grave beside **Down Cathedral**, and walk the Victorian resort promenade at Newcastle under Slieve Donard. **Tip:** the Mourne Wall walk up Donard is the North's classic summit; reward yourself with fish and chips in Dundrum's bay-view pubs.

Armagh (NI) · the orchard county

Ireland's ecclesiastical capital since Patrick founded his church here in 445: two **cathedrals of St. Patrick** — one Church of Ireland, one Catholic — face each other across the Georgian city, with a planetarium and the Robinson Library between. West lies **Navan Fort** (Emain Macha), Ulster's mythic royal seat. Bramley-apple blossom paints the county pink each May. **Tip:** time a visit for the May Apple Blossom Festival, or September's Food & Cider weekend.

Derry~Londonderry (NI) · the walled city

Walk the complete 17th-century **walls** (Ireland's only unbroken circuit), then descend into the **Bogside's** murals and the Museum of Free Derry — moving, necessary history. The coast delivers **Mussenden Temple** perched over Downhill's vast strand, and Seamus Heaney's **HomePlace** museum waits at Bellaghy. **Tip:** if you can, come for **Halloween** — Derry's four-day festival is Europe's biggest, and the walled city was made for it.

Tyrone (NI) · the empty quarter

The **Sperrin Mountains** are among the least-walked ranges in these islands — gold once drew prospectors; silence draws walkers now. The Bronze Age **Beaghmore stone circles** emerge eerily from the bog, and the **Ulster American Folk Park** at Omagh walks you from a Tyrone cottage onto an emigrant ship and out into a Pennsylvania street — the best emigration museum on the island. **Tip:** An Creagán centre makes the Sperrins legible with looped trails and local guides.

Fermanagh (NI) · the lakeland

A third of the county is water. Cruise **Lough Erne** from Enniskillen past **Devenish Island's** perfect round tower and the enigmatic carved figures of **White Island**; go underground at the **Marble Arch Caves**; and tour two of Ulster's great houses, Castle Coole and Florence Court. **Tip:** the two-hour boat hire from Enniskillen castle basin needs no licence — pack a picnic and claim an island; there are 154 to choose from.

County spotlights — a perfect day in each

The headline counties earn a closer look. Each spotlight is a ready-made day: follow it as written, or steal the pieces. Sights are detailed in Parts Four and Thirteen — this is how to string them together.

A perfect day in Dublin

No car needed

Morning: first Book of Kells slot at Trinity (booked weeks ago), then coffee and a wander down Grafton Street to St. Stephen's Green. **Midday:** lunch around South William Street, then choose your afternoon — Kilmainham Gaol's revolution tour or EPIC's emigration story. **Evening:** a pre-dinner pint in the snug at Kehoe's or The Long Hall, dinner in Portobello along the canal, and the nightly session at The Cobblestone to finish.

If it rains: the National Gallery and National Museum (both free) sit five minutes apart. **With kids:** swap the afternoon for Dublin Zoo and a Phoenix Park bike.

A perfect day in Cork

City + harbour

Morning: breakfast upstairs at the Farmgate Café while the English Market wakes below, then ring the Shandon Bells at St. Anne's — you play the tune. **Midday:** the 25-minute train to **Cobh**: the Titanic Experience in the old White Star offices, the Deck of Cards houses, the cathedral above the harbour. **Evening:** back to the city for dinner and a pint at the Franciscan Well or a snug on Oliver Plunkett Street.

With a car and another day: Kinsale's harbour and forts, then the West Cork coast as far as the light lasts.

A perfect day in Kerry

Killarney base

Morning: into the national park before the coaches — Ross Castle at opening, then the Muckross lakeshore path and Torc Waterfall. **Midday:** picnic at Ladies View on the Ring road, then over Moll's Gap and down to **Kenmare** for a proper lunch. **Afternoon:** a jaunting-car ride through the Gap of Dunloe, or the boat across the three lakes if you'd rather float than trot. **Evening:** trad and a pint in Killarney — or push on to Dingle and let the town do the rest.

The full Ring of Kerry deserves its own day — see the itineraries in Part Six.

A perfect day in Limerick

City + Adare

Morning: King John's Castle and its siege tunnels, then across the Shannon for the view back at the walls. **Midday:** graze the Milk Market (best on Saturday), then the Hunt Museum's improbable treasures. **Afternoon:** fifteen minutes to thatched **Adare** for the ruined friaries and a slow coffee. **Evening:** if Munster are at home, beg a Thomond Park ticket — there's no atmosphere like it in Irish sport; otherwise dinner back on the city's Georgian mile.

Detour: Lough Gur, 25 minutes south — Ireland's largest stone circle and 6,000 years of continuous settlement.

A perfect day in Tipperary

Castles & the vale

Morning: the **Rock of Cashel** at opening light, then the ten-minute walk down to Hore Abbey — you'll likely have the ruin to yourself. **Midday:** lunch at Mikey Ryan's in Cashel town, then 20 minutes south to **Cahir Castle** and the riverside stroll to the thatched Swiss Cottage. **Afternoon:** the scenic loop through the **Glen of Aherlow** under the Galtees. **Evening:** overnight in Cashel or push on to Cork — you're 45 minutes away.

Note: this whole day sits just off the M8 — the easiest great day in Ireland to slot into a Dublin–Cork drive.

A perfect day in Clare

Cliffs & the Burren

Morning: the **Cliffs of Moher** at 8–9am (pre-book parking), walking south toward Hag's Head until the crowds thin to nobody. **Midday:** the R477 Burren coast road north — stop at Fanore beach, then lunch at the Burren Smokehouse in Lisdoonvarna. **Afternoon:** Poulnabrone dolmen and Caherconnell fort in the limestone heart, with Aillwee Cave if the weather turns. **Evening:** Doolin. Chowder, then the session — Gus O'Connor's or McGann's, whichever is singing.

Alternative: the Doolin ferry under the cliffs, or a day on Inis Oírr, the smallest Aran island, 25 minutes offshore.

A perfect day in Galway

City + Connemara

Morning: coffee and buskers in the Latin Quarter, the Spanish Arch and the Claddagh, where the ring began. **Midday:** drive into **Connemara** — lunch in Clifden, then the Sky Road loop above the bay. **Afternoon: Kylemore Abbey** and its walled garden, returning through the Inagh Valley's brooding lakes. **Evening:** back in the city, dinner in the West End, then Tigh Neachtain's or the Crane Bar for music.

Swap: give the whole day to Inis Mór instead — ferry from Rossaveal, bike to Dún Aonghasa, and stand on the 100-metre cliff edge.

A perfect day in Antrim

Causeway Coast · UK ETA required

Morning: the **Giant's Causeway** early — walk in free from Bushmills on the cliff path and beat the coaches by two hours. **Midday: Carrick-a-Rede** rope bridge (book the timed slot), then lunch in Ballycastle overlooking Rathlin Island. **Afternoon:** the **Dark Hedges**, then back along the coast to **Dunluce Castle** for the clifftop ruin at golden hour. **Evening:** a tasting at **Bushmills** (1608) and dinner at the Bushmills Inn — or drive the Glens down to Belfast.

In a day from Belfast: doable as written — 75 minutes up the direct road, home along the coast.

PART SIX

Road-trip itineraries

Distances are short but the roads are slow — that's the point. Budget 50 km/h average on coastal routes and plan fewer, longer stops.

The City Break — 3 days, no car

Dublin + one big day trip · all by rail and coach

Day	Base	The day
1	Dublin	Trinity & the Book of Kells, Grafton Street and St. Stephen's Green, Dublin Castle, dinner and a first pint around South William Street.
2	Dublin	Kilmainham Gaol in the morning, Guinness Storehouse after lunch, trad session at the Cobblestone tonight.

Day	Base	The day
3	Day trip	Pick one: DART to Howth for the cliff walk and seafood; coach tour to Glendalough & Wicklow; or the Belfast train (2 hrs) for Titanic Belfast — ETA required.

The Classic Southwest Loop — 7 days

Dublin – Kilkenny – Cork – Killarney – Dingle – Cliffs of Moher – Galway – Dublin · ~1,100 km

Day	Base	The day
1–2	Dublin	Trinity & the Book of Kells, Kilmainham Gaol, Guinness Storehouse, a night of music around the city. No car needed yet.
3	Kilkenny – Cork	Collect the car. Kilkenny's medieval mile at lunch, the Rock of Cashel mid-afternoon, into Cork for dinner.
4	Killarney	English Market breakfast, Blarney or Cobh on the way west, then Killarney National Park — Torc Waterfall and Muckross House before dusk.

Day	Base	The day
5	Killarney	The Ring of Kerry, counter-clockwise, all day — add the Skellig Ring if the weather's kind.
6	Dingle	Slea Head Drive in the morning light, an afternoon in Dingle's shops and galleries, a session in the pub tonight.
7	Galway / Dublin	Tarbert ferry across the Shannon, Cliffs of Moher at midday, through the Burren to Galway for a final evening — or straight back to Dublin (3 hrs).

The Full Island — 10 days

Add the west, northwest and Northern Ireland to the classic loop · ~1,900 km · UK ETA required

Day	Base	The day
1–5	As above	Days 1–5 of the classic loop: Dublin, Kilkenny, Cork, Killarney and the Ring of Kerry.
6	Doolin	Dingle's Slea Head early, Tarbert ferry, Cliffs of Moher late afternoon, trad session in Doolin.

Day	Base	The day
7	Galway	The Burren and Poulnabrone in the morning, Galway's Latin Quarter by afternoon — or swap the day for an Aran Islands crossing.
8	Donegal town / Sligo	Connemara loop (Kylemore Abbey, Sky Road), then north past Benbulben; Slieve League cliffs at golden hour if you time it well.
9	Causeway Coast	Cross into the North via Derry's walls, then the Causeway Coastal Route: Dunluce, Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede, a Bushmills nightcap.
10	Belfast – Dublin	Titanic Belfast and the Cathedral Quarter, then the M1 back to Dublin (2 hrs) to drop the car.

Ireland on foot

The island is laced with waymarked trails, and even one walking day transforms a driving trip. The great long-distance routes all break into superb single-day sections:

The Wicklow Way — 127 km from Dublin's suburbs over the mountains; the Glendalough-area stages are the highlight.

The Kerry Way — 214 km around the Iveragh Peninsula: the Ring of Kerry without the tour buses.

The Dingle Way — 179 km looping the peninsula through Gaeltacht villages and past Mount Brandon.

The Causeway Coast Way — 53 km, Portstewart to Ballycastle; the Giant's Causeway-to-Carrick-a-Rede stage is arguably Ireland's finest coastal day walk.

Croagh Patrick — the 764 m pilgrim summit above Clew Bay; 3–4 hours return, loose stone near the top.

Day-walk classics — the Spinc loop at Glendalough, the Cliffs of Moher coastal path, Slieve League's Pilgrim Path, Howth's cliff circuit, Torc Mountain in Killarney.

Weather turns fast on Irish hills — carry waterproofs and check Met Éireann before committing to a summit. Route details and maps: sportireland.ie/outdoors and walkni.com.

The Grand Tour — 14 days, the whole island

Everything in this book at a humane pace · ~2,300 km · UK ETA required

Day	Base	The day
1–2	Dublin	The capital's greatest hits, at leisure.

Day	Base	The day
3	Kilkenny	Glendalough in the morning, over the Wicklow Gap, medieval Kilkenny by night.
4	Cork	Rock of Cashel, then Cobh's Titanic story, into Cork.
5	Kenmare	Kinsale for lunch, the West Cork coast, Healy Pass over the Beara Peninsula.
6	Killarney	Ring of Kerry + Skellig Ring, ending in the national park.
7	Dingle	Slea Head Drive, pub session; Conor Pass out next morning if clear.
8	Doolin / Galway	Tarbert ferry, Cliffs of Moher, the Burren coast road, trad music tonight.
9	Clifden	Galway city morning, Connemara loop, Kylemore Abbey, Sky Road sunset.
10	Westport	Croagh Patrick climb or Achill Island drive — earn the Westport pint either way.

Day	Base	The day
11	Donegal	Sligo's Yeats country under Benbulben, Slieve League cliffs by evening.
12	Derry	Glenveagh National Park, then cross into the North; walk Derry's walls at dusk.
13	Causeway Coast	Downhill beach, Dunluce, Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede, Bushmills.
14	Belfast – Dublin	Titanic Belfast, a Cathedral Quarter lunch, motorway home.

Three themed long weekends

The Foodie Southwest

Fly into Cork. Day 1: English Market, Midleton distillery, dinner in the city. Day 2: Kinsale — Ireland's original gourmet town — and the West Cork producers around Clonakilty. Day 3: Kenmare's restaurants via Bantry's Friday market. Eat everything.

Literary Ireland

Day 1: Dublin — Trinity, MoLI, the Joyce Centre, a literary pub crawl. Day 2: train west — Yeats's Sligo: Drumcliffe, Lough Gill, Benbulben. Day 3: Galway's bookshops and, in season, the Cúirt literature festival. Pack a paperback per day.

The Homecoming

For roots-tracers: Day 1: EPIC and the Irish Family History Centre in Dublin with your research (see Part Ten). Day 2: your ancestral county — the local heritage centre, the parish church, the townland itself. Day 3: Cobh, where most emigrants last touched Ireland.



THE WILD ATLANTIC WAY — 2,500 KM OF SIGNPOSTED COAST FROM KINSALE TO MALIN HEAD

PART SEVEN

Where to stay

Ireland is busy — in July and August, and around St. Patrick's Day, book everything well ahead. You'll also be asked for your first night's address at immigration.

The usual platforms (Booking.com, Airbnb, Expedia) all work well here; **Ireland's Blue Book** curates country houses and historic hotels, and **B&B Ireland** lists approved bed and breakfasts nationwide. Our own hand-picked hotel recommendations live at lovetovisitireland.com/hotels.

Bed & breakfasts

The classic Irish stay, and still the best value-to-warmth ratio in the country: a room with an Irish family, a cooked breakfast, and better local advice than any app. Hundreds across the country, typically well under city hotel prices.

Hotels

From budget chains to grand institutions — Dublin's Shelbourne has hosted Chaplin, Grace Kelly and JFK, and the Merrion holds Ireland's only two-Michelin-star restaurant. City prices are steep in season; compare against staying slightly outside the centre.

Castles & country houses

Sleep in the history: dozens of castles operate as hotels, from splurge-worthy five-stars to surprisingly affordable manor houses. Worth one night of any trip — see the full list below.

Hostels, self-catering & camping

Hostels (see Hostelworld or Independent Hostels Ireland) suit far more than backpackers — some offer real value for families too. Self-catering cottages, seaside holiday homes and townhouses shine for longer stays: try Discover Ireland, Dream Ireland or Imagine Ireland. Campsites and glamping pods dot the coasts from roughly €15 a night for two; Pitchup.com has the best directory.

Castle hotels, county by county

One of Ireland's great indulgences is a night behind medieval walls. All of these are working hotels; Celtic Castles (celticcastles.com) can book most of them.

Abbeyglen Castle, Galway

Ashford Castle, Mayo

Ballygally Castle, Antrim

Ballynahinch Castle, Galway

Ballyseede Castle, Kerry

Cabra Castle, Cavan

Castle Leslie, Monaghan

Clontarf Castle, Dublin

Dromoland Castle, Clare

Dunboyne Castle, Meath

Fitzpatrick Castle, Dublin

Kilkea Castle, Kildare

Kilronan Castle, Roscommon

Kinnitty Castle, Offaly

Lough Eske Castle, Donegal

Lough Rynn Castle, Leitrim

Waterford Castle, Waterford

Wilton Castle, Wexford

PART EIGHT

Food & drink

"Laughter is brightest where food is best." — Irish proverb. The old kitchen classics are still here, now joined by one of Europe's most exciting modern food scenes.



The classics

Irish stew — the ultimate rainy-day dish. Purists insist on mutton, potato, onion and water alone; most kitchens now use lamb or beef, and some add Guinness.

Seafood chowder — fresh and smoked fish, usually with salmon and bacon, in every coastal pub. Judge a town by its chowder.

Soda bread — flour, buttermilk, salt and bicarbonate of soda; dense, moist and made fresh daily. The mandatory chowder companion.

Boxty — the potato pancake of the northern counties, half mash and half grated raw potato, fried and served with almost anything.

Colcannon — mashed potato folded with kale or cabbage, scallions and a great deal of butter.

Dublin coddle — the capital's end-of-week pot: sausages, bacon, potato and onion, slow-stewed. Comfort in a bowl.

Barmbrack — sweet fruited tea bread; at Halloween, charms baked inside tell your fortune.

The full Irish — bacon, sausage, eggs, black and white pudding, and toast. Your B&B will insist, and you should let it.

Drink

Guinness genuinely tastes different in Ireland — fresher lines, shorter journeys, and a two-part pour you shouldn't rush. It's the national drink, but look too for stouts from the new wave of Irish craft breweries. **Irish whiskey**, typically triple-distilled and famously smooth, is in the middle of a renaissance: from a handful of distilleries in 2010 to more than forty today. Tour one — Jameson in Dublin or Midleton, Bushmills in the North, or a small independent like Dingle or Teeling. And the **Irish coffee** — hot coffee, brown sugar, whiskey, cream floated on top — was invented at Foynes flying-boat terminal in 1943 and remains the correct end to a wet day.

Above all: **the pub is the point.** It's Ireland's living room — go early for conversation, stay for the music session, and remember the round system. Children are welcome in most pubs until early evening.

PART NINE

Ireland on screen

Directors keep discovering what you're about to: the light, the ruins, the coast. Most locations are free to stand on.



Star Wars — Luke's island retreat is **Skellig Michael**; more scenes shot at Ceann Sibéal on the Dingle Peninsula and Malin Head in Donegal.

Game of Thrones — Northern Ireland was Westeros: the **Dark Hedges** (the Kingsroad), Ballintoy Harbour (the Iron Islands), Castle Ward (Winterfell), plus a full studio tour at Banbridge. Our guide to the film sites: lovetovisitireland.com.

The Banshees of Inisherin — shot on **Achill Island** and **Inis Mór**; JJ Devine's pub was built for the film, but the views are permanent.

Braveheart — the sieges were filmed at **Trim Castle**, Meath (standing in for York).

Harry Potter — the sea-cave of *The Half-Blood Prince* is the **Cliffs of Moher**.

The Quiet Man — John Ford's 1952 classic made **Cong**, on the Mayo–Galway border, a pilgrimage site that still leans into it.

Normal People — Marianne and Connell's Ireland: **Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo**, Streedagh beach, and Trinity College.

Derry Girls — the mural of the gang covers a wall on Orchard Street, **Derry**; the whole city is the set.

P.S. I Love You — the Wicklow Mountains, mostly around Sally Gap and Lough Dan.

Saving Private Ryan — Omaha Beach was **Curracloe Strand**, Wexford, with the Irish army reserve as extras.

PART TEN

Tracing your Irish roots

Eighty million people carry Ireland in their family tree. If you're one of them, the trip can be more than a holiday.

Before you fly: the paper trail

Genealogy works backwards — start with what your family knows: names, a county, ideally a **parish or townland**, and a rough emigration date. (Our free Irish ancestry guide — surnames, counties and hidden villages — is at lovetovisitireland.com.) Then hit the records, most of them free online. **irishgenealogy.ie** holds civil registration (births from 1864, with earlier church marriages) and indexed church registers. The **1901 and 1911 censuses** are fully searchable at the National Archives — sadly most 19th-century census returns burned in the Four Courts fire of 1922, which is why **Griffith's Valuation** (1847–64), a property survey naming nearly every household, matters so much. For Ulster ancestors, **PRONI** in Belfast is the equivalent treasury. Emigration-side records — ship manifests at Ellis Island and Castle Garden — often pin down the Irish origin when Irish records can't.

On the ground

In Dublin, pair **EPIC** with its **Irish Family History Centre**, where consultants will look at your research over a desk. Nearly every county has a **local heritage or genealogy centre** with parish records the internet doesn't have — and a local who knows which hill your surname farmed. Then go: stand in the parish church, find the headstones, knock politely. Rural Ireland is used to returning descendants and generally delighted by them; the person who owns the old homestead may well put the kettle on.

CITIZENSHIP BY DESCENT

Born abroad to an Irish-born parent? You're already a citizen. An Irish-born **grandparent** entitles you to register in the **Foreign Births Register** and claim citizenship — and an Irish (EU) passport. You'll need civil birth, marriage and death certificates linking the generations. Details and applications: **ireland.ie/dfa**. Processing takes many months, so start well before any planned move — or simply frame the certificate.

PART ELEVEN

Speaking Irish

You won't need Irish — but the English spoken here isn't quite the English you know either, and the road signs are a 2,000-year-old code worth cracking.

Hiberno-English, decoded

Grand — fine, okay, no bother. "How's the room?" "Grand." The national adjective.

Your man / your one — that fellow / that woman over there. No relation to you whatsoever.

The jacks — the toilets. Also "the loo."

Give out — to scold or complain. "She was giving out about the weather."

Yoke — any object whose name escapes the speaker. "Hand me that yoke there."

Banjaxed — broken beyond repair. Also applies to people after a long night.

Runners — sneakers/trainers. A **press** is a cupboard; **minerals** are soft drinks.

Acting the maggot — fooling around. **Codding** — joking. "I'm only codding you."

A soft day — misty drizzle, said approvingly. **Lashing** — heavy rain, said resignedly.

Thanks a million — the standard thank-you, worth adopting for life.

What the place names mean

Nearly every Irish place name is an anglicised Irish phrase describing the spot. Learn a dozen roots and the whole map starts talking:

Bally- (baile) — town, homestead	**Kil-** (cill) — church	**Dún-** — fort
Rath- / Lis- — ringfort	**Carrick-** (carraig) — rock	**Glen-** (gleann) — valley
Knock- (cnoc) — hill	**Slieve-** (sliabh) — mountain	**Lough** — lake
Inis- / Inish- — island	**Derry-** (doire) — oak wood	**Ard-** — height, high place
Ath- (áth) — ford	**Clon-** (cluain) — meadow	**Tra-** (trá) — beach, strand

So Ballykissane is "the town of the little path," Dún Laoghaire "Laoghaire's fort," and Dublin itself dubh linn — "the black pool."

PART TWELVE

The outdoor island

Beyond the walking trails of Part Six: fairways, waves, greenways and rivers — and what to do with the kids.

Golf

Ireland holds a third of the world's true links courses. The royalty: **Royal County Down** (routinely ranked the world's best), Open-venue **Royal Portrush**, **Ballybunion**, **Lahinch**, **Waterville** and **Portmarnock**. Green fees at the famous links run steep and tee times sell out a year ahead in summer — but superb, half-price links hide one bay over from every big name. Caddies are worth every euro on a links you don't know; wind is part of the course.

Surf, cycle, fish

Surfing: the cold-water Atlantic swell makes Ireland a genuine surf nation — learn at **Lahinch**, **Strandhill** or **Bundoran** (wetsuits included, warmth optional); experts chase the big-wave break at Mullaghmore. **Cycling:** Ireland converted its dead railways into flat, car-free **greenways** — the Great Western (42 km, Westport to Achill), the Waterford (46 km, city to the sea at Dungarvan) and the Limerick Greenway are the stars; bike hire waits at every trailhead. **Fishing:** wild brown trout on Loughs Corrib and Mask, salmon rivers

in Mayo and Donegal (state licence required for salmon and sea trout — fishinginireland.info), and deep-sea charters from Kinsale to Killybegs.

Ireland with kids

An easy country for families: distances are short, B&Bs do family rooms, pubs welcome children until early evening, and castles are climbing frames with history attached. Reliable hits: **Dublin Zoo** and **Emerald Park** (theme park + zoo, Meath), **Fota Wildlife Park** near Cork where the giraffes roam free-range, **Dingle's aquarium** and boat trips, Bunratty's costumed **folk park**, the interactive **W5** science centre in Belfast — and any beach, any castle, any boat. The winning formula is one sight before lunch, then let the landscape do the afternoon.



OLDER THAN THE PYRAMIDS — IRELAND'S STONE RECORD RUNS BACK FIVE MILLENNIA

PART THIRTEEN

Castles & ancient ruins

Ireland has more castles per square mile than almost anywhere on earth — around 3,000 recorded castle sites, most of them medieval tower houses — and ruins running back five thousand years. This is how to choose.



Why so many castles?

Ireland holds around 3,000 recorded castle sites — the residue of eight turbulent centuries. The **Anglo-Normans** arrived in 1169 and secured their conquest in stone: first earthen mottes, then great keeps like Trim and Carrickfergus. Gaelic chieftains answered with castles of their own, and from the 1400s the countryside sprouted thousands of **tower houses** — fortified family homes, four or five storeys of defence stacked over a single vaulted hall (a £10 government subsidy in 1429 helped). Cromwell's campaigns and the confiscations of the 1600s "slighted" hundreds — deliberately broken so they could never be held again — which is why so many stand today as roofless, romantic shells in sheep fields. What war spared, fashion finished: by the Georgian era the gentry abandoned draughty keeps for elegant country houses, keeping the old towers as ornaments in the demesne.

Reading a ruin is half the pleasure. The **murder hole** above the entrance let defenders drop unpleasantness on callers; the spiral stair usually turns **clockwise ascending**, cramping a right-handed attacker's sword arm; a **bawn** is the walled yard where cattle sheltered during raids; and the fine carved fireplaces floating halfway up a ruined wall mark the lord's lost upper floors.

Blarney & the gift of the gab

The most famous ritual in Irish tourism: climb the 15th-century keep of **Blarney Castle**, lie on your back at the parapet, grip the iron rails, and lean backwards over a 26-metre drop to kiss a block of limestone set into the battlements. The reward, legend insists, is **the**

gift of the gab — eloquence for life. The word itself entered English when Queen Elizabeth I, exasperated by Lord Blarney's endless, charming, commitment-free flattery, is said to have snapped that his talk was “all Blarney.”

Where the stone came from depends on which guide you believe: half of Scotland's Stone of Scone, gifted by Robert the Bruce after Bannockburn; the pillow of St. Columba; even Jacob's pillow from Genesis. Geologists have tested it — it's local Cork limestone — which has dented the ceremony not at all. Millions have kissed it, Winston Churchill among them (1912), and connecting his later oratory is irresistible.

Doing it well: arrive at opening (queues for the kiss can run past an hour by mid-morning — the climb is the bottleneck, 100 narrow spiral steps), let the attendants hold you (nobody has been dropped yet), and know the stone is wiped down between kisses. Then give the **gardens** the time most visitors don't: the Poison Garden's caged specimens, the druidic Rock Close with its witch's kitchen and wishing steps, and the arboretum — honestly the better half of the ticket.



A short history of the Irish castle

The story runs in four waves. The **Anglo-Normans** arrived in 1169 and stamped their authority in stone — vast royal keeps like Trim and Carrickfergus, built to overawe. As their grip loosened, the 15th and 16th centuries became the age of the **tower house**: a fortified family home four or five storeys tall, and the castle you'll see most — roughly 3,000 were raised by Gaelic and Old English lords alike (Bunratty and Ross Castle are the polished survivors). The **Plantation era** added fortified manors like Dunluce and Portumna — half castle, half mansion — before Cromwell's artillery made stone walls obsolete in the 1650s; many of the shattered ruins you'll pass date their ruin, not their building, to him. Finally the Victorians built castles for romance rather than defence — Ashford, Kylemore, Dromoland — which is why you can sleep in them now.

Reading a ruin: the **murder hole** sits above the entrance passage (boiling water, rocks); the spiral stair usually climbs **clockwise** so a defending swordsman's right arm had the free swing; wall slits widen inward for archers; and a **bawn** is the walled yard where cattle sheltered during raids.

The great castles

Trim Castle, Meath — the largest Anglo-Norman castle in Ireland (1180s); climb the cruciform keep on the guided tour.

Kilkenny Castle — lived in until 1935 and fully restored: the one to visit for interiors as well as walls.

Cahir Castle, Tipperary — Ireland's best-preserved medieval fortress, working portcullis included, on an island in the Suir.

Dunluce Castle, Antrim — the most dramatic ruin on the island, clinging to a Causeway Coast cliff edge; part of the kitchen fell into the sea in 1639.

Ross Castle, Killarney — a 15th-century tower house on Lough Leane; arrive by boat for the full effect.

Bunratty Castle, Clare — the most complete medieval tower house, furnished to period, with a folk park and nightly banquets — touristy and good fun.

King John's Castle, Limerick — 800 years of siege history on the Shannon, with excavated siege tunnels under the visitor centre.

Blarney Castle, Cork — yes, the stone; but the poison garden, fern glades and Rock Close reward those who skip the queue.

Carrickfergus Castle, Antrim — the best-preserved Norman castle in Ireland, begun 1177, glowering over Belfast Lough for 850 years.

Rock of Dunamase, Laois — Strongbow's shattered hilltop fortress; free, unfenced, and glorious at sunset.

Donegal Castle — the O'Donnell chieftains' tower house, burnt by its own lord rather than surrendered, restored in the town's heart.

Portumna Castle, Galway — the great semi-fortified house of 1618, with Ireland's finest recreated 17th-century kitchen garden.



DUNLUCE — THE KITCHEN FELL INTO THE SEA IN 1639



CASHEL — SEAT OF THE KINGS OF Mmunster



TRIM — THE LARGEST ANGLO-NORMAN CASTLE IN IRELAND



THE MONASTIC CITIES — EUROPE'S CLASSROOMS IN THE DARK AGES



BLARNEY — 100 STEPS TO THE GIFT OF THE GAB



STONE AGAINST THE SEA AND CENTURIES



THE MONASTIC CENTURIES



BEFORE WRITTEN HISTORY

Monastic Ireland

Between the 6th and 12th centuries Ireland's monasteries were among Europe's great centres of learning — their ruins are the country's most atmospheric places. The essentials: **Glendalough** (Wicklow) and **Clonmacnoise** (Offaly) for whole monastic cities; the **Rock of Cashel** for drama; **Jerpoint Abbey** (Kilkenny) for carved cloisters; **Monasterboice** (Louth) for Ireland's finest high crosses under a 30-metre round tower; and **Skellig Michael** for the outer limit — beehive cells on a sea crag 12 km offshore. The **round towers** you'll keep seeing (some 65 survive) were belfries, treasuries and refuges — the door set metres above the ground so the ladder could be pulled up.

Second-tier only by fame, not by beauty: **Kells Priory** (Kilkenny), a walled monastic town so complete it feels abandoned rather than ruined, free among the sheep; **Quin Abbey** (Clare), a Franciscan friary built inside a Norman castle's drum towers; **Corcomroe** in the

bare Burren hills; island monasteries on **Devenish** (Fermanagh) and **Inishmurray** (Sligo); and **Gallarus Oratory** on the Dingle Peninsula — a boat-shaped chapel of dry-fitted stone, watertight after twelve centuries without a spoonful of mortar.

Before history: tombs, forts & standing stones

Brú na Bóinne, Meath — Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth: passage tombs from c. 3200 BC, decorated with Europe's greatest concentration of megalithic art.

Poulnabrone, Clare — the iconic Burren dolmen, 5,800 years old, free and always open.

Dún Aonghasa, Inis Mór — a Bronze Age fort semicircled on a 100-metre cliff edge; no railing, all nerve.

Carrowmore, Sligo — one of Europe's oldest and largest megalithic cemeteries, with Queen Maeve's cairn on Knocknarea above.

Hill of Tara, Meath — seat of the High Kings; low earthworks, enormous meaning, and a view over a third of Ireland on a clear day.

Staigue & Grianan of Aileach — the finest stone ringforts, in Kerry and Donegal; of the ~45,000 ringforts dotting Irish farmland, these are the cathedrals.

Loughcrew Cairns, Meath — hilltop passage tombs the crowds never reach; collect the gate key locally and let yourself into a 5,000-year-old chamber.

Drombeg Stone Circle, Cork — West Cork's "Druid's Altar," aligned to the winter solstice sunset, with a Bronze Age cooking pit alongside.

Céide Fields, Mayo — the world's oldest known field systems, a farmed landscape sealed under blanket bog for over five millennia, on cliffs to match.

Ruins that cost nothing

Some of Ireland's best ruins have no ticket booth, no fence and no queue — part of the pleasure is having a national monument to yourself in a sheep field. A starter list: **Hore Abbey** below the Rock of Cashel; **Kells Priory's** walled acres; the **Rock of Dunamase**; **Poulnabrone** and most of the Burren's forts and tombs; **Monasterboice's** high crosses; **Grianan of Aileach's** restored ring walls above three loughs; Sligo's **Carrowkeel** passage tombs (a hill walk, bring a torch); and almost any castle marked on the OS map with no name you recognise. The rule of the unfenced ruin: it's likely on farmland — gates closed, dogs leashed, nothing climbed that looks like it's deciding whether to fall.

Ruins with legends attached

Leap Castle, Offaly — billed as Ireland's most haunted: a chieftain murdered his priest brother at the altar of the "Bloody Chapel," and an oubliette full of bones was found off it. The owner gives tours by arrangement.

Ross Castle, Killarney — prophecy said it would fall only to an attack from the water; in 1652 Cromwell's general floated gunboats up the lough, and the garrison, seeing the prophecy afloat, surrendered.

Dunluce, Antrim — after the kitchen (and, the story goes, the cooks) dropped into the sea in 1639, the lady of the house refused to spend another night; the family moved out for good.

Charles Fort, Kinsale — the "White Lady" walks the star-shaped ramparts: a bride whose groom was shot on their wedding night, she in the sea by morning.

Kilkea Castle, Kildare — the "Wizard Earl" of Kildare is said to ride out from the castle every seven years on a silver-shod horse, until the shoes wear away and Ireland is free.

Malahide Castle, Dublin — 800 years of one family (the Talbots) and five resident ghosts, including Puck the jester; fourteen Talbot cousins breakfasted here on the morning of the Boyne in 1690 — all dead by evening.

Second-tier only by fame

Where to go once (or instead of) the headliners — emptier, and every bit as good:

Carrickfergus, Antrim — the best-preserved Norman castle in the North, guarding Belfast Lough since 1177.

Dunguaire, Galway — the much-photographed tower on Kinvara's shore, on the road between the Burren and Galway city.

Minard & the Dingle towers, Kerry — storm-broken Knights of Kerry keep above a boulder beach; nobody there, ever.

Kells Priory, Kilkenny — a fortified medieval priory the size of a village, wandered by sheep; arguably Ireland's most underrated ruin.

Roscommon & Ballintubber — vast 13th-century royal shells in empty midland fields; you'll share them with crows.

Aughnanure, Galway — the O'Flaherty stronghold near Oughterard, complete bawn and all, on the way into Connemara.

Quin Abbey, Clare — a Franciscan friary built inside a slighted Norman castle, cloister intact; free, and minutes from Bunratty's crowds.

Devenish Island, Fermanagh — ferry to a perfect round tower and abbey alone on a Lough Erne island.

VISITING WELL

- The **OPW Heritage Card** covers most sites in this chapter — it pays for itself by the third visit (heritageireland.ie; Northern Ireland sites are separate, many under the National Trust).
- Newgrange and Skellig Michael are **strictly capacity-limited** — book months ahead; most other ruins you'll have nearly to yourself before 10am.
- Many of the best ruins stand in **working farmland** — close gates, mind livestock, and leave every stone where five thousand years put it.

PART FOURTEEN

Dublin on foot

The city was built for walking — compact, flat, and story-dense. Three self-guided routes, each 2–3 hours at a stroll, no ticket required unless you choose to go in.

Walk 1 — The Georgian & literary city

~3 km · 2–3 hours · start: St. Stephen's Green main gate

Cross **St. Stephen's Green** diagonally past the duck ponds and the Yeats memorial, exiting to **Merrion Row** and the colourful doors of **Merrion Square** — Oscar Wilde reclines on his rock in the corner park, opposite his childhood home at No. 1. Loop the square, then down **Mount Street Upper** to the Grand Canal at **Baggot Street Bridge**, where Patrick Kavanagh sits in bronze on his bench — "commemorate me where there is water." Follow the towpath west, cut up **Fitzwilliam Street** — one of Europe's longest intact Georgian streetscapes — and finish through **Fitzwilliam Square**, the smallest and best-kept of the five. **Worth the ticket:** MoLI on the Green's south side.

Walk 2 — Vikings, cathedrals & the Liberties

~3.5 km · 2–3 hours · start: City Hall, Dame Street

Start under City Hall's rotunda, then through **Dublin Castle** and out the back to the **Dubh Linn Gardens** — the "black pool" that named the city; the **Chester Beatty's** world-class manuscript collection here is free and unmissable. On to **Christ Church Cathedral** (1030) and its medieval crypt, down to **St. Patrick's Cathedral**, where Swift is buried, then west into the **Liberties** — Dublin's oldest quarter — along Thomas Street past the **Guinness Storehouse** gates and the new-wave distilleries (Teeling; Pearse Lyons in its converted church). Finish with a pint where locals do — Arthur's, in the brewery's shadow. **Detour:** Marsh's Library (1707), unchanged since Swift read there.

Walk 3 — The north side: rebels & writers

~3 km · 2 hours · start: O'Connell Bridge

Up **O'Connell Street** past the monuments to the **GPO**, headquarters of the 1916 Rising — the bullet scars are still in the columns and the museum inside is excellent. Continue to the **Garden of Remembrance**, then the **Hugh Lane Gallery** (Francis Bacon's studio, moved from London wall by wall). Down **North Great George's Street's** tall terraces to the **James Joyce Centre**, across to **Mountjoy Square**, and down Gardiner Street to finish at Gandon's riverfront **Custom House**. **Extend it:** 15 minutes east along the quays to EPIC and the Jeanie Johnston famine ship.

PART FIFTEEN

The Wild Atlantic Way, stage by stage

The world's longest defined coastal route: 2,500 km from Kinsale to Malin Head, waymarked the whole way. Nobody should drive it in one go — here it is in six stages, each a great trip on its own.

Stage 1 · The Haven Coast — Kinsale to Mizen Head

~200 km · 2–3 days

Gourmet Kinsale and star-shaped Charles Fort, then the soft coves of West Cork: Clonakilty (order the black pudding at its source), Skibbereen's famine story, Baltimore's harbour and the ferry to Cape Clear. Finish at **Mizen Head's** footbridge over the churning Atlantic — Ireland's land's end. **Don't miss:** Lough Hyne, Europe's first marine nature reserve, best by night kayak.

Stage 2 · The peninsulas — Beara, Kerry, Dingle

~450 km · 3–5 days

The route's crescendo, detailed in Part Four: over the Healy Pass on quiet **Beara**, the full **Ring of Kerry** with the Skellig Ring extension, then **Slea Head** on the Dingle Peninsula. **Pacing:** one peninsula per day is the maximum that still counts as a holiday.

Stage 3 · The Cliff Coast — Loop Head to Galway Bay

~250 km · 2 days

Cross the Shannon on the Tarbert–Killimer ferry to **Loop Head** — Moher's drama, none of its crowds — then surf-town Lahinch, the **Cliffs of Moher**, and the Burren's limestone shore road (R477) under Black Head to Galway Bay's oyster villages. **Night move:** Doolin for the session.

Stage 4 · The Bay Coast — Galway to Achill

~350 km · 2–3 days

Galway city, then **Connemara** — the Gaeltacht coast road, Roundstone, Clifden's Sky Road, Kylemore — before Killary fjord and into Mayo: Croagh Patrick, Westport, and the bridge onto **Achill Island** for Keem Bay. **Don't miss:** Dog's Bay and Gurteen, twin white-shell beaches back to back near Roundstone.

Stage 5 · The Surf Coast — Erris to Donegal town

~300 km · 2 days

The emptiest stage and the connoisseur's favourite: north Mayo's sea-stack coast and the **Céide Fields**, surf at Enniscrone and **Strandhill** (seaweed bath after), Benbulben and Yeats country, then Mullaghmore's big-wave headland into Donegal. **Don't miss:** Dún Briste, the sea stack off Downpatrick Head, standing like a severed piece of Ireland.

Stage 6 · The Northern Headlands — Slieve League to Malin Head

~350 km · 2–3 days

Donegal saves the wildest for last: **Slieve League's** 600-metre cliffs, Glengesh Pass to tweed-town Ardara, Gweedore's beaches under Errigal, **Fanad Head** lighthouse, and Inishowen's final run to **Malin Head** — where the route ends and the aurora sometimes shows in winter. **Don't miss:** the Fanad–Portsalon road above Ballymastocker Bay.

Practicalities: signage runs north–south but the route works both ways — south-to-north keeps the ocean on the passenger's side. Fuel up in towns; west-coast stations thin out after dark. Full stage maps: thewildatlanticway.com.

PART SIXTEEN

Belfast & the North in depth

Twenty-five years of peace turned Belfast into one of Europe's most rewarding weekend cities — big-museum ambition, small-city warmth, and history that's honest about itself. UK ETA required for most visitors (Part One).

The city by quarter

City centre — the grand Edwardian **City Hall** (free tours, Titanic memorial garden), the Linen Hall Library, and the "Entries" — narrow Victorian alleys hiding the oldest pubs.

Cathedral Quarter — cobbled lanes around St. Anne's: street art, the Duke of York's memorabilia-crammed snug, the MAC arts centre, and the city's best night out under Commercial Court's fairy lights.

Titanic Quarter — **Titanic Belfast** on the very slipways (allow 3 hours; book online), the SS Nomadic tender alongside, and the great yellow Harland & Wolff cranes, Samson and Goliath.

Queen's Quarter — the university, the free **Ulster Museum** (Armada gold, the mummy Takabuti), the Botanic Gardens' Palm House, and café life along the Lisburn Road.

Gaeltacht Quarter — the Falls Road: Irish-language culture at Cultúrlann, the murals, and Clonard Monastery, where the peace talks quietly began.

East Belfast — C.S. Lewis Square's Narnia sculptures, Van Morrison's Cyprus Avenue, and the Connswater greenway through both their childhoods.

The Troubles, honestly

Belfast doesn't hide its past; it explains it. The **black-cab mural tours** are the way in — drivers from both communities take you along the Falls and Shankill roads and the **peace walls**, taller than the Berlin Wall ever was and still standing, some gates still closed at night. You'll be invited to sign the wall, as Clinton and Bono did. Do it early in your visit: everything else about the city makes more sense afterwards. It's safe and welcoming — just let locals lead that conversation in pubs.

Eat, drink, sleep, move

Eat: Mourne Seafood Bar; St. George's Market (Fri–Sun) for the full local larder; an Ulster fry wherever looks busy — the soda farl and potato bread make it distinct. Michelin ambition at OX. **Drink:** the gas-lit **Crown Liquor Saloon's** ten carved snugs (National Trust-owned); Kelly's Cellars (1720) for trad; the Duke of York. **Sleep:** the Merchant (grand), the Titanic Hotel in the old drawing offices (atmospheric), Queen's Quarter guesthouses (value). **Move:** the centre is walkable; Glider buses cross town; the **Enterprise** train links Dublin in about two hours.

Day trips from Belfast

The Causeway Coast — the classic (Part Four): Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede, Dunluce, Bushmills. Full day; doable by tour bus if you'd rather not drive.

The Ards Peninsula — Strangford Lough: Mount Stewart's gardens (among the world's finest), the Portaferry–Strangford ferry, seals at low tide.

The Mournes — Slieve Donard's summit from Newcastle, or the quieter Silent Valley loops. C.S. Lewis's Narnia landscape.

Hillsborough — the royal castle and gardens, Georgian village streets, and the best food stop on the road south.

PART SEVENTEEN

Music & the pub

Irish traditional music is not a show put on for visitors — it's a living folk tradition that happens in public. Knowing how it works turns a good night into the best night of your trip.

How a session works

A **seisiún** is musicians gathering around a pub table — not a stage — to play tunes in sets: jigs, reels, hornpipes, the odd slow air or unaccompanied song. There's usually an anchor musician the pub quietly pays; everyone else just turns up. Sets run about three tunes, started when someone starts them, and between sets the talk is half the point. **Etiquette:** sit near, not among, the musicians unless invited; keep conversation low — and give dead silence to a slow air or sean-nós song; never touch an instrument; clap the set, not each tune; and if you play to session standard, ask the anchor before joining — one tune, then read the room.

The instruments you're hearing

Fiddle — a violin played Irish; the backbone of most sessions, with regional accents (Donegal fast and fierce, Sligo sweet, Clare rolling).

Uilleann pipes — "elbow" pipes, bellows-blown; the most complex bagpipe in the world and the most expressive — the sound of the slow air.

Flute & tin whistle — the wooden flute drives the melody in the west; the humble whistle is where every Irish child starts.

Bodhrán — the goatskin frame drum, played with a tipper. Good bodhrán is a heartbeat; bad bodhrán is why some pubs hang warning signs.

Concertina & button accordion — the box family; Clare is concertina country.

Harp — the national symbol (Ireland is the only country with an instrument for an emblem), heard more in concerts than sessions — catch one if you can.

Where the music lives

Doolin (Clare) is the famous one — nightly year-round in three pubs. **Ennis** and **Miltown Malbay** are Clare's deeper cuts (July's Willie Clancy summer school floods the town with players). **Dingle** mixes trad with everything; **Galway's** Crane Bar and Tigh Chóilí run two sessions a day; **Dublin's** Cobblestone is the capital's true house of tunes. In the North: Kelly's Cellars and the Duke of York in Belfast,

Peadar O'Donnell's in Derry. August's **Fleadh Cheoil** — the world championship of Irish music, a different host town each year — is the greatest concentration of players on earth.

And the pub around the music: order at the bar and pay as you go; join the round if one starts and buy your turn unprompted; know that "last orders" is a bell, a prayer and a negotiation. A pub with a grocer's counter or hardware shelves isn't a theme — it's a survivor. And Guinness needs its two-part pour: the pause is quality control, not slowness.

PART EIGHTEEN

The sporting island

Sport is Ireland's other religion, and the matches are open to anyone. An afternoon on a GAA terrace teaches you more about the country than any museum.

Gaelic games — the heart of it

Hurling is the world's fastest field sport — 3,000 years old, ash sticks, a ball that flies over 150 km/h — and **Gaelic football** is its high-catching sibling. Both are run by the **GAA**, organised by parish and county, and fiercely amateur: the players filling 82,000-seat **Croke Park** go to work on Monday. The **All-Ireland championships** run May–September (hurling final in July, football final later in the summer); the great hurling counties — Kilkenny, Tipperary, Cork, Limerick, Clare — all sit on your route.

Getting in: club and early-round county matches are turn-up-and-pay affairs (€15–25); big championship days sell through the GAA's official site and sell fast — finals are near-impossible, but semi-finals and provincial finals are realistic. Rainy-day fallback: Croke Park's **GAA Museum** and rooftop skyline tour. In summer, ask any pub which match matters this weekend — there is always one.

Rugby, racing & the rest

Rugby is the all-island game — one team, north and south. Internationals fill Dublin's **Aviva Stadium** (the Six Nations, Feb–Mar, is the hottest ticket in the country); the four provinces — Leinster, **Munster** (Limerick's Thomond Park, the game's cathedral of noise), Ulster, Connacht — play September–May with easier tickets and atmosphere to spare.

Horse racing runs deep: the flat at the **Curragh**, jumps at **Punchestown** and **Leopardstown**, and July's **Galway Races** — a week when the west stops working. The **Laytown races** (September) run on a Meath beach, Europe's only official strand racing. A day at the races needs no expertise: €2 each-way bets, dress between smart and weatherproof, and let the bookies' patter entertain you. Beyond that: **road bowling** in Cork and Armagh (a steel ball hurled down country lanes on Sundays), League of Ireland soccer for terrace culture, and **currach** regattas along the west coast all summer.

PART NINETEEN

Essentials & links

The practical A–Z

Accessibility — major attractions and newer hotels are well equipped; historic sites and old pubs less so. Check accessibleireland.com and call B&Bs ahead.

Children — warmly welcomed nearly everywhere, including pubs until early evening. Under-5s ride public transport free; family tickets are standard at attractions.

Heritage Card — if you'll visit three or more OPW sites (Kilmainham, Rock of Cashel, Dún Aonghasa, Muckross…), the annual OPW Heritage Card pays for itself. heritageireland.ie

Internet — excellent 4G/5G coverage; buy an eSIM or a prepaid SIM at the airport. EU phones roam free in the Republic; check NI roaming terms.

Health — pharmacies ("chemists") are everywhere and pharmacists advise freely; EU visitors' EHIC covers public care in the Republic. Emergency: 112.

LGBTQ+ travellers — Ireland legalised same-sex marriage by popular vote in 2015; Dublin, Cork, Galway and Belfast all have visible scenes and summer Pride festivals.

Midges — tiny biting flies on still summer evenings in the boggy west; repellent handles them.

Opening hours — shops broadly 9–6, later Thursdays, shorter Sundays; pubs to 23:30-ish, later with late licences; rural attractions often close November–February.

Phones — country code +353 (Republic), +44 (NI). Within the island, dial NI numbers from the Republic with the 048 prefix.

Safety — Ireland is among Europe's safest destinations; ordinary city precautions in Dublin late at night suffice. Police: Garda Síochána (Republic), PSNI (NI).

VAT refunds — non-EU visitors can reclaim VAT on larger purchases in the Republic; ask shops for the retail-export form and validate at the airport.

Weather — met.ie (Met Éireann) is the local oracle; "grand soft day" means drizzle. Sunset ranges from 16:00 in December to 22:00 in June — plan around the light.

QUICK REFERENCE

- **Emergency:** 112 or 999 (island-wide, free)
- **Electricity:** 230 V, type G three-pin plug
- **Time zone:** GMT (GMT+1 in summer)
- **Tipping:** 10–12.5% in restaurants; none at the bar
- **Tap water:** safe everywhere
- **Smoking:** banned indoors in all public places

OFFICIAL INFORMATION

- **ireland.com** — Tourism Ireland (whole island)
- **discoverireland.ie** — Fáilte Ireland (Republic)
- **discovernorthernireland.com** — Tourism NI
- **gov.uk** — UK ETA application
- **ireland.ie/dfa** — visas & entry (Republic)
- **transportforireland.ie** — journeys, fares, Leap Card

TRANSPORT

- **irishrail.ie** — trains & DART
- **buseireann.ie** — national buses
- **dublinbus.ie** · **luas.ie** — Dublin city transport
- **eflow.ie** — M50 toll payment
- **Car hire:** Enterprise, Avis, Europcar, Irish Car Rentals, Carhire.ie

ACCOMMODATION

- **irelandhotels.com** — Irish Hotels Federation
- **irelands-blue-book.ie** — country houses & historic hotels
- **bandbireland.com** — approved B&Bs
- **hostelworld.com** · **independenthostelsireland.com**
- **pitchup.com** — campsites & glamping
- **celticcastles.com** — castle stays

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- **heritageireland.ie** — OPW castles, monuments & gardens

The festival year at a glance

Jan — TradFest, Temple Bar: trad music in Dublin's historic rooms.

Feb — St. Brigid's weekend opens the festival year; Dublin Film Festival follows.

Mar — St. Patrick's Festival, nationwide — Dublin's parade is the flagship; book months out.

May — International Literature Festival Dublin; Bealtaine bonfires mark old May Day.

Jun — Bloomsday (16th); Cork Midsummer; Taste of Dublin.

Jul — Galway International Arts Festival, then Galway Race Week; Willie Clancy trad summer school in Clare.

Aug — Puck Fair in Killorglin (a goat is crowned king; est. 1613); the Rose of Tralee; Fleadh Cheoil, the world's biggest trad-music gathering.

Sep — Galway Oyster Festival; Lisdoonvarna Matchmaking Festival; Dublin Fringe; the All-Ireland finals fill Croke Park.

Oct — Derry Halloween, Europe's biggest; Wexford Festival Opera; Cork Jazz Festival.

Dec — Christmas markets (Galway's is the charmer); Wren Day parades on the 26th, oldest in Dingle.

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