

# Central North



The six central northern counties – Cavan, Monaghan, Roscommon, Leitrim, Longford and Westmeath – might be a long way from the country's coveted coastline (in Irish terms, at least), but with the mighty River Shannon surging through wooded countryside interspersed with trout-teeming lakes, there's no shortage of water in these parts.

There is, however, a refreshing lack of tourists. That's not to say there's nothing here for visitors to see. Cavan and Monaghan border Northern Ireland, forming part of the province of Ulster along with the North's six counties, and the central north has some major museums interpreting Ireland's colonial past. It also has some significant Celtic sites. Chief among them is the awe-inspiring Cruachan Aí in County Roscommon, spattered with barrows, cairns and standing stones. There's plenty for visitors to do, too, especially outdoors, including mountain hikes along pristine trails and – thanks to all that water – fishing, boating and water sports.

Although it's well off the well-trampled tourist track, the central north is not cocooned from the country's transformed landscape. Ireland's skyrocketing real estate prices have put the coast beyond the reach of many would-be home- and business- owners. As a result, sea-changers are now seeking out previously unimagined possibilities in the country's centre. In turn, these inland areas are starting to see some of the cosmopolitan changes and economic effects that the rest of the country experienced over a decade ago.

But the central north's abundance of water, vast tracts of bog, unfolding fields and mist-shrouded forests means it remains, perhaps, Ireland's final frontier; and a perfect place to retreat.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Take to the Water** Cruise the Shannon-Erne Waterway (p493) at Carrick-on-Shannon
- **Scale New Heights** Get a bird's eye view of Lough Key's lakes and woodlands on a treetop canopy walk (p490)
- **Backtrack** Contemplate the 148 BC–built oak trackway unearthed in County Longford's bogland (p495)
- **Say Cheese** Buy prized Corleggy Cheese direct from the farm or learn how to make it yourself during a cheese-making course (p481) at Belturbet
- **Hit the Literary Trail** Follow Patrick Kavanagh's footsteps around Inniskeen (p487)



■ POPULATION: 291,650

■ AREA: 9302 SQ KM



## COUNTY CAVAN

Cavan's Irish name, An Chabháin, means 'the hollow', and there's not a lot of solid ground here, to be sure. Cavan is known as 'the Lake Country' as it's said there are no fewer than 365 lakes – one for every day of the year. (Some residents claim it has 366, allowing for leap years, too.) Unsurprisingly, Cavan is paradise for anglers, whose luck would have to be running very dry not to land a catch here.

Cavan has some spectacular paths leading through the wild Cuilcagh Mountains, which are the source of the 300km River Shannon. If too much water's barely enough, you can rent a boat at Belturbet to cruise the Shannon-Erne Waterway.

### History

Magh Sleacht, a plain in the northwest near the border village of Ballyconnell, was a hugely important 5th-century druidic centre. The principal Celtic deity, Crom Cruaich, diminished rather swiftly in significance as St Patrick set about spreading the Christian word.

In the 12th century, the Anglo-Normans tried to get a foothold in Cavan, but the landscape foiled them and the region remained under the control of the Gaelic O'Reilly clan. The O'Reillys ruled until the 16th century, when they joined the other Ulster lords to fight the Nine Years' War (1594–1603) against the English and were defeated.

As part of the Ulster Plantation, Cavan was divided up among English and Scottish settlers. In the 1640s, taking advantage of England's troubles, Owen Roe O'Neill led a rebellion against the settlers. O'Neill died in 1649 of suspected poisoning in Clough Oughter Castle near Cavan.

After the War of Independence in 1922, the Ulster counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal were incorporated into the South. With the border so close, republicanism is strong here but with border points now removed you may not even notice crossing between the two.

### Activities

#### FISHING

Exceptional lake fishing reels in anglers from all over Europe to the county's southern and western borders. It's primarily coarse fish-

ing, but there's also some game angling for brown trout in Lough Sheelin. Most lakes are well signposted, and the types of fish available are marked.

For more information, contact **North West Tourism** (☎ 049-433 1942) or the **Northern Regional Fisheries Board** (☎ 049-37174), both in Cavan town.

#### WALKING

The highlight for many walkers in the region is the Cavan Way (p699), traversing 26km between the hamlets of Blacklion and Dowra through the Cuilcagh Mountains. Heading south from Blacklion, it takes you through an area known locally as the Burren, which is dotted with prehistoric monuments; past the Shannon Pot, the source of Ireland's longest river; then by road to Dowra, passing over the Black Pigs Dyke, an ancient fortification that once divided Ireland in two.

Maps of the Cavan Way are on display in Blacklion and Dowra. Detailed route information (including downloadable pdf maps) is available online at [www.cavantourism.com](http://www.cavantourism.com).

At Blacklion you can also pick up the Ulster Way (p700).

### CAVAN TOWN

☎ 049 / pop 3550

According to its residents, the county town of Cavan has boomed over the last few years. Thankfully, one person's boom is another's tranquil escape: Cavan is still the sort of place where strangers say 'hello' to you in the street.

Sparkling crystalware is a speciality here, as are Cavan's gleaming horses.

#### Orientation & Information

Cavan centres on two parallel streets, country town-like Main St and the more elegant Farnham St, with its Georgian houses, large courthouse and garda station, and imposing cathedral.

**Cavan tourist office** (☎ 433 1942; [www.cavan-tourism.com](http://www.cavan-tourism.com); Farnham St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Located above the library on the first floor.

**Ego Internet Café & Coffee House** (☎ 437 3488; Convent Bldgs, Main St; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Check your email here.

**Genealogical Research Centre** (☎ 436 1094; [cavangenealogy@eircom.net](mailto:cavangenealogy@eircom.net); Farnham St; assessment fee €95, single search €25; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) In the same offices as the tourist office, this centre can access over one

million records for you and is a handy resource if you don't want to spend days tracking down files yourself.

#### Sights

The grave of 17th-century rebel leader Owen Roe O'Neill is in Abbey St's cemetery. Nearby, an ancient **bell tower** is all that remains of the 13th-century Franciscan friary the town grew up around.

The town's famous crystal is displayed (with price tags) at the **Cavan Crystal Showroom** (☎ 433 1800; [www.cavancrystaldesign.com](http://www.cavancrystaldesign.com); Dublin Rd; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, noon-5pm Sun). It also sells a wide variety of local crafts, from pottery to candles. The showroom is about 2km southeast of the town centre on the N3.

**Cavan Equestrian Centre** (☎ 433 2017; [www.cavan-equestrian.com](http://www.cavan-equestrian.com); Ballyhaise Rd), 1.5km north of town off the N3, is the largest in the country, with showjumping events most weekends and auctions six times a year. Events are posted on the website.

#### Sleeping

**Glendown House** (☎ 433 2257; [www.glendownhouse.com](http://www.glendownhouse.com); 33 Cathedral Rd; s €40-45, d €70; (P)) Tom and Eileen Flynn make their warm, cosy home feel like your home too. If you've overdosed on fried breakfasts, there's a wonderful fruit-and-yoghurt alternative. It's gay-friendly.

**Farnham Arms Hotel** (☎ 433 2577; [www.farnhamarms-hotel.com](http://www.farnhamarms-hotel.com); Main St; s €65-130, d €99-150, tr €150-180, bar menu €7.50-12, dinner €35; (P)) A typical, welcoming provincial main-street hotel, the Farnham Arms' clean, spacious rooms are endearingly a little battered at the edges. The lounge serves carvery lunches; dinner at the restaurant includes old favourites like a Farnham grill or chicken Maryland, while the bar has good all-day hot snacks and sandwiches.

**Cavan Crystal Hotel** (☎ 436 0600; [www.cavancrystal-hotel.com](http://www.cavancrystal-hotel.com); Dublin Rd; s/d from €110/170, dinner €45; (P) (♿)) Adorned with glittering Cavan Crystal chandeliers, this luxurious 85-room hotel contains a fine restaurant and offers onsite beauty treatments.

**Farnham Estate** (☎ 437 7700; [www.farnhamestate.com](http://www.farnhamestate.com); Cavan; s €125-165, d €150-190; (P) (♿) (♿)) Within misty woodlands, this sprawling 16th-century estate was recently given the royal treatment by the Radisson SAS group. Rooms synthesise contemporary style with the ancient forested surrounds, there's a garden-view restaurant and an indoor/outdoor swim-

ming pool as well as mind-blowing spa facilities (also open to nonguests). The estate's 3km east of town on the R198.

#### Eating & Drinking

**McMahons Café Bar** (☎ 436 5484; [www.mcmahonscafe-bar.com](http://www.mcmahonscafe-bar.com); Main St; café dishes €4-5.50, pizzas €6-12; ☎ café 11am-6pm Mon-Sat, bar 10am-11.30pm daily) This hip establishment could easily hold its own in Dublin. Upstairs there's a funky little café whipping up squeezed-on-the-spot juices and fresh-filled bagels. Downstairs the cavernous tiered bar has live bands on Friday and Sunday and cutting-edge DJs on Thursday and Saturday. There's also a late-night pizza menu (served until 10pm) and over 200 cocktails.

**Melbourne Bakery** (☎ 436 1266; Main St; mains €6-10; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) A friendly local clientele and a delicious array of pastries make this old-world bakery-canteen a treat for breakfast and lunch or just a cuppa.

**Side Door** (☎ /fax 433 1819; Drumalee Cross; mains €15-29; ☎ 5.30-10.30pm Tue-Sat, 12.30-4pm & 5.30-9.30pm Sun) It's worth heading 1km out of town to this sophisticated spot with a seductive sax-and-strings soundtrack, local contemporary art on the walls, and an upbeat world menu ranging from fajitas to curries and char-grilled steaks.

**Abbey Bar** (☎ 433 1650; Coleman Rd) An unreconstructed old-men's pub, Abbey has lots of dark wood, tatty seats and a row of proper characters having slightly surreal conversations.

#### Getting There & Around

Buses arrive at and depart from the small **bus station** (☎ 433 1353; Farnham St; ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat).

Cavan is on the Dublin–Donegal, Galway–Belfast and the Athlone–Belfast bus routes. Buses to Dublin (two hours, 6am to 10pm Monday to Saturday, 8am to 8pm Sunday) leave on the hour. There are buses to Belfast (three hours, two per day Monday to Saturday, one Sunday), to Galway (3¼ hours, two per day Monday to Saturday, one Sunday) and to Donegal (2¼ hours, four daily).

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 433 1353; [www.buseireann.ie](http://www.buseireann.ie); Farnham St) also has services running to various small towns throughout the county including four services daily to Bawnboy, Ballyconnell and Belturbet, and buses leaving on the hour to Virginia, Kells, Dunshaughlin, Navan and Cootehill.

## LAKE ESCAPES

Favoured by renegades, rebels and reclusive royal residents, *crannógs* (meaning 'small islands built with young trees') were the escapists' homes of choice. These artificial islands, particularly popular in times of political instability, had a surprisingly long life, and were made throughout the 6th to the 17th centuries.

Overgrown now with trees and brambles, it's sometimes hard to see *crannóg* remains as the amazingly dogged pieces of engineering that they are. Using the simplest tools, the islands were built from scratch from layers of wood, peat, stone, heather and soil. *Crannóg* dwellers made access even trickier by palisading the islands, and by using zigzagging causeways or submerged stepping stones as a front path. Sometimes canoe-like boats were the only way to get across.

*Crannógs* were used as defended farmsteads, craft centres and storage places for valuables (for example, during 9th-century Viking raids). They were important rebel hide-outs during the Nine Years' War: the English realised this, and made *crannógs* a serious target in their northerly Irish assaults.

There are over 1200 *crannógs* in Ireland (mainly in Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim and over the border in Fermanagh), but few have been properly excavated. Those that have give tantalising glimpses of *crannóg* life: manacled, mutilated skeletons of slaves and hostages, for example, highlight their turbulent histories.

Taxis can be ordered on ☎ 433 1172 or ☎ 433 2876.

## AROUND CAVAN TOWN

### Lough Oughter & Killykeen Forest Park

Rod-wielding anglers congregate at Lough Oughter, which splatters across the map like spilt liquid. Coarse fishing aside, the wildlife-rich lough is also idyllic for naturalists, walkers and anyone wanting to vanish into a landscape of shimmering waters and cathedral-like aisles of trees. It's best accessed via **Killykeen Forest Park** (☎ 049-433 2541; car €5, pedestrians & cyclists free), 12km northwest of Cavan, where various nature trails (from 1.5km to 5.8km) lead you through the woods and along the shore. Keep an eye out for stoats, badgers, foxes, grey squirrels and hedgehogs, as well as some amazing birdlife.

Many of the low overgrown islands in the lake were *crannógs* (fortified, artificial islands). The most spectacular is **Clough Oughter Castle**, a 13th-century circular tower perched on a tiny speck of land. It was used as a lonely prison, then as a stronghold by rebel leader Owen Roe O'Neill, who was (probably) poisoned there in 1649, before it was destroyed by Cromwell's army in 1653. Although the castle lies out of reach over the water, it's worth getting near for the view: go on foot via the forest trails, or get a closer look by car by turning left out of the Killykeen park exit and following the narrow road running north from the village of Garthtrattan.

### Butlersbridge & Cloverhill

These two blink-and-you'll-miss-them townships are well placed for breaking your journey through the central north.

The pretty hamlet of Butlersbridge (8km north of Cavan), on the River Annalee, makes a pleasant spot for a riverside picnic. If it's not picnic weather, pop into the **Derragarra Inn** (☎/fax 049-433 1003), an ivy-covered pub with a wood-beamed interior, beer garden, live music at weekends and good bar food.

At Cloverhill (9km north of Cavan), the multi-award-winning **Olde Post Inn** (☎ 047-55555; www.theoldepostinn.com; s/d €50/100, 5-course dinner €53; ☎ 6.30-9pm Tue-Sat, 12.30-2.30pm & 6.30-8.30pm Sun; ♿) has outstanding fare. Gearóid Lynch's menu revolves around old Irish favourites such as suckling pig, venison, pheasant and steak. For dessert, his warm fig tart with caramelised banana and banana ice cream involves an extra wait, but it's worth it. Afterwards, retire to one of the inn's six comfortable rooms in the post master's former residence.

To experience life on a working farm, head to **Fortview House** (☎ 049-433 8185; fortviewhouse@hotmail.com; Drumbran; d from €60; ♿), which arranges guided fishing trips, and free use of boats on the main lakes. From Butlersbridge take the N54 to Cloverhill, turning right just after the Olde Post Inn. The farm is a further 2km along this lane.

## CHEESE-MAKING

Hard pasteurised goat's milk cheese is something of a rarity in the cheese world, and prize-winning **Corleggy Cheese** (☎ 952 2930; www.corleggy.com; Belturbet) is particularly rare due to its small production runs. Corleggy uses vegetarian rennet and is washed in sea brine, with subtle flavours thanks to the grassy grazing pastures surrounding the farmhouse where the cheese is handmade. Its flavours are brought out when accompanied by fruit like fresh figs or plums. A number of other cheeses including cow's and sheep's milk cheeses are also produced here, with flavours including garlic and red pepper, smoked cheese, cumin, and green peppercorn.

You can stop by the farmhouse between 3pm and 6pm each Thursday to buy Corleggy cheese direct from the source. Otherwise, visit cheese-maker Silke Cropp at her weekly stall at Dublin's Meetin House Sq Market in Temple Bar (p139).

If you want to learn how to make this cheese yourself, Silke runs half-a-dozen **cheese-making courses** each summer. Courses take place on Sundays from 10am to 5pm and cost €150, which includes coffee and treats on arrival and an organic lunch with wine while the cheese-making process takes place. Afterwards you'll have your own kilo of cheese to take with you. BYO bucket.

Corleggy's farmhouse is located 2.5km north of Belturbet village. Coming from the direction of Cavan on the N3 into Belturbet village, turn right at the point the main road takes a sharp left, then take your first left and follow it for just on 2.5km; you'll see Corleggy's sign on your left.

## Belturbet

☎ 049 / pop 1300

In a prime position on the Shannon-Erne Waterway, this charming, old-fashioned settlement, 16km northwest of Cavan, is a fisherman's favourite. It's also a busy base for cruise boats, and the start of many a cycle trip along the canal and river system. **Emerald Star** (☎ 952 2933; www.emeraldstar.ie; ☎ Apr-Oct) has several hire boats that you can sail between Belturbet and Belleek. A two- to three-berth boat costs from €1050 per week in the high season; two- to five-berth boats start from €1505.

You can hire bicycles and get route advice from Pdraig Fitzpatrick at **Fitz Hire** (☎ 952 2866, 086-804 7521; fitzpatrickhire@eircom.net; Belturbet Business Park, Greeney; per day/week €15/45). For an additional €10 per bike, you can cycle one way along the waterway and have Pdraig collect your bikes from your final destination.

Belturbet is home to celebrated Corleggy cheese (above), which is served in some of the country's top restaurants.

Trains used the **Belturbet Railway Station** (☎ 952 2074; www.belturbet-station.com; Railway Rd; adult/child/student €2.50/1.30/2; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Jun-Sep) from 1885 until 1959, after which it languished for 40 years, at times sheltering cattle. Volunteers have painstakingly restored the old station building, which is built of cut stone from the nearby River Erne.

The cosiest accommodation option in town is the cherry-coloured **Church View Guest House** (☎ 952 2358; www.churchviewguesthouse.com; 8 Church St;

s €32, d €50; ♿), but book ahead as it's perennially busy with anglers thanks to its cold storeroom and proximity to the lakes.

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 433 1353) bus 30 runs through Belturbet, stopping outside the post office (on the Diamond) six times per day Monday to Saturday (four Sunday). The main towns on this route are Dublin (two hours), Cavan (15 minutes) and Donegal (2¼ hours).

## SOUTHERN CAVAN Ballyjamesduff

☎ 049 / pop 870

As its name suggests, Ballyjamesduff was the one-time home of the earl of Fife, James Duff, an early Plantation landlord. His descendant, Sir James Duff, commanded English troops during the suppression of the 1798 Rebellion.

These days the town is best known as the home of the **Cavan County Museum** (☎ 854 4070; ccmuseum@tinet.ie; Virginia Rd; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat year-round, 2-6pm Sun Jun-Sep), located inside a forbidding former convent. Highlights include the Pighthouse Collection (18th-, 19th- and 20th-century costumes and folk items), and an array of relics from the Stone, Bronze, Iron and Middle Ages, including a 1000-year-old boat excavated from Lough Erril. There's also a large feature on Irish sports.

Pigs might not fly but they get a fair bit of speed up during the three-day **Ballyjamesduff International Pork Festival** (☎ 087 419 1859; ccjarans.goreilly@eircom.net; ☎ mid-Jun), where thousands

**BALLY WHO?**

All over Ireland you'll see the town prefix 'Bally' (and variations thereof, such as Ballyna and Ballina). The ubiquitous term originates from the Irish phrase 'Baile na'. It's often mistranslated as 'town', but there were few-to-no towns in Ireland when the names came about. A closer approximation is 'place of' (similar to the French expression *chez*). Hence Ballyjamesduff, for example, means Place of James Duff (or James Duff's place). Dublin's Irish name was Baile Átha Cliath (Place of the Hurdle Ford). If it was anglicised, it too would be a Bally; spelt something like 'Ballycleagh'.

Other common place names, especially in the central northern counties, include Carrick (or Carrig), meaning 'rock' in Irish; such as Carrickmacross (Rock of MacRoss/MacRoss' rock) in County Monaghan.

And a prefix you'll encounter particularly often in the province of Connaught (Connacht in Irish) is Clon (or Cloon), which is Irish for 'dry place' – something in short supply and hence highly coveted in damp Connaught counties like Leitrim.

gather to watch pig races, as well as to dine on giant spit roasts and to take part in pork-cooking competitions.

There are no buses to Ballyjamesduff; the closest bus stops in Virginia and from there it costs around €10 euros by taxi.

**Lough Sheelin**

☎ 049

Trout fishing is at its best in May and June along the tree-lined banks of Lough Sheelin. Any time of year the leafy setting is ideal for horse riding, walking or splashing about in boats far from, well, anything.

Peaceful accommodation options exist at opposite ends of the 6km-long lough in the villages of Finnea (in County Westmeath) and Mounthugent (about 24km south of Cavan).

**Ross House** (☎/fax 854 0218; www.ross-house.com; Mounthugent; d €76, apt €180; Ⓟ) is a refined period farmhouse in mature grounds on the lake's edge with a free tennis court, horse riding (from €17 per hour) and boat hire (from €20 per day). Some of Ross House's half-a-dozen spacious rooms have fireplaces and/or their own conservatories. In addition to high tea (€15), or a four-course dinner (€22), you can get a packed lunch (€5) to take out boating.

**Crover House Hotel** (☎ 854 0206; www.croverhousehotel.ie; Mounthugent; d from €140; Ⓟ) is a grand 40-room complex with a golf course, graceful gardens and panoramic lake views from the bedrooms. Boat hire's available from the hotel's private jetty, and if you're really travelling in style, you can land a helicopter here.

**EASTERN CAVAN**

Many settlements in the county's east, such as **Virginia** (pronounced *ver-ginee*), were laid

out as 17th-century Plantation estates. While in the area, it's worth stopping at **Kingscourt** (population 1307) to visit **St Mary's Catholic Church**, with superb 1940s stained-glass windows made by artist Evie Hone.

Just northwest of Kingscourt is the 225-hectare **Dún an Rí Forest Park** (☎ 042-966 7320; car/pedestrian €5/free). There are colour-coded forest walks (all under 4km long), with picnic places and a wishing well. Along the river, look out for mink and otters. Bordering the forest, **Cabra Castle** (☎ 966 7030; www.manorhousehotels.com; s from €112, d from €173, dinner €42; Ⓟ Ⓞ), about 3km out of Kingscourt on the Carrickmacross road, was put together in the 19th century, since Cromwell battered the original castle to pieces. It's now a deluxe 80-room hotel decked out in plush period furnishings with a fine restaurant and a nine-hole golf course.

**WESTERN CAVAN**

Set against the dramatic backdrop of the Cuilcagh Mountains, the remote western stretch of the county straddles the border with the North.

Few buses serve this isolated fragment of the county. The express Donegal–Dublin buses pass through Ballyconnell, Bawnboy and Swanlinbar four times daily. The Galway–Belfast bus goes via Sligo and stops in Blacklion four times Monday to Saturday (twice Sunday). Contact **Bus Éireann** (☎ 433 1353) in Cavan for schedules.

**Ballyconnell**

☎ 049 / pop 1100

The Shannon–Erne Waterway wends its way through the village of Ballyconnell, which

has a couple of restorative spots to spend the night.

Within a converted farmhouse, Cavan's only hostel, the independently-run **Sand-ville House** (☎ 952 6297; http://homepage.eircom.net/~sandville; dm from €15, d from €30; ☎ Easter-Oct; Ⓟ), has its own meditation room as well as a self-catering kitchen (though no breakfast). The hostel's set in silent fields 5km southeast of the village (signposted off the R200). The Dublin to Donegal bus stops on request at the Slieve Russell Hotel, from where you can pre-arrange for the hostel to pick you up. Check ahead as it's often closed for private spiritual retreats.

For relaxation of an altogether more luxurious kind, the **Slieve Russell Hotel** (☎ 952 6444; www.quinnhotels.com; Cranaghan; d from €198; Ⓟ Ⓞ Ⓞ), 2km southeast of town, is famed for its marble columns, fountains, restaurants, bars, and an 18-hole golf course. Spa treatments include flotation tanks, a herbal sauna and a salt grotto.

**Blacklion & Around**

☎ 071 / pop 170

Traversed by the Cavan Way (p699), the area between Blacklion and Dowra is spotted with prehistoric monuments, including the remains of a *cashel* (ringfort) and the ruins of several weathouses, used mostly in the 19th century.

Dedicated foodies make the pilgrimage to Blacklion's **MacNeen House & Bistro** (☎ 985 3022; fax 985 3404; Main St; s/d €60/120, dinner menu €35-55, mains €20-24.50; ☎ restaurant sittings from 7pm Thu & Fri, from 6.30pm & 9.30pm Sat, 12.30pm, 3.30pm & 7pm Sun; Ⓟ), run by award-winning TV chef Neven Maguire, who grew up in this gorgeous country house and has turned it into one of the country's finest restaurants. The food is

truly outstanding: feast on crab ravioli, succulent lamb with truffle juice, or vegetarian fare including avocado spring rolls. Overnighting here gives you the chance to taste Maguire's steaming porridge with cream and honey at breakfast.

Sligo–Belfast buses stop in Blacklion four times every day from Monday to Saturday (twice on Sunday). Buses stop in front of Maguire's pub.

**Cuilcagh Mountain Park**

The border between the Republic and Northern Ireland runs along the ridge of Mt Cuilcagh, the distinctive summit of this park. Its lower slopes are important protected peatland habitats. The visitor centre and the park's biggest attraction, the Marble Arch Caves (p688), lie a short hop over the border from Blacklion, in County Fermanagh.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111) express buses on the Dublin–Donegal route pass through Virginia, but only pick up going north and drop off going south. Bus 109 from Dublin to Cavan stops in Virginia (1¾ hours, hourly). A Cavan–Dundalk bus passes through Kingscourt (one hour) on Tuesday and Thursday. There's also a Dublin–Navan–Kingscourt (1¾ hours) service, with two buses per day Monday to Saturday (one Sunday).

**COUNTY MONAGHAN**

If you're one of the few visitors who passes through Monaghan (Muineachán), you'll immediately notice the rippling landscape's tiny rounded hills, resembling bubbles in badly pasted wallpaper. Known as drumlins, the

**DETOUR: JAMPA LING BUDDHIST CENTRE**

If you're on a quest for enlightenment, or just seeking some time out, the **Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre** (☎ 952 3448; www.jampaling.org; Owendoon House, Bawnboy; dm/s/d incl meals €32/39/68), in a beautiful country setting, is peace on earth. Jampa Ling, meaning 'Place of Loving Kindness', offers courses (from about €45 per day) in Galupa Buddhism, philosophy and meditation, though you don't have to take part in a course to stay here. All meals, which are included in the day courses and for overnight guests, are vegetarian. Occasional weekend workshops range from yoga to medicinal and culinary herbs, and visitors can stay as long as they like. From Ballyconnell, follow the signs to Bawnboy. In the village, turn left at the petrol station and follow the small road for 3km. Continue past the lake and a series of bends; you'll see the centre's stone gates a further 250m ahead on your right.

bumps are the result of debris left by retreating glaciers during the last Ice Age.

Unlike much of the province, Monaghan was largely left alone during the Ulster Plantation. After the Cromwellian wars, though, local chieftains were forced to sell their land for a fraction of its true value, or have it seized and redistributed to Cromwell's soldiers.

Poet Patrick Kavanagh (1905–67) was born in Inniskeen, and the village's literary resource centre offers an evocative insight into his life and work.

County Monaghan is famed for its lace, and this eye-straining craft continues in Clones and Carrickmacross, centres of the industry since the early 19th century.

## MONAGHAN TOWN

☎ 047 / pop 5720

It may be the county town, but Monaghan's residents live their lives utterly unaffected by tourism. The main visitor attraction is the county museum, containing an extensive regional collection, but it's also pleasant to wander the streets admiring the elegant 18th- and 19th-century limestone buildings.

The MacMahon family ruled this area for centuries: in Convent Lake, just behind St Louis Convent, there is a small overgrown *crannóg* that served as the family headquarters in the 14th century. After the turbulent wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, the town was settled by Scottish Calvinists.

Monaghan lies 141km northwest of Dublin, but just 8km from the border with Northern Ireland.

## Orientation & Information

Monaghan is squashed between two small lakes, Peter's Lake to the north, and Convent Lake in the southwest. Its principal streets form a rough arc, broken up by the town's three main squares. From east to west these are Church Sq, the diamond (the Ulster name for a town square) and Old Cross Sq.

To the west of this arc, at the top of Park St, are Market Sq and the **tourist office** (☎ 81122; www.monaghantourism.com; 6 Castle Meadow Ct; ☹ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri May–mid-Oct). For help with genealogies, contact the **Monaghan Ancestral Research Group** (☎ 82304; 6 Tully St).

## Sights & Activities

**Monaghan County Museum & Gallery** (☎ 82928; comuseum@monaghancoco.ie; 1–2 Hill St; admission free;

☹ 11am–5pm Mon–Fri, noon–5pm Sat) is an excellent regional museum, containing over 70,000 artefacts in its permanent collection from the Stone Age to modern times. Its crowning glory is the 14th-century **Cross of Clogher**, an oaken altar cross encased in decorative bronze panels. Other impressive finds include the Lisdrumturk and Altartate Cauldrons, medieval *crannóg* artefacts, a still-functioning original lock and key from Monaghan Gaol, and some frightening knuckle-dusters and cudgels relating to the border with the North.

Eye-catching edifices around town include the **Dawson Monument** (1857), in Church Sq – a hefty obelisk commemorating Colonel Dawson's unfortunate demise in the Crimean War. Overlooking it is the Gothic **St Patrick's Church** and a stately Doric **courthouse** (1829). The most striking is the **Rossmore Memorial** (c 1875), an over-the-top Victorian drinking fountain that dominates the diamond. The town also has a number of buildings with gently rounded corners, which is an unusual architectural feature in Ireland.

Just out of the centre of town on the Dublin road is another piece of Victorian whimsy, the mock-14th-century **St Macartan's Catholic Cathedral** (1861), topped by a teetering 77m-high, needle-sharp spire.

Fine fishing abounds in the area; contact Dick Kernan at **Venture Sports** (☎ 81495; 71 Glaslough St) for permits, tackle and local knowledge.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Glendrum House** (☎ 82347; Cootehill Rd, Drumbear; s/d €40/65; ♾) There are five comfortable rooms in this modern home, a 10-minute walk from the town centre (on the R188). And for 'a good walk spoilt', there's a golf course practically within putting distance.

**Four Seasons Hotel** (☎ 81888; www.4seasonshotel.ie; Coolshannahg; d from €140; ♾) Unconnected to the similarly named international chain, this is a large, modern establishment with a full complement of fitness facilities including a Jacuzzi, sauna and gym. Service is both affable and professional. The hotel is less than 1km from town on the N2.

**Andy's Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 82277; 12 Market St; mains €13–22, set dinner menus €20–30; ☹ restaurant 4–10.15pm Tue–Fri, noon–10.15pm Sat, 3.30–10pm Sun) You can barely see Andy's Bar for the plaudits that plaster its exterior. Most of these relate to its dark, old-fashioned interior and top-

quality beer, but the deep-fried Irish brie served with warm wine, and Andy's signature monkfish and crab claws sautéed in lime deserve a wholehearted mention too. Inexpensive but delicious bar food is available in the Victorian pub, which also offers a good children's menu.

**Mediterraneo** (☎ 82335; 58 Dublin St; mains €15–30; ☹ 6–11pm Tue, 6–10pm Wed–Sun) The two-sittings system on busy nights shows you just how popular this colourful bistro is. There's a good fish selection, as well as decent Italian staples including pizza and pasta. You'll need to reserve at the weekend, and turn up on time or risk having your table given away.

**Paramount** (☎ 77333; 30 Market St; mains €16–30; ☹ 6.30–10pm Wed–Mon) This classy, minimalist restaurant over Cooper's pub serves excellent seafood and steak, and vegetarians will find at least a couple of options on the menu.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Sherry's** (☎ 81805; 24 Dublin St) Walking into Sherri's, one of Monaghan's oldest bars, is like stepping back into a spinster's parlour of the 1950s. The old tiled floor, beauty board and dusty memorabilia probably haven't been touched in decades.

**Squealing Pig Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 49550; the Diamond) Monaghan's nightlife revolves around this triple-decker place, which has a young, fun vibe and decently priced diner-style food.

**An Póc Fada** (☎ 77952; North Rd) Named after an Irish hurling term (essentially translating as 'the long shot'), this good-time pub has live music mostly of the rock variety.

**Market House** (☎ 38158; www.themarkethouse.ie; Market St; admission free–€10) This restored 18th-century market hall—turned—arts venue hosts traditional, classical and jazz music concerts, poetry readings and drama events, and the occasional film and art exhibition.

## Getting There & Around

From the **bus station** (☎ 82377; North Rd), there are numerous daily intercity services within the Republic and into the North. These include 12 buses Monday to Saturday (seven Sunday) to Dublin (two hours); six to Derry (two hours) via Omagh; five (four Sunday) to Belfast (two hours); and nine (eight Sunday) to Armagh (40 minutes). There are also frequent daily local services to the nearby towns of Castleblayney, Ballybay, Carrickmacross and Ardee.

**McConnon's** (☎ 82020) private bus company runs buses to Dublin (two Monday to Friday, one Saturday and Sunday), which serve Castleblayney, Carrickmacross and Slane en route. They leave from outside Ronaghan's chemist on Church Sq.

## ROSSMORE FOREST PARK

Crumbling remains of the Rossmore family's 19th-century castle, including its entrance stairway, buttresses and the family's pet cemetery can be seen at **Rossmore Forest Park** (☎ 047-433 1046; car/pedestrian €5/free; ☹ Jul & Aug). Rhododendrons and azaleas blaze with colour in early summer.

Along with forest walks and pleasant picnic areas, the park contains several giant redwoods, a fine yew avenue and Iron Age tombs. A gold collar (known as a lunula) from 1800 BC was found here in the 1930s and is now on display in the National Museum in Dublin. The park is located 3km southwest of Monaghan on the Newbliss road (R189).

## CLONES & AROUND

☎ 047 / pop 1720

There must be something in the water at Clones (Cluain Eois). It's the hometown of both the 'Clones Colossus', heavyweight Kevin McBride, whose defeat of Mike Tyson in 2005 was so crushing that it prompted Tyson's immediate retirement; and the 'Clones Cyclone', former featherweight boxer Barry McGuigan, who won the world championship in 1985. McGuigan went on to train Daniel Day-Lewis for six months for the 1997 film *The Boxer*.

The year 1997 also saw Clones make cinematic headlines with the release of Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy*, which was shot on location here and featured many of the townspeople as extras. *The Butcher Boy* was based on Patrick McCabe's dark novel of the same name, which is set in the town. McCabe also hails from Clones.

Clones was once the site of an important 6th-century monastery that later became an Augustinian abbey, and its main sights are ecclesiastical. There's a well-preserved 10th-century **high cross** on the Diamond, decorated with drama-charged biblical stories such as Daniel in the lion's den.

Along with the remains of the **abbey** founded by St Tiernach on Abbey St, there's a truncated 22m-high **round tower** in the cemetery south of town, from the early 9th century. Nearby is

the supposed burial place of Tiernach himself, a chunky 9th-century **sarcophagus** with worn animal-head carvings.

The bus stop, post office and banks are in the central diamond. There's no tourist office but you can pick up information at the **Ulster Canal Stores** (☎ 52125; Cara St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun, 9am-5pm daily Jul & Aug), which also displays locally made traditional crocheted lace. Over 120 different pieces are available to buy; prices range from €8 to €125.

Aside from boxing, Clones is fanatical about Gaelic football and consistently punches above its weight in the national sport.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Lennard Arms Hotel** (☎ 51075; www.lennardarms.com; the Diamond; d €70; Ⓟ) A welcoming, home-spun country hotel, the Lennard Arms has 11 comfortably refurbished rooms. Snacks and more substantial meals are available all day from the bar. Specials including a fishing package from €100 per person including two nights' B&B, dinner, and a fishing trip on the owners' boat.

**Hilton Park** (☎ 56007; www.hiltonpark.ie; d €220-300, dinner €55; ☎ Apr-Sep; Ⓟ) This glamorous country home's interior was transformed into an Italianate palazzo in the 1870s, and light streams through stained glass into antique-filled rooms. Top-class cuisine, much of it produced in the estate's organic gar-

dens, is served in regal surroundings (book 24 hours ahead for dinner), and there's an 18-hole golf course. Hilton Park is 5km south of Clones along the L46 towards Scotshouse.

## Getting There & Around

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 82377) runs a service from Clones to Monaghan (30 minutes, five buses Monday to Saturday, one Sunday), with connections on to Castleblayney, Carrickmacross, Slane and Dublin.

**Ulsterbus** (☎ 048-9066 6630) has one direct service per day between Clones and Belfast (2¾ hours), and another service that requires a change in Monaghan, running Monday to Friday.

**McConnon's** (☎ 82020) runs a bus to Dublin (two hours), leaving Clones at 8.20am Monday to Saturday, which stops in Monaghan, Castleblayney, Carrickmacross and Slane.

**Collins Coaches** (☎ 042-966 1631) operates a bus to Dublin (2½ hours) at 7.45am from Monday to Saturday, and at 5.45pm on Sunday that stops at various towns including Carrickmacross.

## CARRICKMACROSS & AROUND

☎ 042 / pop 1965

Until recently, the centre of Carrickmacross (Carraig Mhachaire Rois) was clogged with highway traffic. But a new bypass has

breathed new life into the town, making it a peaceful spot to wander.

*Father Ted* fans may know Carrickmacross as the birthplace of Ardal O'Hanlon aka Father Dougal McGuire in the TV series. O'Hanlon's first novel *The Talk of the Town* was set in 'Castlecock', a thinly-veiled version of the town.

Carrickmacross was first settled by early English and Scottish Planters, and its broad main street is dotted with some elegant Georgian houses. Delicate Carrickmacross lace, an industry revived in 1871 by the St Louis nuns, is a world-famous export.

There's no tourist office, but the tourism section of the town's website, www.carrickmacross.ie, has visitor information.

## Sights & Activities

In the town's former cattle yards, a local cooperative runs the **Carrickmacross Lace Gallery** (☎ 62506; Market Sq; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 9.30am-5pm Fri Apr-Sep), which sells the distinctive gossamer-like designs. Unlike Clones' crocheted lace, here designs are appliquéd on organza using thick thread and close stitches. Excess organza is cut away and the work is embellished with a variety of point stitches, guipure, pops and the lace's distinctive loop edge. Most famously, Carrickmacross lace graced the sleeves of Princess Diana's wedding dress.

Craftsmanship also shines at **St Joseph's Catholic Church** (O'Neill St), with 10 windows designed by Harry Clarke, Ireland's most renowned stained-glass artist.

There's fantastic **fishing** in many of the lakes around Carrickmacross, including Loughs Capragh, Spring, Monalty and Fea; contact **Peader O'Brien** (☎ 966 3207) for angling information.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Red Door B&B** (☎ 969 0691; www.thereddoor.ie; 51-53 Main St; s €70, d €100, fste from €120) Situated on the wide main street in a stately town house, you'll instantly recognise this glossy new B&B by its scarlet door. Contemporary interiors blend with original period detail, and family suites have baths with spa jets.

**Grenmount Restaurant** (☎ 966 1357; Main St; mains €5.50-12.50; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) This old-time split-level café is where locals congregate over lunch for a chat or bring the kids for an early dinner. Rib-sticking food

includes battered fresh cod (though other seafood such as scampi is frozen). Vinyl booths are big and comfy, and friendly staff can fill you in on the goings-on around town.

**Molly's Restaurant** (☎ 969 2540; 1 Monaghan St; lunch mains €7-14, dinner mains €16-22; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon, 9am-4pm & 6-10pm Tue-Sat, 1-8pm Sun) Carrickmacross' newest restaurant is this chic little spot run by Moira and Declan Dunne. The modern Irish menu has some interesting world influences, ranging from a Portuguese prawn hot pot to roast pork fillet with truffled mash or honey roast chicken breast with spicy parsnip puree. For dessert, don't pass up the divine blackberry and almond frangipane tart with vanilla-bean ice cream.

## Getting There & Away

Four **Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111) routes connecting Dublin with Letterkenny, Derry, Armagh and Portrush pass through Carrickmacross (two hours, 11 daily Monday to Saturday, six Sunday).

**Collins Coaches** (☎ 966 1631) runs a service to Dublin (five daily Monday to Friday, four Saturday, two Sunday).

**McConnon's** (☎ 047-82020) has a bus service that passes through Carrickmacross on its Dublin-Monaghan-Clones route, with two buses per day on weekdays leaving Carrickmacross at 7.15am and 9.35am, and on Saturday at 9.35am.

**Matthews Coach Hire** (☎ 042 937 8188; www.matthewscoach.com) runs limited services to Dublin, and also serves Inniskeen.

The bus stop is outside O'Hanlon's shop on Main St.

## INNISKEEN

☎ 042 / pop 310

Acclaimed poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904-67) was born in the village of Inniskeen (Inis Caoin), which lies 10km northeast of Carrickmacross. The **Patrick Kavanagh Rural & Literary Resource Centre** (☎ /fax 937 8560; www.patrickkavanaghcountry.com; adult/child under 12/student €5/free/3; ☎ 11am-4.30pm Tue-Fri year-round, call for summertime weekend opening hr) is housed in the old parish church where the poet was baptised, and the staff have a passion for his life and work that is contagious.

Kavanagh's long work *The Great Hunger* (1942) blasted away the earlier clichés of Anglo-Irish verse and revealed Ireland's poor farming communities as half-starved,

### DETOUR: CASTLE LESLIE

Sir Paul McCartney and Heather Mills' doomed nuptials took place at **Castle Leslie** (☎ 88109; www.castleleslie.com; Glaslough; d from €290) but don't let that dissuade you – the castle has a weird and wonderful history, and activities for both guests and nonguests.

The Leslie family (who trace their ancestors to Attila the Hun) acquired the castle in 1665 and still run it today. The castle's kooky history comes into its own in its 14 guest rooms. Each has a unique character and story to tell. The Red Room, used by WB Yeats, contains the first bath plumbed in Ireland. In Uncle Norman's Room, guests claim to have been levitated in the Gothic four-poster bed. And Desmond's Room recalls this particularly eccentric member of the Leslie family. A *bon vivant* who palled around with Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithful, Desmond made sci-fi films, composed experimental early electronic music and wrote several novels including the early 1950s bestseller *Flying Saucers Have Landed*.

**Candlelit banquets** (from €52 for guests and nonguests) at the castle are a sumptuous, communal affair. Castle Leslie also offers an extensive programme of year-round **cooking courses** with master chef Noel McMeel. Themed courses cover everything from 'Irish cooking by seasons' to 'death by chocolate' and 'food and erotica'. Prices start from €65 for evening courses, to €185 for one-day courses and €350 for two-day courses (excluding accommodation).

Guests and nonguests can also **fish** on the estate's private lake, or saddle up at the newly restored **equestrian centre** (☎ 88100; per hr from €30) to ride through 40km of trails in the demesne.

There's a minimum two-night stay on weekends; children under 18 aren't allowed.

'broken-backed' and sexually repressed. His best-known poem, *On Raglan Road* (1946), was an ode to his unrequited love. It doubled as the lyrics for the traditional Irish air 'The Dawning of the Day'; performed by Van Morrison, Mark Knopfler, Billy Bragg, Sinéad O'Connor and countless others.

Actor Russell Crowe's passion for Kavanagh's writing ran so high at the BAFTA awards a few years back that when his recital of Kavanagh's poem *Sanctity* (1937) was cut from the telecast of his Best Actor acceptance speech, he infamously threw the awards' director against a wall, kicking over chairs in the process; vowing he'd see to it that the director would never work in Hollywood.

Information on **guided literary tours** around town is posted on the resource centre's website. Otherwise you can buy a copy of the *Patrick Kavanagh Trail Guide* (€0.70) and walk or drive around the sites in and around the village and picturesque surrounding countryside (5.6km all up).

The centre hosts an annual **Patrick Kavanagh Weekend** in November and an annual **Writers' Weekend** in August. Contact the centre for booking information.

There are three or four Bus Éireann buses daily, Monday to Saturday, between Dundalk and Inniskeen (20 minutes). **Matthews Coach Hire** (☎ 042 937 8188; www.matthewscoach.com) has limited services from Carrickmacross (15 minutes).

## COUNTY ROSCOMMON

In a county composed of one-third bog, studded by island-scattered lakes and cleaved by the Rivers Shannon and Suck, fishing is, naturally enough, the main lure for visitors here. But Roscommon is also home to a couple of excellent museums as well as over 5000 megalithic tombs, ring forts and mounds.

### STROKESTOWN & AROUND

☎ 078 / pop 630

Strokestown (Béal na mBuillí), about 18km northeast of Roscommon town, is worth at least a half-day visit for its grand estate and Famine Museum. The broad main street in town was designed by one of the early Mahons to be Europe's widest.

Over the May Bank Holiday weekend, Gaelic and English poetry and music are performed at the **International Poetry Festival** (☎ 947 4123; www.strokestownpoetry.org). If you're poetically inclined, the website has details on entering the International Poetry Competition.

### Strokestown Park House & Famine Museum

At the end of Strokestown's main avenue, three Gothic arches lead to **Strokestown Park House** (☎ 33013; www.strokestownpark.ie; house, museum & gardens €11, house or museum only €4.50, gardens only €4; ☎ 10am-5.30pm mid-Mar–Oct, tours 11.30am, 2pm & 4pm Mon-Fri, 5pm Sat & Sun).

The original 12,000-hectare estate was granted by King Charles II to Nicholas Mahon for his support in the English Civil War. Nicholas' grandson Thomas commissioned Richard Cassels to build him a Palladian mansion in the early 18th century. Over the centuries, the estate decreased along with the family's fortunes. When it was eventually sold to a local garage in 1979, it had been whittled down to 120 hectares. The estate was bought as a complete lot, so virtually all of its contents are intact.

Admission to the house is by a 50-minute **guided tour**, taking in a galleried kitchen with state-of-the-art clockwork machinery, and a child's bedroom complete with 19th-century toys and fun-house mirrors.

The **walled garden** contains the longest herbageous border in Ireland and Britain, which blooms in a rainbow of colours in summer.

In direct and deliberate contrast to the splendour of the house and its grounds is the harrowing **Strokestown Famine Museum**, a must for anyone seeking to understand the devastating 1840s potato blight. The museum takes an unblinking look at the starvation of the poor, and the ignorance, callousness and cruelty of those who were in a position to help. Strokestown landlord Major Denis Mahon ruthlessly evicted starving peasants who couldn't pay their rents, chartering boats to transport them away from Ireland. Almost 600 of these 1000 emigrants died on the overcrowded 'coffin ships'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mahon was assassinated by some of his tenants in 1847. The museum also opens visitors' eyes to present-day famine around the world.

### Cruachan Aí Visitor Centre

Anyone with an interest in Celtic mythology will be enthralled by the area around the vil-

lage of Tulsk, which contains 60 ancient national monuments including standing stones, barrows, cairns and fortresses, making it the most important Celtic royal site in Europe. The landscape and its sacred structures have lain largely undisturbed for the past 3000 years. The **Cruachan Aí Visitor Centre** (☎ 071-963 9268; www.cruachanai.com; Tulsk; adult/child €5/2.75; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 1-4pm Sun Jun-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat Nov-May) has audiovisual displays and informative panels and maps, and can let you know the current status of access to the (privately owned) sites.

According to the legend of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley), Queen Maeve (Medbh) had her palace at Cruachan. The Oweynagat Cave (Cave of the Cats), believed to be the entrance to the Celtic underworld, is also situated here.

Tulsk is 10km west of Strokestown on the N5. Bus Eirran's frequent Dublin to Westport route stops right outside the visitor centre.

### BOYLE & AROUND

☎ 071 / pop 2200

At the foot of the Curlew Mountains, Boyle (Mainistir na Búille) has been somewhat usurped in recent years by Carrick-on-Shannon in terms of development. There's plenty to interest visitors here, though, including the hands-on King House Interpretive Centre, a 4000-year-old dolmen, an island-scattered forest park and beautiful Boyle Abbey.

If you're here at the end of July, you can catch the lively **Boyle Arts Festival** (☎ 966 3085; www.boylearts.com), which features music, theatre, storytelling and contemporary Irish art exhibitions.

### History

The history of Boyle is the history of the King family. In 1603, Staffordshire-born John King was granted land in Roscommon with the aim of 'reducing the Irish to obedience'. Over the next 150 years, through canny marriages and cold-blooded conquests, his descendants made their name and fortune, becoming one of the largest landowning families in Ireland. The town of Boyle grew around their estate.

King House was built in 1730, and in 1780 the family moved to the grander Rockingham House, built in what is now Lough Key Forest Park, and which was destroyed by fire in 1957.

Actress Maureen O'Sullivan (Mia Farrow's mum), was born in a house on Main St opposite the Bank of Ireland in 1911.

### Information

**Tourist office** (☎ 966 2145; cnr Military Rd & Main St; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Jun-early Sep) In King House; when it's closed, calls are diverted to Galway tourist office (p404).

**Una Bhán Tourism Centre** (☎ 966 3033; www.unabhan.net; ☎ 9am-6pm daily May-Aug, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Apr) Also in King House, you can seek assistance here if the tourist office is closed.

### Sights & Activities

#### KING HOUSE INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

After the King family moved to Lough Key, the imposing Georgian mansion King House became a military barracks for the fearsome Connaught Rangers from 1788 until Irish independence in 1922. The county council bought the property in 1987, and spent several years and €3.8 million turning it into the inspired **King House Interpretive Centre** (☎ 966 3242; www.kinghouse.ie; Main St; adult/child/family €7/4/18; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Sep; ☎). Sinister-looking dummies from various eras tell the turbulent history of the Connaught kings, the town of Boyle and the King family, including a grim tale of tenant eviction during the Famine. Kids can try on ancient Irish cloaks, brooches and leather shoes, write with a quill, play a regimental drum, and build a vaulted ceiling from specially designed blocks.

The mansion's sheltered walled courtyard hosts an **organic market** (☎ 10am-2pm Sat). Green-and-white-striped tented stalls sell a fantastic array of organic produce including meat, over

#### CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about Boyle and its surrounds is a rash of reported UFO sightings in recent years, particularly along the quiet little back road north to Ballinafad. The **UFO Society of Ireland** (☎ 966 2844) launched in Boyle in 1997 following a particularly mysterious crash in the nearby mountains. A few kilometres away, the Roscommon side of Carrick-on-Shannon is home to **Golden UFO Investigations** (☎ 086 684 7866). Of course, there are plenty of sceptics, but you might want to keep your eyes peeled, just in case.



26 varieties of fresh fish, vegetables, cheeses, chutneys and breads, as well as hot soups to warm you up.

### BOYLE ABBEY

Gracing the River Boyle is the finely preserved (and reputedly haunted) **Boyle Abbey** (☎ 966 2604; adult/child/family €2/1/5.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Easter-end Oct, last admission 45 min before closing). Founded in 1161 by monks from Mellifont in County Louth, the abbey captures the transition from Romanesque to Gothic, best seen in the nave, where a set of arches in each style face each other. Unusually for a Cistercian building, figures and carved animals decorate the capitals to the west. After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the abbey was occupied by the military and became Boyle Castle; the stone chimney on the southern side of the abbey (once the refectory) dates from that period.

Guided tours of the abbey are available on the hour until 5pm.

### LOUGH KEY FOREST & LEISURE PARK

Sprinkled with small islands, **Lough Key Forest & Leisure Park** (☎ 966 2363; www.loughkey.ie; forest admission free; ☎ forest 10am-6pm Mon-Thu, to 9pm Fri & Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-6pm daily Sep-Jun) has long been popular for its picturesque ruins, including a 12th-century abbey on tiny Trinity Island, and a 19th-century castle on Castle Island. It's also a time-honoured favourite with kids for its wishing chair, bog gardens, fairy bridge, and viewing tower over the lake. Deer roam freely, and there are several marked walking trails.

The park recently received a boost with the addition of a brand-new **visitor centre**, and the **Lough Key Experience** (adult/student/child €7.50/6.50/5), incorporating a panoramic, 250m-long tree-top canopy walk, which rises 7m above the woodland floor and offers superb lake views. Other new attractions include the **Boda Borg Challenge** (adult/child €16/12, min 3 people) – a series of rooms filled with activities and puzzles (great for sudden bursts of rain); and an outdoor **adventure playground** (adult/child free/€5). Attractions are open 10am to 6pm Monday to Thursday, and to 9pm from Friday to Sunday in July and August. From April to June, and in September, hours are from 10am to 6pm daily. It's advisable to check opening hours before visiting.

In summer, **Lough Key Boats** (☎ 086-816 7037; www.loughkeyboats.com) provides water-skiing les-

sons, on-the-hour commentated boat trips aboard the *Trinity*, rowing-boat hire and fishing advice (record-breaking pike have been caught here). Contact Lough Key Boats for prices and seasonal operating hours or ask at the visitor centre.

The 350-hectare park was once part of the Rockingham estate, owned by the King family from the 17th century until 1957. Rockingham House, designed by John Nash, was destroyed by a fire in the same year; all that remains are some stables, outbuildings and tunnels leading to the lake – built to hide the servants from view.

If you want to pitch up, there's an onsite caravan and camping park (opposite).

Lough Key is 3km east of Boyle on the N4. The Bus Éireann Sligo to Dublin service has frequent services from Boyle to Lough Key.

### DRUMANONE DOLMEN

This astonishing portal **dolmen**, one of the largest in Ireland, measures 4.5m by 3.3m and was constructed before 2000 BC. It can be tricky to find: follow Patrick St west out of town for 2km, then bear left at the junction signposted to Lough Gara. Follow this road for another kilometre, passing under a railway arch. A sign indicates the path across the railway line. Take extra care crossing the busy line, as trains are frequent.

### DOUGLAS HYDE INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

The life of Roscommon native Dr Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), poet, writer and first president of Ireland, is celebrated at the **Douglas Hyde Interpretive Centre** (Gairdín an Craoibhín; ☎ 094-987 0016; Frenchpark; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun May-Sep). Outside the political arena, Hyde cofounded the Gaelic League in 1893 and spent a lifetime gathering Gaelic poems and folklore that might otherwise have been lost forever.

The centre is housed in the former Protestant church at Frenchpark, 12km southwest of Boyle on the R361. Call ahead to make sure it's open.

### ARIGNA MINING EXPERIENCE

Ireland's first and last coal mine (1600s to 1990) is remembered at the **Arigna Mining Experience** (☎ 964 6466; www.arignaminingexperience.ie; adult/child €8/5; ☎ 10am-5pm), set in the hills above Lough Allen. The highlight is the 40-minute underground tour, which takes you 400m

### HARP & SOUL

The blind harpist Turlough O'Carolan (1670–1738) is celebrated as the last of the Irish bards, but his biggest entry in the history books is for composing the tune of 'The Star-Spangled Banner'.

Most of O'Carolan's life was spent in Mohill (County Leitrim) where his patron Mrs MacDermott-Roe lived. He later moved to the pretty village of Keadue (County Roscommon), where the **O'Carolan International Harp Festival & Summer School** (☎ 071-964 7204; www.keadue.harp.net; ☎ late Jul-early Aug) is held in his honour. Over the course of a week, the festival's programme includes harp workshops, recitals and lectures. The festival is preceded by a week-long summer school of music and dancing classes.

O'Carolan is buried in the 12th-century Kilonan church just west of the village on the R284 to Sligo.

down to the coal face. Tours are led by examiners, who really bring home the gruelling working conditions and dangers of their job. Wear sturdy shoes for the tour, as it can be wet and muddy underfoot.

### ARIGNA MINERS WAY & HISTORICAL TRAIL

Covering 118km of north Roscommon, east Sligo and mid-Leitrim, these well-signposted tracks and hill passes cover the routes taken by miners on their way to work. A guidebook with detailed maps is available from local tourist offices or the **Arigna Miners Way & Historical Trail office** (☎ 078-47212; www.arignaminingexperience.com; Keadue Presbytery, Keadue).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Lough Key Caravan & Camping Park** (☎ 966 2212; camp sites from €12; ☎ May-Aug) Right inside the picturesque Lough Key Forest Park, excellent facilities at this camp ground include a recreation room, a laundry and a children's play area. The tourist office at King House can also provide details.

**Royal Hotel** (☎ 966 2016; fax 966 4949; Bridge St; d €80-130, mains €8-15; ☎ P) In the town centre, this old-fashioned 18th-century country hotel has 22 plain but comfy rooms (some overlooking the river), great craic in the bar, and a restaurant, open daily, serving honest-to-goodness home cooking.

**Stone House Café** (Bridge St; lunch €5-8; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat Jun-Aug, 9.30am-5pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat, 9.30am-3pm Wed Sep-May) This charming little building on the river was once the gate lodge to the private mansion Frybrook House. It's an atmospheric spot to enjoy a range of soups, *panini* and puddings while watching the water rushing past.

**Chambers** (☎ 966 3614; Bridge St; mains €14-24; ☎ 6-10pm Tue-Sun) High-quality modern Irish cuisine

at Chamber's smart new premises includes wild boar, and ostrich served with *rösti* (a side dish of fried, grated potatoes) along with plenty of fish.

### Drinking & Entertainment

**Moving Stairs** (☎ 966 3586; the Crescent) The most lively evening joint in Boyle has a great line-up of live music – everything from jazz to traditional to rock, depending on the night.

**Wynne's Bar** (☎ 086-821 4736; Main St) Don't be surprised if you bump into Irish actor Brendan Gleeson, who often pops by this quaint old bar in the centre of town. Its trad music session, from 10pm on Friday, is the most respected in Boyle – come early if you want to sit down.

Alongside Moving Stairs are a couple of other small pubs which are popular with locals seeking a quiet pint.

### Getting There & Around

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 916 0066) buses leave for Sligo (50 minutes, six Monday to Saturday, four Sunday) and Dublin (three hours, five Monday to Saturday, four Sunday). Buses pull up just near the Royal Hotel on Bridge St.

Boyle **train station** (☎ 966 2027) is on Elphin St. Trains leave three times daily to Sligo (40 minutes) and Dublin (three hours) via Mullingar.

You can order a taxi on ☎ 966 3344 or ☎ 966 2119.

### ROSCOMMON TOWN

☎ 090 / pop 1625

The county town of Roscommon (Ros Comáin) is very much a place of local business and commerce, rather than a tourist stop, but it has a small, stately centre, and a couple of really lovely accommodation options.

Roscommon's seasonally opening **tourist office** (☎ 662 6342; www.irelandwest.ie; John Harrison Hall, the Square; ☹ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Jun-Aug) is next to the post office.

### Sights & Activities

In the former Presbyterian church, **Roscommon County Museum** (☎ 662 5613; the Square; adult/child €2/1; ☹ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri Jun-mid-Sep) contains some interesting pieces, including an inscribed 9th-century slab from St Coman's monastery and a medieval sheila-na-gig from Rahara. The unusual Star of David window supposedly represents the Trinity.

The Norman **Roscommon Castle**, built in 1269, was almost immediately destroyed by Irish forces. Its turbulent 'knocked-down, put-up-again' history continued until the final surrender to Cromwell in 1652. The massive walls and round bastions, standing alone in a field to the north of town, look mighty impressive as you approach...although the castle's as hollow as an Easter egg inside.

At the southern end of town, the 13th-century **Dominican priory**, off Circular Rd, merits a quick visit for its unusual 15th-century carving of eight *gallóglí* ('gallowglasses' or mercenary soldiers). Wielding seven swords and an axe, they protect an earlier effigy of the priory's founder, Felim O'Connor, set in the north wall.

Roscommon's central square is dominated by its former courthouse (now the Bank of Ireland). Opposite, all but the façade of its **old jail** was demolished around a decade ago to make way for a dismal shopping arcade.

Ask at the tourist office for a map of the **Suck Valley Way**, a 75km walking trail along the River Suck. The river has an abundance of rudd, tench, pike and perch. En route you may pass **La Tène Stone** in Castlestrange, 7km southwest of town on the R366, a rare Iron Age spiral-inscribed stone.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Gleeson's Guesthouse** (☎ 662 6954; www.gleesons.townhouse.com; the Square; s/d from €55/110, café mains €8-15, restaurant mains €14-35, restaurant set menus from €30; ☹ café 8am-6pm, restaurant 12.30-2.30pm & 6.30-9.30pm; 📍) There's a wonderfully warm welcome at this listed 19th-century town house, set back from the square in its own fairy-lit courtyard. Rooms are decorated in bright Mediterranean colours and babysitting can be organised on request. At the same premises, Eamonn and Mary Gleeson also run a bustling café and

the excellent Manse restaurant, serving delicious fare like crispy duck salad, and mustard-encrusted spring lamb.

**Castlecoote House** (☎ 666 3794; www.castlecootehouse.com; Castlecoote; s €95-115, d from €150/190; 📍) About 8km southwest of Roscommon, this wedding-cake-white Georgian Palladian mansion (c 1570) has five impossibly romantic rooms with antique furnishings and views over the orchard, croquet lawn, ruined castle or river. A couple also come with four-poster beds and chandeliers. You can play tennis on two courts on the grounds. From Roscommon town, take the R366 signposted to Fuerty and follow it to Castlecoote. As you go over the bridge into the village, the double gates of Castlecoote House are on your right.

### Drinking & Entertainment

**JJ Harlow's** (☎ 663 0869; the Square) Converted from a family drapery, this old-style bar has shelves full of provisions and hardware items, and hosts live music including bluegrass and jazz.

**Roscommon Arts Centre** (☎ 662 5824; www.roscommonartscentre.ie; Circular Rd) There's an impressive range of independent cinema and touring comedy, theatre and music at this auditorium. Check the website for programmes.

### Getting There & Around

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 071-916 0066) express buses between Westport (2½ hours) and Dublin (three hours) via Athlone stop in Roscommon three times daily (once on Sunday). Buses stop on the square.

Roscommon train station is in Abbeytown, just west of the town centre near the Galway road; there are three trains daily (four Friday) on the line from Dublin (two hours) to Westport (1½ hours).

Order taxis on ☎ 087-979 1406.

## COUNTY LEITRIM

Split almost in two by Lough Allen, locals say that land in Leitrim (Liatroim) is sold by the gallon, and they're only half joking. Leitrim suffered hugely from emigration because of its terrible soil fertility. Even today it has the smallest population (around 25,800) of all the counties. On the flip side, it has the most pubs per capita in Ireland.

A far-sighted renovation project, completed in 1994, saw the creation of a symbolic link between southern and northern Ireland, when the 19th-century Ballyconnell-Ballinamore Canal was reopened as the Shannon-Erne Waterway. It joins Ireland's two main river systems (the Shannon and the Erne) to create an amazing 750km network of rivers, lakes and artificial navigations. The waterway runs from the River Shannon beside the village of Leitrim, 4km north of Carrick-on-Shannon, through northwestern County Cavan to the southern shore of Upper Lough Erne, just over the Northern Ireland border in County Fermanagh.

Lively Carrick-on-Shannon is the ideal gateway for exploring both the waterway and the county.

### CARRICK-ON-SHANNON

☎ 071 / pop 1850

Since the completion of the Shannon-Erne Waterway, Carrick-on-Shannon (Cora Droma Rúisc) has become a major marina, and a recent influx of international business centres has seen the town's population surge. Tourism remains Carrick's main industry, however, and its charming village centre and riverside location make a popular weekend destination, so you'll need to plan your visit well ahead.

During the 17th century and most of the 18th it was a Protestant town, but Catholics were permitted to live in the area known as 'the Liberty' on the Roscommon side of the river.

### Orientation & Information

Carrick's main L-shaped layout (Main St, then the right-angled turn onto Bridge St) is in Leitrim; the town's continuation over

the bridge is in County Roscommon. Market Yard is situated at the corner of the 'L'.

**Allied Irish Bank** (AIB; Main St)

**Post office** (Bridge St) Opposite Flynn's Corner House bar.  
**Internet café** (☎ 962 1103; gartlans@eircom.net; Bridge St; per 15min €2; ☹ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Above Gartlan's Newsagents.

**Tourist office** (☎ 962 0170; www.leitrimtourism.com; Old Barrel Store, Carrick-on-Shannon Marina; ☹ 9.30am-5pm Easter-Oct) Has a walking-tour booklet, which takes in Carrick's places of interest. If you're here out of season, the Sligo tourist office (p463) has information.

**Trinity Rare Books** (☎ 96 22144; Bridge St) Stocks over 20,000 antiquarian and second-hand books including some hard-to-come-by first editions and a huge collection of Irish-interest titles.

### Sights

Europe's smallest chapel is the teensy **Costello Chapel** (Bridge St), measuring just 5m by 3.6m. It was built by Edward Costello in 1877, distraught at the early death of his wife Mary. Both husband and wife now rest within the grey limestone interior, lit by a single stained-glass window. Their embalmed bodies were placed in lead coffins, which sit on either side of the door under slabs of glass. If the door is locked, ask the tourist office to open it.

Carrick has some above-par examples of early-19th-century architecture on St George's Terrace. Have a glance at **Hatley Manor**, home of the St George family; the **Old Courthouse** (now the seat of the county council), whose underground tunnel led convicts from the dock to the (demolished) jail; and stop by the craft shops and cafés in the recently refurbished **Market Yard**.

### Activities

The 110-seater boat **Moon River** (☎ 962 1777; www.moon-river.net; the Quay) runs one-hour cruises on the Shannon. There are one or two sailings per day (€12) between Easter and October, rising to four sailings during June, July and August; check the information board on the quay for details. The boat also has late-night cruises – see the listing under Drinking & Entertainment, p495.

If you prefer to sail under your own steam, Carrick is the Shannon-Erne Waterway's **boat-hire** capital, with several companies based at the Marina. The canal's 16 locks are fully automated, you don't need a licence, and you're given full instructions on handling your boat

#### RIVER'S WISDOM

According to Irish mythology, the River Shannon's name comes from Princess Sinann, granddaughter of Lir (the 'father god of the sea'). So the story goes, in pursuit of mystic knowledge, Sinann plunged into a well where the salmon of wisdom swam. The well boiled up into a raging flood, surging into the great river.

A plaque on Carrick-on-Shannon's main street opposite Market Yard commemorates the legend.

before you set out. Make sure you pick up a chart of the waterway (available from bookshops and boat-hire companies), showing the depths and locations of locks. High-season prices start at around €1000 per week for a four-berth cruiser.

Hire companies:

**Carrick Craft** (☎ central reservations 01-278 1666, Carrick office 962 0236; www.carrickcraft.com; the Marina)

**Crown Blue Line** (☎ 962 7634; www.crownblueline.com; the Marina)

**Emerald Star** (☎ 962 0234; www.emeraldstar.ie; the Marina)

The annual regatta run by **Carrick Rowing Club** (☎ 962 0532) takes place on the first Sunday in August and draws a big crowd.

For information on fishing, contact the **Carrick-on-Shannon Angling Association** (☎ 962 0489; Gortmor House, Lismakeegan).

## Sleeping

Camping is free on the Roscommon side of the riverbank, though there are no facilities. Tokens for the showers at the nearby Marina can be purchased from the Marina office.

**An Oiche Hostel** (☎ 962 1848; Bridge St; dm €20; (P)) Tucked above a vet's surgery a couple of doors towards town from the river, this tiny hostel has four plain, single-sex dorms that are comfortable, if on the pricey side. There's a small kitchen and sitting room, but no breakfast.

**Four Seasons** (☎ 962 1333; Main St; s €35-40, d €70-80) Within a period town house, this beautifully kept B&B is exactly the kind of place you'd hope to find in such a pretty country town, run with pride by its courteous host, Mr Lannon.

**Hollywell** (☎ 962 1124; hollywell@esatbiz.com; Liberty Hill; s €70-90, d €100-140; (M) early Feb-early Nov; (P)) This beautiful ivy-covered Georgian country house, on the Roscommon side of the river has spacious, restful bedrooms with huge beds. Two rooms have splendid views of the Shannon and its ever-changing light. Hollywell's hosts are full of local knowledge and put on superb breakfasts including freshly baked bread. The antique furnishings and proximity to the water mean the house isn't suitable for children.

**Bush Hotel** (☎ 962 0014; www.bushhotel.com; Main St; s €75-89, d €89-159; (P)) This centrally located old stagecoach inn has warm furnishings but a frosty welcome. If traffic noise annoys you, ask for a room at the back overlooking the

garden. There's an all-day coffee shop and a good restaurant (with friendlier service).

## Eating

**Coffey's Pastry Case** (☎ 962 0929; Bridge St; dishes €3.50-8.25; (M) 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-7pm Sun) Cakes, quiches and other inexpensive fare are made on the premises of this coffee shop. Upstairs, its large dining room has polished linoleum floors, some great black-and-white photographs of the town, and big timber-framed windows overlooking the river.

**Oarsman Bar & Boathouse Restaurant** (☎ 962 1139; Bridge St; lunch mains €8-10, dinner €16-24; (M) noon-3.30pm Mon-Wed, noon-2.30pm Thu-Sat, dinner 7-9.30pm Thu-Sat) The Oarsman pours a fine pint, but the pub grub here is also surprisingly good, including classy dishes like turkey with date-and-chestnut stuffing accompanied by cranberry compote and sage-and-onion jus.

**Cryan's** (☎ 962 0409; Bridge St; mains €10-15; (M) 8am-9.30pm) Cryan's serves up Irish breakfasts and schoolboys' favourites like bacon and cabbage and sherry trifle in truly enormous portions at wooden booths lit by tasselled lamps. Vegan alert: check when ordering as even the vegetable soups are generally made with meat stock. The attached pub has traditional music sessions on Saturday and Sunday nights.

**Vittos** (☎ 962 7000; Market Centre; mains €10.50-20.50; (M) 12.30-2.30pm & 5-10pm Mon-Fri, 12.30-10.30pm Sat, 12.30-9.30pm Sun Jun-Aug, 12.30-2.30pm & 6-9.30pm Mon, Thu & Fri, 12.30-10pm Sat, 12.30-9pm Sun Sep-May) In a wood-beamed barn, this family-friendly restaurant has over 50 dishes on its Ireland-meets-Italy menu, including chicken, vegetarian and Atlantic seafood risottos. Service is fast and friendly, and there is such a thing as a free lunch (for kids on weekends in the winter months).

**Victoria Hall Restaurant** (☎ 962 0320; Victoria Hall, Quay Rd; mains €18-29; (M) 12.30-10pm) Plasma TVs screening footage of flickering open fireplaces make for a bizarrely cosy atmosphere in this graceful old parochial hall. You can watch Victoria Hall's chefs turn out Asian-inspired dishes like sea bass and king prawns in panang curry butter sauce in the open kitchen. Bento boxes (€9 to €15) are available at lunch.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Flynn's Corner House** (☎ 962 1139; cnr Main & Bridge Sts) This authentic corner house has a good drop of Guinness and live music on Friday night. Savour it before it's modernised.

**Moon River** (☎ 962 1777; www.moon-river.net; the Quay; admission €12) Local bands make Saturday nights aboard this 110-seater cruiser a great alternative to hitting the pubs. Boarding is at 11.30pm; the boat then sets sail along the Shannon until 3am, returning to dry land between 1.30am and 2am for those who want to get off.

Carrick's **cinema** (Carrick Cineplex; ☎ 967 200; www.carrickcineplex.ie; Boyle Rd) screens new releases. In your travels around the area, you may also spot the **mobile cinema** (www.leitrimcinema.ie): a capsule that contains a full set of seats as well as a giant screen. The tourist office can tell you where you can catch it and what's playing.

## Getting There & Away

The bus stop is outside Coffey's Pastry Case. **Bus Éireann** (☎ Dublin 01-836 6111, 916 0066) express service 23 between Dublin (2½ hours) and Sligo (one hour) stops here six times in each direction Monday to Saturday (five Sunday). The service stops at several large towns en route, including Boyle, Longford and Mullingar.

The **train station** (☎ 962 0036) is a 15-minute walk over on the Roscommon side of the river. Turn right across the bridge, then left at the service station onto Station Rd. Carrick has three trains daily to Dublin (2½ hours) and Sligo (55 minutes), with an additional one to Sligo on Friday.

## Leitrim Way

The **Leitrim Way** walking trail begins in Drumshanbo and ends in Manorhamilton, a distance of 48km. For more detailed information get a copy of *Way-Marked Trails of Ireland*, by Michael Fewer, from the tourist office.

# COUNTY LONGFORD

County Longford (An Longfort) is a quiet farming county largely off the tourist map – to the delight of those who come for the superb fishing around Lough Ree and Lanesborough.

If you fancy a walking holiday with a difference, consider exploring the region on the towpath of the 145km-long **Royal Canal** (see p341), which runs from Dublin to meet the River Shannon near Clondra, west of Longford town.

One of the three biggest portal **dolmens** in Ireland, with an improbably balanced top stone, lies at Aughnaclyffe in the north; it's thought to be around 5000 years old.

Longford suffered massive emigration during the Famine of the 1840s and 1850s, and it's never really recovered. Many Longford migrants went to Argentina, where one of their descendants, Edel Miro O'Farrell, became president in 1914.

## LONGFORD TOWN & AROUND

☎ 043 / pop 6830

Longford's county town is a solidly work-a-day place that offers easy access to its star visitor attraction, the Iron Age Corlea Trackway bog road.

Literati converge on the town each February for the **Longford National Writers Group Festival**, which attracts novelists, short-story and screen writers and poets from around the country.

County-wide information is available at Longford's friendly **tourist office** (☎ 42577; www.longfordtourism.com; Market Sq; (M) 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat summer, winter hr vary).

## Sights

In the mid-1980s, excavations of Longford's vast bogland revealed an extraordinary oak *togher* (trackway) dating back to 148 BC. An 18m stretch of the historic track has now been preserved in a humidified hall at the **Corlea Trackway Visitor Centre** (☎ 22386; Keenagh; adult/child/family €3.70/1.30/8.70; (M) 10am-6pm Apr-Sep; (♿)). The fascinating 45-minute tour details the bog's unique flora and fauna, and fills you in on how the track was discovered, and methods used to preserve it. Wear a wind-proof jacket as the bogland can get blowy. The centre is 15km south of Longford on the Ballymahon road (R397).

The discovery of the ancient road has inspired bog oak sculptures such as the works of local artist **Michael Casey** (☎ 25297; www.michaelcaseysculptor.com).

Goldsmith Country (p502) straddles the Longford/Westmeath border.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Viewmount House** (☎ 41919; www.viewmounthouse.com; Dublin Rd; s €50-60, d €90-100, ste €110-120, dinner €50; (M) restaurant 6-9pm; (P)) This sensitively restored Georgian residence, about 1km out

of town, is the pick of the Longford crop. Five peaceful bedrooms, filled with period furniture including solid wooden beds, look out over manicured gardens. Breakfast is served in the eggshell-blue, cross-vaulted dining room; alternatives to the Irish fry include homemade muesli and pecan pancakes. Viewmont's intimate restaurant in the former coach house is open to nonguests.

**Aubergine Gallery Café** (☎ 48633; 17 Ballymahon St; mains €12-18; ☎ noon-5pm Tue, noon-5pm & 6-8pm Wed & Thu, noon-4pm & 6-9.30pm Fri & Sat, 2-8pm Sun) Above a fashion boutique on the main street is this young and cheerful restaurant. Dishes are mainly contemporary Mediterranean affairs, and there are several good vegetarian options.

### Getting There & Away

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 090-648 4406) operates services from Longford to Athlone (one hour, six daily Monday to Saturday), Carrick-on-Shannon (40 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, five Sunday), Dublin (two hours, 13 daily Monday to Saturday, 11 Sunday), Galway (2½ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday) and Sligo (1½ hours, six daily Monday to Saturday, five Sunday). Buses stop outside Longford train station.

Longford **train station** (☎ 45208), off New St, has trains to Dublin (one hour and 40 minutes, four daily) and Sligo (1¼ hours, three daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday), with an extra one to Sligo on Friday.

## COUNTY WESTMEATH

Characterised by lakes and pastures grazed by beef cattle, Westmeath (An Iarmhí) has a wealth of attractions ranging from a wonderful whiskey distillery to the miraculous Fore Valley; an ecological estate where you can learn ancient Irish crafts; and the country's oldest pub in the county town, Athlone. Regular river trips explore Lough Ree and its Viking heritage.

### MULLINGAR & AROUND

☎ 044 / pop 8820

Humming with the activity of locals going about their daily lives, Mullingar (An Muileann gCearr) is a prosperous regional town. In the greater area, you can visit fish-filled lakes, a pewter factory, and the area's

main draw – a fantastical mansion with an odious history.

The town itself is one of the few places outside Dublin that James Joyce visited, and it appears in both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Restored sections of the Royal Canal (p341) extend in either direction from Mullingar.

### Information

There are several banks on the main street (which changes name five times).

**East Coast & Midlands Tourism** (☎ 934 8761; www.eastcoastmidlands.ie; Dublin Rd; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.15pm Mon-Fri) About 1.5km east of town and opened year-round.

**Laundrette** (☎ 934 3045; Dublin Bridge; ☎ 8.45am-6.15pm Mon-Sat) Wash your travel-weary clothes at this place in town.

**Market House tourist office** (☎ 934 8650; cnr Mount & Pearse Sts; ☎ 9.30am-5.15pm Mon-Fri Jun-Sep) Central but seasonal.

**Post office** (Dominick St)

### Sights

Most of Mullingar's interesting sights lie a few kilometres outside the town centre.

In town, at the northern end of Mary St, the immense **Cathedral of Christ the King** was built just before WWII and has large mosaics of St Anne and St Patrick by Russian artist Boris Anrep. There's a small **ecclesiastical museum** (☎ 934 8338; adult/child €1.25/0.65; ☎ 3-4pm Sat & Sun Jul-Aug) over the sacristy, entered from the side of the church, which contains vestments worn by St Oliver Plunkett.

### MULLINGAR PEWTER

Pewterware is Mullingar's best-known export. Put the **Mullingar Pewter visitor centre** (☎ 934 8791; www.mullingarpewter.com; Great Down, the Downs), you can tour the **factory floor** (☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Thu, 9.30am-12.30pm Fri) and see artisans turning the matt-grey metal into goblets, tankards, candle sticks and *objets d'art*. The centre is about 6km southeast of Mullingar on the Dublin road (N4).

### BELVEDERE HOUSE & GARDENS

Don't miss the magnificent **Belvedere House Gardens & Park** (☎ 934 9060; www.belvedere-house.ie; adult/child €8.75/4.75; ☎ house, shop & café 10.30am-5pm Mar-Apr & Sep-Oct, 10am-5pm May-Aug, 10.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb, gardens 10.30am-7pm Mar-Apr & Sep-Oct, 9.30am-9pm May-Aug, 10.30am-4.30pm Nov-Feb), an immense

1740-built hunting lodge set in 65 hectares of gardens overlooking Lough Ennell. More than a few skeletons have come out of Belvedere's closets: the first earl, Lord Belfield, accused his wife and younger brother Arthur of adultery. She was placed under house arrest here for 30 years, and Arthur was jailed in London for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, the earl lived a life of decadence and debauchery. On his death, his wife emerged dressed in the fashion of three decades earlier, still protesting her innocence.

Lord Belfield also found time to fall out with his other brother George, who built a home nearby. Ireland's largest folly, a ready-made 'ruin' called the **Jealous Wall**, was commissioned by the earl so he wouldn't have to look at George's mansion.

Designed by Richard Cassels, Belvedere House contains some delicate rococo plasterwork in the upper rooms. The gardens, with their Victorian glasshouses and lakeshore setting, make for wonderful walking on a sunny day. Kids will enjoy tram rides around the grounds, which hold an **animal sanctuary** full of donkeys, ponies and goats.

Note that the last admission to both the house and gardens is one hour prior to closing.

Belvedere House is 5.5km south of Mullingar on the N52 to Tullamore.

### LOUGH ENNELL

This lough is renowned for its brown trout and coarse fishing. It's also the area where Jonathan Swift first dreamed up *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), hence its park's name, **Jonathan Swift Park**.

The park is 10km south of Mullingar on the N52.

### Activities

#### FISHING

**Trout fishing** is popular in the loughs around Mullingar, including White, Mt Dalton and Pallas Lakes, and Loughs Owel, Derravaragh, Glöre, Lene, Sheelin and Ennell. The largest trout (11.9kg) ever caught in Ireland was landed in Ennell in 1894.

The fishing season runs from 1 March or 1 May (depending on the lake) to 12 October. The **Shannon Regional Fisheries Board** (☎ 934 8769) control all lakes except Lough Lene.

For further information contact East Coast & Midlands Tourism, or the helpful

**David O'Malley's Fishing Tackle Shop** (☎ 934 8300; 33 Dominick St) in Mullingar.

### HORSE RIDING

**Mullingar Equestrian Centre** (☎ 934 8331; www.mullingarequestrian.com; Athlone Rd; ☎), southwest of Mullingar on the Athlone road (R390), offers riding packages starting at €90 including a lesson, lunch and a two-hour cross-country ride; or €275 for two nights' accommodation including all meals and five hours' riding tuition.

### WATERSPORTS

**Swimming** is possible in Loughs Ennell, Owel and Lene (which has a Blue Flag award – an EU award given to clean, safe swimming spots – and lifeguards on duty in July and August), but Derravaragh is very deep with no shallows.

At Lough Ennell you can rent boats from **Lilliput Boat Hire** (☎ 26167; lilliputboathire@ireland.com; boat hire per day from €20) in Jonathan Swift Park. At the same location, **Lilliput Adventure Centre** (☎/fax 26789; www.lilliputadventure.com) organises kayaking, as well as land-based activities such as gorge walking and abseiling courses; a day's mixed-activity package costs €40. It's also possible to get a dorm bed here (including activities €65), or to camp (including activities €37).

### Festivals & Events

The inaugural **Hi:Fi festival** (www.hiffestival.ie) rocked Mullingar's Belvedere House in August 2007, with indie artists including The Prodigy and The Streets and DJs such as Sasha. Tune into the website for upcoming dates and ticket info.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are few B&Bs in the centre, but you'll find them on the approach roads from Dublin and Sligo.

**Lough Ennell Caravan & Camping Park** (☎/fax 934 8101; eamon@caravanparksireland.com; Tudenham; camp sites from €15; ☎ Apr-Sep; ☎) Eight hectares of woodland surround this peaceful camp site. It's right on the shore of Lough Ennell, and is within walking distance of Belvedere House. The site is 5km south of town on the N52 to Tullamore.

**Greville Arms Hotel** (☎ 48563; www.grevillearmshotel.com; Pearse St; s €65-80, d €120-140; ☎) If James Joyce dropped by today, he would find this

atmospheric maze of wooden staircases and landings much the same as it was when he described it in *Ulysses*.

**Gallery 29** (☎ 49449; 16 Oliver Plunkett St; lunch mains €4-9, dinner mains €14-22; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Wed & Sat, 9.30am-late Thu & Fri) Classy and creative, Gallery 29 is a buzzing café of increasing fame, picking up awards for its health-conscious fare. Its homemade baked goods look as artistic as the artworks on display, and you can get full hot meals like oven-baked salmon at lunch as well as soups and salads.

**Ilia** (☎ 40300; 28 Oliver Plunkett St; light meals €4.25-12; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Croissants, full Irish, pancakes with maple syrup, and bacon and eggs make this sweet two-storey café Mullingar's most popular spot for breakfast. It's also a good bet for lunches like prawn and avocado salad or toasted bagels.

**Con's** (☎ 934 0925; 22 Dominick St; mains €7-12; ☎ carvery noon-3pm) Con's is best known for its huge carvery lunches and hearty sandwiches, and it's a fun spot for a pint too.

**Oscar's** (☎ 44909; 21 Oliver Plunkett St; mains €15-25; ☎ 6-9.30pm Mon-Thu, 6-10pm Fri & Sat, 12.30-2.15pm & 6-8.15pm Sun) If you ask anyone in Mullingar where you should go for dinner, chances are they'll send you here. The menu mostly skirts the Mediterranean (pastas, quality pizzas and French-inspired meat and poultry), and the wine list is the best in town.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Yukon Bar** (☎ 934 0251; 11 Dominick St) The fortune-teller at this pub is a real draw – hours can vary and it's hard to get an appointment, but between 2.30pm and 4.30pm on Tuesday is your best bet. There's also a Monday- and Thursday-night soul, blues and rock session in the front bar, while the small venue at the back, Stables, has occasional gigs.

**Danny Byrne's** (☎ 934 3792; 27 Pearse St) This renovated pub draws passionate crowds when it screens football and rugby matches. There's traditional music on Wednesday nights.

**Mullingar Arts Centre** (☎ 934 7777; www.mullingarartscentre.ie; County Hall, Lower Mount St) The centre runs a regular programme of music, comedy, drama and art exhibitions.

## Getting There & Away

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111) runs services to Athlone (one hour, two Monday to Saturday, one Sunday), Ballina (three hours, three Monday to Saturday, four Sunday)

and Dundalk (2½ hours, two Monday to Saturday, one Sunday). There's also a frequent commuter service to and from Dublin (1½ hours), reduced at weekends to around eight buses on Saturday and five on Sunday. All stop at Austin Friar St and the train station.

The **train station** (☎ 934 8274) sees three or four trains daily in each direction on the line from Dublin (one hour) to Sligo (two hours).

## KILBEGGAN & AROUND

Little **Kilbeggan** (population 652) has two big claims to fame: a restored whiskey facility-turned-museum, and Ireland's only National Hunt racecourse.

Industrial technology enthusiasts (and/or whiskey enthusiasts) will get a kick out of **Locke's Distillery** (☎ 057-933 2134; Kilbeggan; adult/child €6.25/free; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar). This 1757-established whiskey producer is believed to be the oldest licensed pot still in the world before it ceased operation two centuries later. Today you can marvel at hulking machinery, visit a cooper's room and warehouse, and listen to the creaks and groans of the working mill wheel. Guided tours last 50 minutes; finishing off with a whiskey tasting.

Punters from all over the country attend the old-time evening meetings at the **Kilbeggan Races** (☎ 057-933 32176; www.kilbegganraces.com; tickets €15; ☎ approx fortnightly May-Sep).

About 6.5km west of Kilbeggan (1.5km west of Horseleap), just off the N6, is the blissful spa retreat **Temple House & Health Spa** (☎ 057-933 35118; www.templespa.ie; s from €145, d from €250, restaurant mains €23.50-30; ☎ Tue-Sun, day spa Wed-Sun, restaurant 7-9pm Tue-Thu, 7-9.30pm Fri & Sat, 12.30-2pm Sun; ♿) The 250-year-old house is set in 40 hectares of grounds, on the site of an ancient monastery. Food is locally sourced (with herbs fresh from the garden), and wine's served with dinner. Both the restaurant and the day spa are open to nonguests – 'relaxing days' start at €140, while all-out 'pampering days' start from €220.

## NORTH OF MULLINGAR Crookedwood & Around

The small village of Crookedwood hugs the shore of Lough Derravaragh. The 8km-long lake is associated with the legend of the children of Lír, who were turned into

swans here. Stepmums get a bad rap in lore (Cinderella et al), and Irish mythology is no exception – the transformation of Lír's children is said to have been inflicted by their jealous stepmother. Each winter, the legend is recalled by thousands of snow-white migratory swans who flock from as far away as Russia and Siberia.

About 3km west of Crookedwood is the **Multyfarnham Franciscan friary**. In the present church, the remains of a 15th-century church still stand, and there are outdoor Stations of the Cross set beside a stream.

East of Crookedwood, a small road leads 2km to the ruins of the fortified 15th-century **St Munna's Church**, built in a lovely location on the site of a 7th-century church founded by St Munna. Keys to the church are available from the nearby bungalow.

## Tullynally Castle Gardens

The seat of the Pakenham family is the imposing Gothic revival **Tullynally Castle** (☎ 044-61159; www.tullynallycastle.com; Castlepollard; gardens adult/child/family €6/3/16; ☎ 2-6pm Jun-Aug). The castle itself is closed to visitors, but you can roam its 12 hectares of gardens and parkland containing ornamental lakes, a Chinese and a Tibetan garden and a wonderful stretch of 200-year-old yews.

To get here, take the N4 from Mullingar, then the R394 at Edgeworthstown to Castlepollard, from where the castle and gardens are signposted 2km to the northwest.

## Fore Valley

Near the shores of Lough Lene, the emerald-green Fore Valley is a superb place to explore by bicycle or on foot. In AD 630, St Fechin founded a monastery just outside the village of Fore. There's nothing left of this early settlement, but three later buildings in the valley are closely associated with 'seven wonders' said to have occurred here.

The **Fore Abbey Coffee Shop** (☎ 044-61780; foreabbeycoffeeshop@oceanfree.net; ☎ 11am-6pm daily Jun-Sep, 11am-5pm Sun Oct-May), on the edge of Fore village, acts as a tourist information office and screens a 20-minute video about the wonders. Guided tours of Fore can be arranged by contacting the coffee shop in advance.

From Mullingar, take the N4 then the R394 northeast to Castlepollard. The road to Fore is signposted from there.

## THE SEVEN WONDERS OF FORE

The oldest of the three buildings is St Fechin's Church, containing an early-13th-century chancel and baptismal font. Over the cyclopean entrance is a huge lintel stone carved with a Greek cross and thought to weigh about 2.5 tonnes. It's said to have been put into place by St Fechin's devotions – the wonder of the **stone raised by prayer**.

A path runs from the church to the attractive little anchorite cell – the **anchorite in a stone** – which dates back to the 15th century and was lived in by a succession of hermits. The Seven Wonders pub in the village holds the key.

On the other side of the road near the car park is **St Fechin's Well**, filled with **water that will not boil**. Cynics should beware of testing this claim, as it's said that if you try it, doom will come to your family. Nearby is a branch from the **tree that will not burn**; the coins pressed into it are a more contemporary superstition.

Further over the plain are the extensive remains of a 13th-century Benedictine priory, the **Monastery of the Quaking Scraw**, miraculous because it was built on what once was a bog. In the following century it was turned into a fortification, hence the loophole windows and castlelike square towers. The western tower is in a dangerous state – keep clear.

The last two wonders are the **mill without a race** and the **water that flows uphill**. The mill site is marked, and legend has it that St Fechin caused water to flow uphill, towards the mill, by throwing his crosier against a rock near Lough Lene, about 1.5km away.

## Rockfield Ecological Estate

This **ecological estate** (☎ 043-76025; imeldadaly@eir.com.net; Rathowen; tour €10, mains €20-25; ☎ by appointment) gives you an inspiring insight into sustainable living as well as traditional Irish culture and crafts. In addition to two-hour tours of the working farm, you can dine on nutritious homemade food utilising organic produce from the rambling gardens (while sitting on a chair fashioned from fallen tree branches); or take part in full-day **courses** (per person incl lunch €100) such as spinning, weaving, basket making, wood carving and stone sculpting. Irish bands sometimes play here, and onsite accommodation is in the works.

From Mullingar, take the Longford road (N4) northwest for 28km through the village of Rathowen. At the end of the village turn left for 1km until you reach a bend, then

follow the road around to the left for a further 1km; the farm's signposted on your left.

## ATHLONE

☎ 090 / pop 71350

The location of Athlone (Baile Átha Luain), smack-bang in the centre of the country, is both a blessing and a curse for Westmeath's county town. A curse because it's easily bypassed on intercoastal journeys, and infrastructure is often allocated elsewhere (Athlone, for example, has long been pushing for an international airport, but it's unlikely since it would take business away from those on the coast). But on balance it's a blessing because it's within easy reach of Ireland's major cities by rail and road, with none of the traffic congestion and all of the benefits of small-town life.

The Shannon splits this former garrison town in two. Most businesses and services sit on the river's eastern bank. In the shadow of Athlone Castle, the western (left) bank is an enchanting jumble of twisting streets, colourfully painted houses, historic pubs, antique shops, and old book binders, as well as some outstanding restaurants.

In true 'if you can't join them, beat them' spirit, Athlone is in the midst of building what's slated to be the country's biggest shopping centre in the town's heart, as well as maintaining its campaign for city status.

## Orientation & Information

Athlone is on the main Dublin-Galway road (N6). The Shannon flows through the centre from Lough Ree; major landmarks Athlone Castle and Sts Peter and Paul Cathedral are prominently situated on the river's western bank.

The websites [www.athlone.ie](http://www.athlone.ie) and [www.westmeathtourism.com](http://www.westmeathtourism.com) are good sources of information; while the website [www.acis.ie](http://www.acis.ie) has a downloadable pdf version of the *Athlone & District Tourist Guide* including walking tours of the town.

**Bank of Ireland** (Northgate St) At the start of Northgate St, just up from Custume Pl.

**Information office** (☎ 647 3173; Lloyds Lane; ☎ 9am-5pm) Run by the local chamber of commerce.

**Post office** (Barrack St) Beside the cathedral.

**Tourist office** (☎ 649 4630; Athlone Castle; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.15pm Mon-Fri May-Sep) Inside the castle guardhouse.

## Sights & Activities

### ATHLONE CASTLE VISITOR CENTRE

The Normans built their castle here in 1210, at this important crossroads formed by the river and the ford across it. Over the centuries it was much squabbled over, particularly during the turbulent 17th century. In 1690 the Jacobite town survived a siege by Protestant forces, but a year later it fell, under a devastating bombardment of 12,000 cannonballs, to William of Orange's troops. Major alterations to the castle took place between the 17th and 19th centuries.

The **Athlone Castle Visitor Centre** (☎ 649 2912; adult/child/family €5.50/1.60/12; ☎ 10am-4.30pm May-Sep) contains some informative displays on the 1691 Siege of Athlone, the flora and fauna of the Shannon, and the Shannon's hydro-electricity role. Other highlights are an old gramophone that belonged to the great Athlone tenor John McCormack (1884-1945); and a military and folk museum with two sheila-na-gigs. An hour is probably enough time to take it all in.

### RIVER CRUISES

**Viking Tours** (☎ 086-262 1136; [vikingtours@ireland.com](mailto:vikingtours@ireland.com); 7 St Mary's Pl; ☎ May-Sep) offers cruises on the River Shannon aboard a replica Viking longship complete with costumed staff and helmets, and swords and shields for kids. Tours sail north to Lough Ree (adult/child/family €12/10/40, 1½ hours), and south to Clonmacnoise (adult/child/family €20/15/60, 4½ hours) in County Offaly. There are usually daily sailings in June, July and August, plus sailings most days in May and September; call or ask the tourist office about schedules.

New outfit **Shannon Safari** (☎ 647 9558; [www.shannonsafari.ie](http://www.shannonsafari.ie); 36 Silverquay) offers private hour-long powerboat cruises year-round for €80 per couple or €100 per family, with longer cruises available. Boats depart beside the Radisson hotel.

### FISHING

Information and permits are available from the friendly **Strand Tackle Shop** (☎ 647 9277; [powell@iol.ie](mailto:powell@iol.ie); the Strand), on the eastern bank of the river opposite the castle.

### Sleeping

**Bastion B&B** (☎ 649 4954; [www.thebastion.net](http://www.thebastion.net); 2 Bastion St; s €40-50, d €60-70) In a converted draper's shop, this funky B&B's white-on-white interiors

are a canvas for eclectic artwork, cacti collections and Indian wall hangings. The five rooms (three with private bathroom) are crisp and clean, with neatly folded fluffy towels, and there's an arty lounge-breakfast room where you can kick-start your day with cereal, fruit, ground coffee, fresh bread and a cheeseboard.

**our pick** **Coosan Cottage Eco Guesthouse** (☎ 647 3468; [www.ecoguesthouse.com](http://www.ecoguesthouse.com); Coosan Point Rd; s/d €50/80, snacks €2-3.50; ☎ (♿)) Built from scratch by its owners, this beautiful cottage is completely ecofriendly, utilising wind-generated electricity, rain water and sawdust pellet-fuelled heating. Home comforts include cooked breakfasts such as salmon fishcakes, an on-site sauna, and a bar (with great Guinness on tap). If you're not staying here, you can pop by from 1pm for a cuppa or a wholesome bowl of chowder and a chat. The cottage is set in peaceful horse paddocks 2.5km from the town centre, with free pick-up if you're coming by train or bus. Credit cards aren't accepted.

**Prince of Wales Hotel** (☎ 647 6666; [www.theprinceofwales.ie](http://www.theprinceofwales.ie); Church St; d from €120; ☎ (♿)) Former guests – including US President Martin Van Buren, who stayed here in 1853 – wouldn't recognise the Prince of Wales since it's ultra-contemporary strip-and-refit. Chocolate-and-cream bedrooms are equipped with state-of-the-art entertainment systems and black marble bathrooms; the latest addition is a gleaming restaurant, the Corvus. Lunch and dinner are served Saturday and Sunday only (main course, dessert and tea or coffee €32.50); cheaper bar food is available for lunch and dinner during the rest of the week. The hotel is on the eastern riverbank in the centre of town.

### Eating

Athlone's culinary excellence continues apace; scout around the western bank's backstreets and you'll unearth some gems.

**our pick** **Left Bank Bistro** (☎ 649 4446; Fry Pl; snacks €3-6, mains €20-29; ☎ snacks 10.30am-noon, lunch noon-5pm & dinner 5.30-10.30pm Tue-Sat) With airy, whitewashed interiors, shelves of gourmet goods, and a menu combining superior Irish ingredients with Mediterranean and Asian influences, this sophisticated deli-bistro attracts coffee-sipping web designers as well as power-lunching business types. There's a lengthy wine list, some extraordinary des-

serts, such as dark chocolate truffle torte with raspberry and Bushmills sauce, and staff who really know their stuff.

**Olive Grove** (☎ 647 6946; Custume Pl; mains €14-22.50; ☎ noon-4pm & 5.30-10pm Tue-Sun) Another mover and shaker on Athlone's dining scene, this stylised restaurant by the river gets creative with starters like deep-fried mozzarella sticks with spicy peach salsa, and mains such as chicken breast stuffed with smoked cheese, or pistachio-encrusted oven-baked cod.

**Le Chateau** (☎ 649 4517; Peter's Port; mains €22-30; ☎ lunch from 12.30pm, dinner from 5.50pm) Many Athlone locals regard this converted church as their favourite restaurant, and it's easy to understand why: the split-level timber dining room glows with flickering candles at night, and classy comfort food includes tender roast beef and rack of lamb.

Hip left-bank cafés include **Slice of Life** (☎ 649 3970; Bastion St; mains €3-7; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) and **Foodies** (☎ 649 8576; Bastion St; sandwiches €4-7; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), which has a soothing wood stove, good coffee (Illy – yay!), and muffins bursting with fruit. In the same creaking wooden building as Foodies, there's a New Age-ish gift shop filled with Celtic charms, candles, crystals and local art.

A market sets up between the cathedral and Athlone Castle on the first weekend of the month.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**Sean's Bar** (☎ 649 2358; Main St) Age certainly hasn't wearied Sean's Bar. Dating way back to AD 900, Sean's stakes its claim as Ireland's oldest pub. Its log fires, uneven floors, sawdust, rickety piano and curios collected over the years attest to the theory, which is backed up by the *Guinness Book of Records*. The riverside beer garden has live music most nights in summer; to really see things in full swing, turn up at about 5.30pm on a Saturday.

**Dean Crowe Theatre** (☎ 649 2129; [www.deancrowetheatre.com](http://www.deancrowetheatre.com); Chapel St) This refurbished theatre has wonderful acoustics, and runs a broad programme of theatrical and musical events year-round.

## Getting There & Around

Athlone's **bus depot** (☎ 648 4406) is beside the train station. Express buses stop there on many east-west routes. There are 15 buses daily to

Dublin (two hours) and Galway (1¼ hours); three from Monday to Saturday (one Sunday) to Westport (2¾ hours) in County Mayo; and three Monday to Saturday (one Sunday, plus an extra bus Friday) to Mullingar (one hour).

From **Athlone train station** (☎ 647 3300), there are nine trains daily Monday to Saturday (seven Sunday) to Dublin (1¼ hours); three or four daily to Westport (two hours); and four to six daily to Galway (1¼ hours). The train station is on the eastern bank on Southern Station Rd. To get here, follow Northgate St up from Custume Pl. Its extension, Coosan Point Rd, joins Southern Station Rd near St Vincent's Hospital.

You can order a taxi on ☎ 647 4400.

## LOUGH REE & AROUND

Many of the 50-plus islands within **Lough Ree** were once inhabited by monks and their ecclesiastical treasures, drawing Vikings like moths to a flame. These days, its visitors are less bloodthirsty, with sailing, trout fishing and bird-watching the most popular pastimes. Migratory birds that nest here include swans, plovers and curlews.

Poet, playwright and novelist Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74), author of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, is closely associated with the

area running alongside the eastern shore of Lough Ree. Known as **Goldsmith Country**, the region is beautifully captured in his writings. The *Lough Ree Trail: a Signposted Tour*, by Gearoid O'Brien, is available from the tourist offices in Athlone and Mullingar. Ideal for cycling, this 32km tour runs through Glasson (which Goldsmith called the 'loveliest village of the plain') and around the shores of Lough Ree, and into County Longford.

Situated 8km northeast of Athlone on the N55, **Glasson** (population 816) is well worth a stop for its good restaurants and lively pubs. Nearby, **Wineport Restaurant** (☎ 648 5466; www.wineport.ie; d €150-350, mains €24-29, dinner menu €55; ☎ 5-10pm Wed-Sat, 12.30-9pm Sun), in a lakeside cedar lodge, showcases chef Feargal O'Donnell's fêted modern Irish cuisine. Despite its fame, the atmosphere remains relaxed and little gourmets are made welcome. The lodge's 10 rooms are named after wines and champagnes (with a tippie on arrival), and boat hire can be arranged.

### Getting There & Away

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 647 3322) service 466 from Athlone to Longford has two trips daily from Monday to Saturday, stopping outside Grogan's pub in Glasson.