

Counties Mayo & Sligo



They're just a few hours by road from Dublin, yet Mayo and Sligo have a genuine off-the-beaten-track feel to them. Both are rural, sparsely populated and blessed with beguiling natural beauty. A traveller looking to get away from the modern pace of life need only make a beeline for Mayo and Sligo's remote islands, deserted beaches, desolate bogs and humble Gaeltacht enclaves populated by maybe a few hundred souls.

Mayo is the more rugged of the two counties. It juts further into the Atlantic, and most of the county is covered by an impressively harsh, boggy terrain. The words 'To hell or to Connacht' – not necessarily meant as a compliment – may well have been referring to Mayo's nether regions. But while the land isn't heavenly for farmers, it dazzles the eye with its stark rock formations and subtle hues. And a preponderance of the evidence suggests that living here builds character, for you won't meet a harder, friendlier bunch anywhere.

Sligo also has its share of natural wonderment. Its magnificent flat-top mountains and verdant pastoral scenes directly inspired the poet William Butler Yeats to compose some of Ireland's most ardent verse. But Sligo presents a more worldly face. Its coast has become a haven for international surfers, and Sligo Town, with its complementary blend of international restaurants, art galleries and mod hotels, is as sophisticated as many cities. The county boasts an improbable bounty of prehistoric sites, and is home to some of Ireland's finest traditional musicians.

If you're looking to raise your blood pressure, there are better places to go, but for remote country lodgings; relaxed drives behind slow-moving tractors; placid, fish-filled lakes; and a warm-hearted welcome, Mayo and Sligo are your ticket.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Tragic Beauty** Jaw-dropping Doolough Valley (p450), site of the desperate Famine Walk
- **Island Escape** Ruggedly remote Achill Island (p452), off western Mayo
- **Sing Along** Raise a glass, and your voice, at Matt Molloy's pub (p449) in Westport
- **Maeve's Grave** Hike up the rock pile said to cover a legendary queen's remains at Knocknarea (p469)
- **Surfin' Sligo** Year-round waves at Strandhill (p469) and Easky (p471)



■ POPULATION: 178,900 (COMBINED)

■ AREA: 7195 SQ KM

COUNTY MAYO

In terms of topography and history, much of Mayo (Maigh Eo), particularly along its coast, is a continuation of the wilds of Connemara. It's Connacht to the core, and with only a fraction of the tourists who flood into County Galway's rugged hinterland each summer. Though it's not one of Ireland's famously green counties, Mayo does have a flair for the dramatic, particularly in the stunningly beautiful Doolough Valley. In the farthest reaches of the county you can really shake free of the world's cares.

Of course, Mayo's history does not paint a picture of the easy county life. The ravages

of the Potato Famine – which provoked the refrain 'County Mayo, Mayo, God help us!' – were harshest here. Due to emigration, many overseas Irish can trace their roots to this once-plagued land. The population has never rebounded to its pre-Famine numbers.

While the county lags behind the rest of Ireland in terms of economy, it is by no means a down-trodden place. The pace of life is slower here, which is precisely what attracts many travellers out this way. The further west you go, the more rugged it gets.

CONG

☎ 094 / pop 135

Cong does its best to comply with romantic notions of what a traditional country Irish

village ought to look like. Time appears to have stood still here ever since *The Quiet Man* was filmed in and around the village in 1951. But while it still more or less fits the bill for an ordinary little village surrounded by some particularly enticing rural scenery, the town lacks an authentic pulse. Very few people actually live in the town proper, and photos of John Wayne gaze out from shop windows. In summer, the arrival of the morning's first tour bus instantly doubles the number of people walking the town's streets.

Obviously, Cong is out of step in every way with modern Ireland. Come here either as a fan of the film and appreciate it the way you might enjoy a visit to a Hollywood backlot, or shield yourself with a postmodern fascination for the way in which reality and fiction tend to blur. If you're here for the quietude of spring or fall, simply amble the wooded trails between the lovely old abbey and fantastic Ashford Castle. Cong is blessed with tranquil streams, attractive stone bridges and forested parklands.

Cong is just east of the border with County Galway and lies on the narrow isthmus between Lough Corrib and Lough Mask.

Information

The **tourist office** (Map p443; ☎ 954 6542; Abbey St; ☒ 10am–6pm Mar–Nov) is in the old courthouse building opposite Cong Abbey. Film fanatics may want to equip themselves with a copy of *Complete Tour Guide to the Quiet Man Locations* (€5).

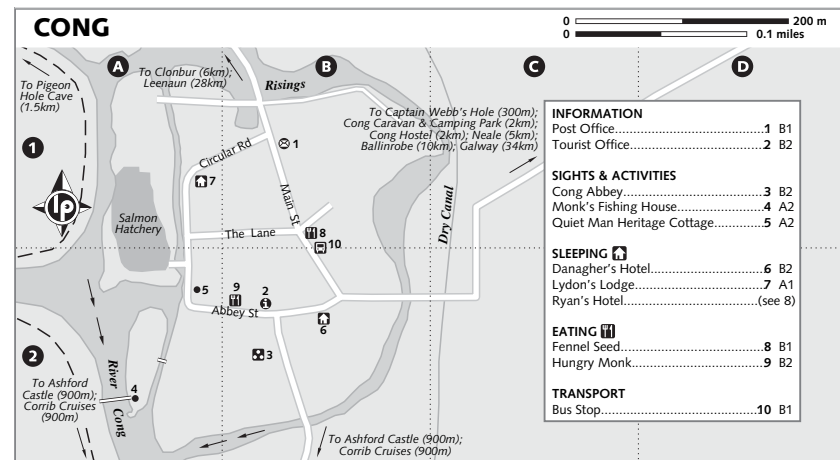
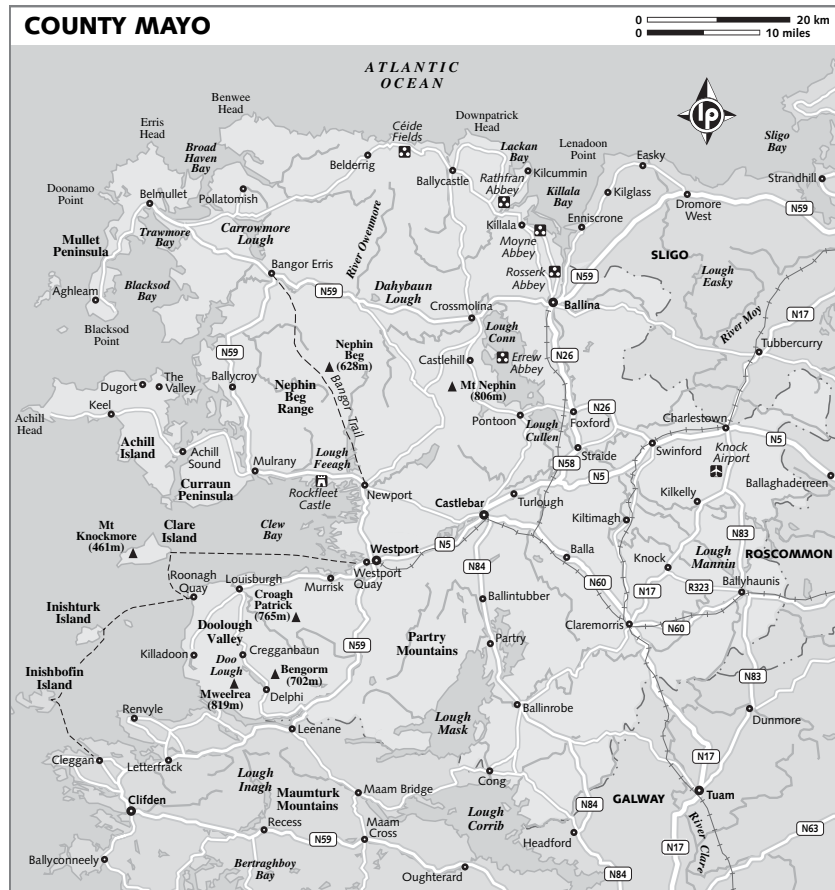
There are no banks, but you can change money at the post office on Main St, or in the tourist office.

Sights CONG ABBEY

An evocative reminder of ecclesiastical times past, the weathered shell of Cong's 12th-century **Augustinian abbey** (Map p443; admission free; ☒ dawn–dusk) is scored by wizened lines from centuries of exposure to the elements. Nevertheless, several finely sculpted features have survived, including a carved doorway, windows and lovely medieval arches (touched up in the 19th century).

Founded by Turlough Mór O'Connor, high king of Ireland and king of Connaught in 1120, the abbey occupies the site of an earlier 6th-century church. The community once gathered in the **Chapter House** to confess their sins publicly. Nowadays, many of those same people are trying to rest in peace here, for over the years a graveyard has spread around the abbey's hull and within it as well.

From the abbey, moss-encrusted trees guard a path to the river. Here lies the site's most memorable feature – a diminutive 16th-century **monk's fishing house** (Map p443) built midway over the river so that the monks could haul their catch straight up through a hole in the floor. There would have once been a cord to a bell in the kitchen, letting the cooks know to get the pot on.



INFORMATION	
Post Office.....	1 B1
Tourist Office.....	2 B2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Cong Abbey.....	3 B2
Monk's Fishing House.....	4 A2
Quiet Man Heritage Cottage.....	5 A2
SLEEPING	
Danagher's Hotel.....	6 B2
Lydon's Lodge.....	7 A1
Ryan's Hotel.....	(see 8)
EATING	
Fennel Seed.....	8 B1
Hungry Monk.....	9 B2
TRANSPORT	
Bus Stop.....	10 B1

QUIET MAN HERITAGE COTTAGE

Cong's most over-the-top nod to its own celluloid glory is the **Quiet Man Heritage Cottage** (Map p443; ☎ 954 6089; Circular Rd; adult/child/student €3.75/2/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Mar-Oct), modelled on Sean Thornton's 'White O' Mornin' Cottage from the film. The cottage also contains a regional **archaeological and historical exhibition**, which crams items from 7000 BC to the 19th century into a very small space.

ASHFORD CASTLE

Just beyond Cong Abbey, the village abruptly ends and the woodlands surrounding **Ashford Castle** (Map p445; ☎ 954 6003; www.ashford.ie) begin. First built in 1228 as the seat of the de Burgo family, the castle changed hands several times and was added onto and rebuilt on a few occasions. Among its owners were the Guinness family, whose stout ruled Ireland for well over a century. Arthur Guinness turned the castle into a regal hunting and fishing lodge, which it remains today. The castle is an impressive sight, with battlements towering over the Cong River, and visitors can peek into its immaculately restored interior parlours. The real attraction, however, is the surrounding estate – 350 acres of parkland, covered with forests, streams, bridle paths and a golf course. A walk through the Kinlough Woods gets you away from the golfers and out to the shores of Lough Corrib. You can also walk along the banks of the river back to the monk's fishing house (p443).

Activities
CRUISES

In the centre of Lough Corrib is the island of Inchagoill. **Corrib Cruises** (Map p445; ☎ 954 6029; www.corribcruises.com; Cong) offers 1½ hour boat tours from the Ashford Castle pier to Inchagoill (€15, 11.15am and 2.45pm, April to October), with a 30 minute guided tour of the Island's Monastic sites. Some boats also continue on to Oughterard (€20, 11.15am, June to September) in County Galway (see p427). Tickets can be purchased on board. The company also runs 45-minute mini tours and live-music cruises at night. Ask at the tourist office for details.

FALCONRY

As if Ashford Castle wasn't already medieval and aristocratic enough, it is also home to

Ireland's first **falconry school** (Map p445; ☎ 954 6820; www.falconry.ie). It's hard to imagine a more magnificent setting to learn this ancient art. Set deep in the castle's magnificent estate, the school will teach anyone over the age of seven how to handle and fly Harris hawks. An introductory lesson lasting 45 minutes costs €60 per person, although there are reduced rates for two or more people. A lengthier 'hawk walk' lesson lasts for 90 minutes (€90). Call ahead to make an appointment.

Sleeping
BUDGET

Cong Caravan & Camping Park (Map p445; ☎ 954 6089; www.quietman-cong.com; Quay Rd, Lisloughrey; camp/caravan sites €15/20) This agreeable camping ground has thick lawns on which to pitch your tent (read: soft ground for sleeping). It is operated by the same family that run the hostel, and all the same amenities are available to campers.

Cong Hostel (Map p445; ☎ 954 6089; www.quietman-cong.ie; Quay Rd, Lisloughrey; dm/s/d €15/25/50; P) Well-run and friendly, Cong Hostel is 2km outside Cong village, past the main gate to Ashford Castle. It has an array of tidy dorms and private rooms and offers laundry facilities, a screening room for *The Quiet Man*, and hires bikes. It's affiliated with both An Óige and Independent Holiday Hostels of Ireland (IHH). To find it, head east from town along the Galway road (R346) and when you see the signs turn right onto the side road.

MIDRANGE

Lydon's Lodge (Map p443; ☎ 46053; lydonslodge@eircom.net; Circular Rd; s/d from €40/80; ☎ Mar-Oct; P) This rambling family-run lodge by the river has comfy but plain rooms and a laidback bar with an open fire and occasional music. DJ King Cong makes regular weekend appearances. Breakfast is included in the room rates.

Michaeleen's Manor (Map p445; ☎ 954 6089; www.quietman-cong.com; Quay Rd, Lisloughrey; s/d €50/70; P) Owners Margaret and Gerry Collins give the warmest welcome in town, and if you're crazy about *The Quiet Man*, here's one Irish couple who can actually outmatch your enthusiasm. Their home is large and modern, but they've turned it into a museum of film memorabilia. Gerry proudly boasts blood ties to most of the film's supporting cast. The home is exceedingly comfortable and Margaret's breakfast will sustain you through walking the grounds

of the nearby castle. There's also a hot tub and tennis court.

Danagher's Hotel (Map p443; ☎ 954 6028; fax 954 6495; Abbey St; s/d €50/80) Upstairs from a nice old pub, and overlooking the town's main junction, Danagher's has 11 en-suite rooms, some with views of the countryside. It is named for the Victor McLaglen character from the movie (we'll assume you know *which* movie). The pub serves traditional Irish fare.

Ryan's Hotel (Map p443; ☎ 954 6243; www.ryanshotel.com; Main St; s/d €55/100; P) The social hub of Cong may well be this hotel, on the main drag and sporting a pub and a fine restaurant. Rooms, while clean and presentable, are nothing to shout about. All are en suite.

TOP END

Ashford Castle (Map p445; ☎ 954 6003; www.ashford.ie; d from €310/750 weeknight/weekend; P) Break the bank and you'll feel like a king or a queen for a night or two. Or at least a celebrity. (Flip through the guest book to see if you recognise any of the names signed therein.) Rooms and service are exquisite and rates include breakfast and dinner in the castle's George V restaurant.

Eating

Cullen's at the Cottage (Map p445; ☎ 954 5332; Ashford Castle; mains €7-25; ☎ 12.30-9.30pm Thu-Mon) A viable excuse to visit Ashford Castle for anyone staying in a far cheaper B&B, Cullen's is a comfortable little house that serves delicious seafood, steaks and vegetarian dishes. You

can also drop by for a light lunch after hiking the surrounding forest.

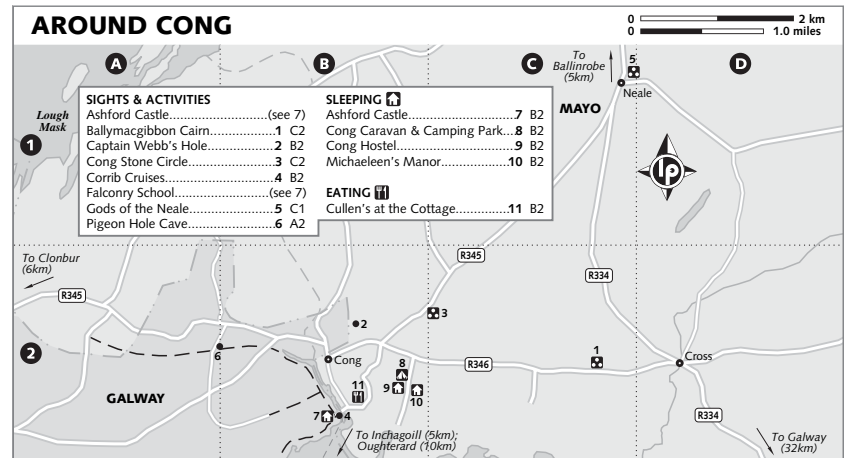
Fennel Seed (Map p443; ☎ 954 6004; Ryan's Hotel, Main St; bar food €8-12, mains €17-25; ☎ 7-10pm Mon-Sat, 1-7pm Sun) Two chefs used to cooking for the upper-crust at Ashford Castle have brought their culinary skills to the village, with great success. The dining room combines elegance and hominess. Steaks and lamb shanks are excellent, but vegetarians are also catered for. Above-average bar food is served in the adjacent Crow's Nest Pub until 7pm.

Hungry Monk (Map p443; ☎ 954 5842; Abbey St; sandwiches €6-8, salads €8-14; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat Mar-Oct; P) This cheery little coffee shop offers a smart selection of delicious sandwiches, soups and salads. Your sandwich might contain slick slices of home-baked ham served with mango chutney. The joint also brews the best coffee in town.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800; www.buseireann.ie) has regular service from Galway (one way/return €9/14) and Westport (€8/13). The bus stops in front of the Quiet Man Coffee Shop on Main St.

If you're travelling by car or bike further into County Mayo, eschew the main N84 to Castlebar and take the longer, but much more attractive, route west to Leenaun (starting with the R345) and north to Westport via Delphi. This will take you through the Doolough Valley.



LOCAL PROTEST YIELDS NEW WORD

It was near the unassuming little village of Neale that the term boycott came into use. In 1880, the Irish Land League, in an effort to press for fair rents and improve the lot of workers, withdrew field hands from the estate of Lord Erne, who owned much of the land in the area. When Lord Erne's land agent, Captain Charles Cunningham Boycott, evicted the striking labourers, the surrounding community began a campaign to ostracise the agent. Not only did farmers refuse to work his land, Boycott was refused local services, and people in the town refused to talk to him or sit next to him in church. The incident attracted attention from the London papers, and soon Boycott's name was synonymous with such organised, nonviolent protests. Within a few months, Boycott gave up and left Ireland.

Getting Around

Bikes can be hired from the Cong Hostel or from Lisloughery House, on the grounds of Ashford Castle (p444).

AROUND CONG

Caves

The Cong area is honeycombed with limestone caves, each of which – in true Irish style – has a colourful legend or story to its credit.

One of the best is **Pigeon Hole**, a deep limestone gash in pine forest about 1.5km west of Cong. It can be reached by road or by the walking track from across the river. Steep and slippery stone steps lead down into the cave, where subterranean water flows in winter. Keep an eye out here for the white trout of Cong – a mythical woman who turned into a fish to be with her drowned lover.

A short distance to the west of the village, though somewhat tricky to find, is the water-filled **Captain Webb's Hole**. This deep hole lays claim to the grisliest legend in the area. Two centuries ago, a local villain nicknamed Captain Webb for the deformity of his hands and feet, is said to have lured a succession of 12 unfortunate women here, stripped them naked and hurled them into the hole's soggy depths to die. His would-be 13th victim however was a canny lass. She asked Webb to look away as she undressed, then promptly pushed him to his own watery grave.

Circles & Graves

The weathered remains of **Cong Stone Circle** stick up like rotten teeth in a field about 1.5km northeast of Cong, just east off the Neale road (R345). About 3.5km east of Cong, north off the Cross road (R346), is the overgrown **Ballymacgibbon Cairn**, supposedly the site of a legendary Celtic battle of Moytura (take

the track signposted and watch for a stile to your right).

Neale

If you take the turn-off at the northern end of the village of Neale, 6km northeast of Cong, you will find the curious, carved stone known as the **Gods of the Neale**. It's about 200m east of the main road, through an unsigned gateway on the left. This mysterious slab, which is dated 1757, is carved with figures of a human, an animal and a reptile.

WESTPORT

☎ 098 / pop 5315

It's perhaps the ultimate twee 'tidy town,' and its gentility is sometimes disturbed by hens and stags flying in for a weekend of partying – yet Westport (Cathair na Mairt) has an undeniable appeal. Its broad Georgian streets and shaded lime-flanked riverside mall are about as photogenic as Ireland gets, and spirited pubs line Bridge St. One pub in particular, Matt Malloy's, is rather conducive to having rare auld time. A short distance west is the town's pretty harbour, Westport Quay, on the shores of Clew Bay and an ideal location for a leisurely meal, or a pint at sundown.

The town's unusual layout unfurls from the octagonal-shaped town square, and slopes down to the River Carrowbeg. The first settlement was built around an O'Malley castle, but it disappeared beneath the demolish-and-build spree that was the Georgian era. The new town was designed by 18th-century architect James Wyatt, with a little help from Georgian superstar Richard Castle.

Information

Allied Irish Bank (Shop St) ATM and bureau de change.
Bookshop (☎ 26816; Bridge St; ☎ 11am-6pm) Good selection of OS maps and books on Ireland.

Gavin's Video & Internet Cafe (☎ 26461; Bridge St; per hr €4; ☎ 10am-10pm) Internet access.

Gill's Launderette (☎ 25819; James St; per load from €5.35; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Will recycle your dirty laundry.

Tourist office (☎ 25711; www.irelandwest.ie, www.visitmayo.com, www.westporttourism.com; James St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-5.45pm Mon-Sat Apr-Jun & Sep, 9am-12.45pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri rest of year)

Sights

WESTPORT HOUSE & COUNTRY PARK

The charms of this glorious country **mansion** (☎ 25430; www.westporthouse.ie; Quay Rd; admission to house & gardens adult/child/student €11.50/6.50/9, attractions extra; ☎ 11.30am-5pm Apr-Sep, Sat & Sun only Mar & Oct; P) outshine its commercial overhaul of recent years. Built in 1730, it was once one of the country's most dignified country homes, but it has since sold its soul to become a kind of stately-home theme-park hybrid. A fake 'dungeon' sits below the house; unnerving waxworks dot the upper galleries; plastic swans drift on the elegantly landscaped lake; and a minirailway and water slides are tucked into the once tranquil gardens. Clearly this

place wasn't always fun for the entire family, but it learned its lesson.

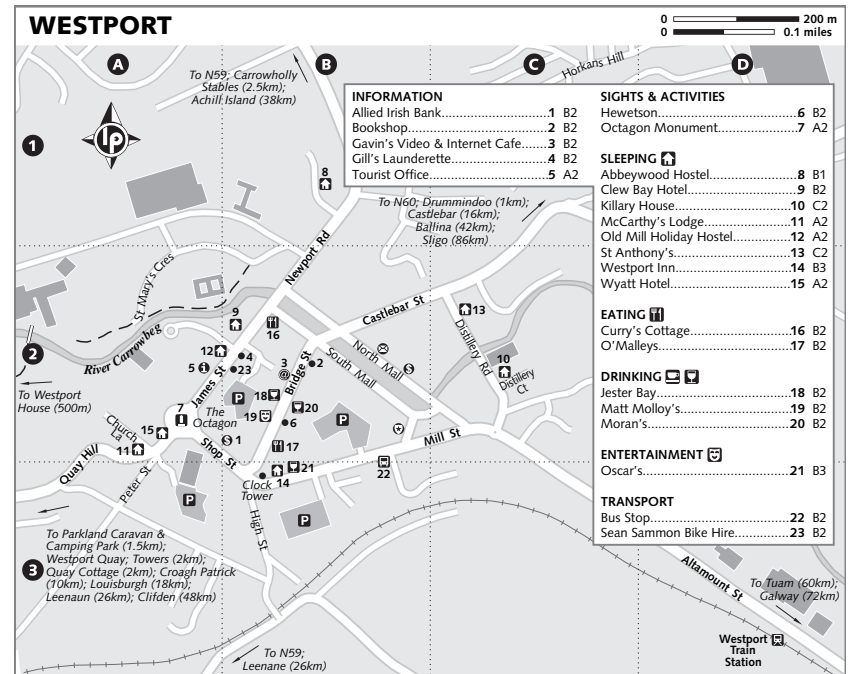
Head out of Westport on Quay Rd towards Croagh Patrick and Louisburgh. After 1km, just before Westport Quay, take a small road to the right and through the grand gateway.

The octagon monument, standing at the nexus of the town, was erected in 1845 in honour of eminently forgettable George Clendening, a local banker. His statue stood upon the podium until 1922, when its head was lopped off during the Civil War. In 1990 a Roman-looking statue of St Patrick, complete with serpent-entwined staff, replaced the unfortunate capitalist.

Activities

For tackle, camping gear and information about fishing, enquire at **Hewetson** (☎ 26018; Bridge St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat).

Carrowholly Stables (☎ 27057; www.carrowholly-stables.com; Carrowholly) has horses and ponies at the ready for guided treks along trails overlooking Clew Bay. All levels are accommodated for. The stables are 3km north of the



town centre, next to Westport Golf Club, off the N59 to Newport. Call ahead.

Sleeping

The tourist office books rooms (€4 service fee).

BUDGET

Old Mill Holiday Hostel (☎ 27045; oldmillhostel@eircom.net; Barrack Yard, James St; dm/d/tr €17.50/48/66; ☹ closed Christmas day; (P)) This hostel is housed in an impressively repurposed mill, with stone walls and rooms that are well attended to, and the location couldn't be more convenient. The IHH property has inviting communal areas that make for a laidback social vibe. It's also family-friendly.

Abbeywood Hostel (☎ 25496; www.abbeywoodhouse.com; Newport Rd; dm €18-22, d €50; ☹ daily May-Sep, weekends only Oct-Dec & Mar-Apr, closed Jan & Feb; (P) (M)) Set back from the road on the northern end of town is this characterful old house and gardens, originally part of a monastery. It still boasts some stained glass, wood floors and high ceilings. A light breakfast is available daily.

Parkland Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 27766; camping@westporthouse.ie; Westport House, Quay Rd; camp sites €25; ☹ mid-May-early Sep) Camping on the sprawling Westport House estate can feel akin to being an evicted tenant or lowly groundsman. However, the site's wide-open areas and proximity to funfair-like attractions at the house make it a hit for families with young children.

MIDRANGE

Westport overflows with B&Bs, which in turn overflow with guests at weekends year round.

Killary House (☎ 27457; killaryhouse@msn.com; 4 Distillery Ct; s/d €45/70; (P)) Tucked away in a quiet cul-de-sac, and formerly home to an 18th-century distillery (no lingering scent, though), this characterful B&B has four en-suite rooms, each warmly decorated and well appointed.

St Anthony's (☎ 28887; www.st-anthonys.com; Distillery Rd; s/d €45/80; (P)) Over the river, on a residential block, this genteel B&B sits under cover of a large hedge and thick creepers inhabited by birds' nests. The interior is just as easy on the eye, with six simple but elegant rooms; two have Jacuzzi-style baths.

Westport Inn (☎ 29200; www.westportinn.ie; Mill St; s/d from €49/98; (P)) One of Westport's snazzier

choices, this hotel has comfortably appointed rooms and is just around the corner from the main drag. Some rooms have four-poster beds and Jacuzzi tubs. Rooms in the front may get noisy when the nightclub next door closes.

McCarthy's Lodge (☎ 27050; www.mccarthyslodge.com; Quay St; s/d €50/90) It's upstairs from a pub, but McCarthy's is no flop for drunks. Rooms are as tidy as the town, and as bright and orderly as an Ikea showroom. It's just a few paces up from the Octagon. Breakfast is included.

TOP END

Clew Bay Hotel (☎ 28088; www.clewbayhotel.com; James St; s/d from €70/140; (P)) A smart choice for anyone looking for stylish digs in the heart of town, this hotel has a good restaurant (breakfast included with the price), an art gallery and a fully equipped gym next door (to which guests have free access).

Wyatt Hotel (☎ 25027; www.wyathotel.com; the Octagon; s/d €110/180; (P)) Other than its position smack in the middle of town, it's the quality of service that really distinguishes this pleasant hotel. Rooms are comfortable though characterless, and guests have free access to a local swimming pool.

Eating

Curry's Cottage (☎ 25297; James St; pastries €2-4; ☹ 9.30am-6pm) This jovial little tea shop is the only place downtown for tea or coffee and a scone or cookie. Naturally it draws a considerable crowd of locals and tourists in the morning, and again around snack time in the afternoon.

Towers (☎ 26534; the Harbour; mains €9-17; ☹ noon-9pm) This wonderfully cosy pub is housed in a former coastguard station with an unusual short turret, rough cut stone and stained glass. The kitchen takes full advantage of freshly hauled in seafood and local produce in producing fine Irish cuisine.

O'Malley's (☎ 27307; Bridge St; mains €11-20; ☹ 6-10pm Thu-Tue) The 'Around the World' menu served upstairs from the pub of the same name (a trendy pick-up joint) has an incredible array of dishes culled from many different cuisines, including Italian, Thai and Mexican.

Quay Cottage (☎ 26412; www.quaycottage.com; the Harbour; mains €18-25; ☹ 6-11pm Tue-Sat) Serving seafood hauled straight from the harbour boats, this delightful restaurant is rich in salty-dog charm, with lobster pots hanging from the

roof beams. There are a few meat and vegetarian dishes offered 'for landlubbers' too. It's on the road that leads to Westport House.

Drinking

Our pick Matt Molloy's (☎ 26655; Bridge St) Matt Molloy, the fife player from the Chieftains, opened this pub years ago and the good times haven't let up. It's a good old fashioned pub, nothing glamorous or trendy about it. Head straight to the back room around 9pm and you'll catch live traditional ceili music. Or perhaps an old man will simply slide into a chair and croon a few dozen classics.

Moran's (☎ 26320; Bridge St) Westport being a well-preserved specimen, it stands to reason a traditional pub such as this one would still be in operation. It's a holdover from the days when a pub was also a shop, and buying groceries was occasion to have a few pints before heading home without the groceries. Don't shy away from the private façade.

Jester Bar (☎ 29255; Bridge St) Westport flashes its contemporary side in this hipster hang-out. If you're looking sharp, you'll fit right in. No céilidhs, no talk of fishing – urban grooves set the pace here.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) travels to Achill Island (€11, 30 minutes, two daily), Dublin (€16, five hours, three daily), Galway (€13, two hours, eight daily) and Sligo (€15, two hours, two daily). Buses depart from and arrive at the Mill St stop. There are limited services on Sunday.

The **train station** (☎ 25253) is 800m from the town centre. There are three daily connections to Dublin (adult/child €30/15, 3½ hours).

Getting Around

For a cab call **Moran's Executive Taxis** (☎ 25539) or **O'Toole Taxis** (☎ 087-243 2600). **Sean Sammon** (☎ 25471; James St) hires out bikes for €10 per day.

AROUND WESTPORT

If you're heading by car or bicycle from Westport to Connemara, in County Galway, or to Cong, in the Eastern part of Mayo, take the Quay Hill route past the harbour and fol-

low the coast highway to Louisburgh. Then turn onto the R335 through the Doolough Valley. It's stunningly beautiful.

Croagh Patrick

St Patrick couldn't have picked a better spot for a pilgrimage than this conical mountain (also known as 'the Reek') just 8km southwest of Westport. On a clear day the tough two-hour climb rewards with a stunning view of Clew Bay and its innumerable sandy islets.

It was on Croagh Patrick that Ireland's patron saint fasted for 40 days and nights, and where he reputedly banished venomous snakes. Climbing the 765m holy mountain is an act of penance for thousands of pilgrims on the last Sunday of July (Reek Sunday). The truly contrite make the trek along Tóchar Phádraig (Patrick's Causeway), the original 40km route from Ballintubber Abbey, and ascend the mountain barefoot.

The trail taken by less contrite folk begins beside Campbell's pub in the village of Murrisk (Muraisc). There's no mistaking the route. At the start of the path you'll find a **visitor centre** (☎ 098-64114; www.croagh-patrick.com; ☹ 11am-5pm mid-Mar-Oct).

Opposite the car park is the **National Famine Memorial**, a spine-chilling sculpture of a three-masted ghost ship wreathed in swirling skeletons, commemorating the lives lost on so called 'coffin ships' employed to help people escape the Famine (1845-49). The path down past the memorial leads to the scant remains of **Murrisk Abbey**, founded by the O'Malleys in 1547.

Louisburgh

☎ 098 / pop 210

Gateway village to the Doolough Valley, the small village of Louisburgh (Cluain Cearbán) was founded under curious circumstances in 1795. Based on a simple four-street system known as the Cross, the whole town was designed and built as a living memorial to a relative of the first marquess of Sligo, Lord Altamont (John Browne): his kinsman was killed at the Battle of Louisburgh in Nova Scotia, 1758.

The **Famine Museum & Granuaile Visitors Centre** (☎ 66134; Church St, Louisburgh; adult/child/concession €3.50/1.50/2.50; ☹ 11am-4pm Tue, 3-7pm Thu, noon-4pm Fri & Sat), in the library, offers a quick glimpse into the life and times of Grace O'Malley (Gráinne Ní Mháille or Granuaile, 1530-1603) the infamous pirate queen of

Connaught. It also recounts local memories of the famine, which hit hard in this part of Mayo.

There are some excellent Blue Flag **beaches** in the vicinity. Old Head Beach, 4km from Louisburgh, just off the main road to Westport, is particularly sandy and safe.

Old Head Forest Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 087-648 6885; Old Head, Louisburgh; camp sites €12; ☽ Jun-Sep) is a medium-sized camping park in woodland, a short walk from its namesake beach, where there is a pier and a slipway with a lifeguard on duty.

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) service 450 links Westport and Louisburgh (€6.50, 35 minutes, up to five times daily Monday to Saturday) via Murrisk.

Killadoon

Panoramic ocean views and vast sandy beaches, almost always empty, can be found at the tiny village of Killadoon. Look for Tallabawn and Dooarghtry beaches, which are reached by a narrow coastal road heading south from Louisburgh, or by turning west off the R335 at Cregganbaun.

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) service 450 from Westport and Louisburgh continues to Killadoon twice daily Monday to Saturday. The trip takes about 15 minutes.

Doolough Valley

One of Ireland's most dramatic drives is through the Doolough Valley, along the R335 scenic route from Westport and Leenane (County Galway). It was the site of a legendary famine walk, which took place in 1849. In icy weather, 400 hundred people died along the road as they walked from Louisburgh to Delphi and back. They had hoped to receive food and aid from a landlord, but were refused. Read up on this history or visit the Famine Museum in Louisburgh before taking this route, as it greatly enhances the impact. Failing that, however, Doolough is still special.

Drive at as leisurely a pace as you can get away with (early morning traffic is usually light). It's mostly a pristine and desolate terrain that continually unfolds as hills part along the road and new hills fill the horizon. Most of the valley is free of housing, cut turf or even stone walls. Black **Doo Lough** (Dark Lake) gives way to **Bundorragha River**, where you can count on seeing people fishing for

salmon. It goes on and on like this, and is very satisfying.

It is possible to park your car near the lake and take a stroll along the road to Delphi. To really immerse yourself in the valley's splendour, stay a night or two in Delphi, and organise a fishing excursion from there.

DELPHI (COUNTY GALWAY)

☎ 095

It's no accident that one of the country's top spas chose to locate itself in Delphi. This starkly beautiful swathe of mountainous moorland is ideal get-away-from-it-all territory. Miles from any significant settlements, you can toss aside that mobile phone, forget your troubles and set about the serious business of relaxing.

The area was named by its most famous resident, the second Marquess of Sligo, who was convinced that the land strongly resembled the area around Delphi, Greece.

ourpick **Delphi Lodge** (☎ 42222; www.delphilodge.ie, www.delphi-salmon.com; Leenane; s/d €130/200, cottages per week for 4 or more from €800; **P** **Q**) feels more like a congenial house party than a hotel, with communal dining often utilising the lodgers' catch. This lakeside Georgian lodge is a popular retreat for well-heeled fishermen, walkers and seekers of tranquillity. It was once the sporting lodge of the Marquis of Sligo. Self-catering cottages offer the best deal for families. Fishing holidays can be arranged through the lodge (enquire when making reservations).

The **Delphi Mountain Resort & Spa** (☎ 42987, 42208; www.delphiescape.com; Leenane; s/d with breakfast & activities from €200/300; **P** **Q**) is built from rough-cut stone and honey-coloured wood. This world-class spa-hotel hits the perfect note between modern chic and rustic glow – even if the exterior somewhat resembles a hobbit hole. Day programmes for nonguests cost from €80 to €230.

Delphi Adventure Centre (☎ 42208; www.delphiadventureholidays.ie), alongside the lodge, offers over 25 outdoor activities from hill walking to raft building to cross-country assault courses.

CLARE ISLAND

☎ 098 / pop 130

Clew Bay is dotted with some 365 islands, presided over by mountainous Clare Island, 5km offshore at the mouth of the bay. Dominated by rocky **Mt Knockmore** (461m), the island's trails and roads offer varied terrain, and are

terrific for walking and climbing. Getting lost is never a worry. It also has several safe, sandy beaches to its credit.

The island has the ruins of the Cistercian **Clare Island Abbey** (c 1460) and **Granuaile's Castle**, both associated with the piratical Grace O'Malley. The tower castle was her stronghold, although it was altered considerably when the coastguard took it over in 1831. Grace is said to be buried in the small abbey, which contains a stone inscribed with her family motto: 'Invincible on land and sea'.

The island is also one of the dwindling number of places where you can find choughs, which look like blackbirds but have red beaks.

Fishing and scuba diving can be arranged through the Bay View Hotel & Hostel (below).

Sleeping & Eating

Bay View Hotel & Hostel (☎ 26307; clareishotel@hotmail.com; dm/s/d €20/40/70, s/d with bathroom €50/90; ☽ May-Oct) The island's only hotel overlooks the harbour, with a sunset view of the mainland that is simply sublime. It has a restaurant and bar, and is a bit of a social centre for the island.

Cois Abhainn (☎ 26216; fax 26250; Toemore; s/d €35/70; ☽ May-Oct) Alternatively, for that 'ends-of-the-earth' feeling, you could head to the windswept southwestern corner of the island, 5km from the harbour. This B&B has sensational views of Inishturk Island. Not all rooms are en suite. Evening meals can be arranged, often involving freshly caught fish.

If you're just going for the day, consider taking your own food, though pub grub is available at the Bay View Hotel & Hostel, and B&Bs do evening meals (from €15).

Getting There & Away

The nearest mainland point is Roonagh Quay, 8km west of Louisburgh. **Clare Island Ferries** (☎ 28288, 087-241 4653; www.clareislandferry.com) and **O'Malley's Ferries** (☎ 25045, 086-600 0204; www.omalleyferries.com) make the 15-minute trip from Roonagh (adult/child return €15/8). There are 15 sailings daily in July and August, and from three to six daily the rest of the year.

Getting Around

You can hire **bikes** (☎ 25640) from opposite the pier for €10 per day. Enquire at the pier if you need taxi service.

INISHTURK ISLAND

☎ 098 / pop 100

Still further off the beaten track is ruggedly beautiful Inishturk, which lies about 12km off Mayo's western coast. It is a sparsely populated and little visited island, despite the two **sandy beaches** on its eastern side, impressive **cliffs**, wonderful **flora and fauna**, and a rugged, hilly landscape that's ideal for **walking**. In fact, ambling the island's maze of country roads is a perfect way to familiarise yourself with the pace of life here.

Accommodation and meals are available at the colourful **Harbour Lodge** (☎ 45610; s/d incl breakfast & dinner €35/70), a short walk from the ferry, and the more remote but scenically positioned **Teach Abhainn** (☎ 45510; s/d €30/50; dinner €25; ☽ Apr-Oct), a working farm 1.5km west of the harbour.

John Heanue operates a **ferry** (☎ 45541, 086-202 9670; Roonagh; adult/child return €25/12.50; ☽ 11am & 6.30pm) from Roonagh Quay, near Louisburgh. There is also a twice weekly service to Cleggan in County Galway; call for details of departure times.

NEWPORT

☎ 098 / pop 530

Newport (Baile Uí Fhiacháin), 12km north of Westport, is a picturesque 18th-century village in which there really isn't much to do other than catch fish in streams, lakes or Clew Bay. The town's most striking feature is a seven-arch viaduct built in 1892 for the Westport–Achill Railway; the trains stopped in 1936 and the bridge has since become a pedestrian walkway. The main attraction in town is stately Newport House, a fine Georgian estate, where most visitors stay. The Bangor Trail (see p456) and Foxford Trail, both end near the town, draw many walkers. Achill Island (p452) is a short drive away.

The **tourist office** (Main St; ☽ 10am–3pm Mon–Fri) has information on fishing. The post office and bureau de change are across the river. There are no banks.

Sleeping & Eating

Newport House (☎ 41222; www.newporthouse.ie; Main St; s €136–188, d €220–324; dinner €63; ☽ Mar–Sep; **P** **Q**) This magnificent Georgian mansion, strangled by ivy that turns crimson in fall, is one of the top country hotels in Ireland. Every room in the hotel is beautifully appointed and includes breakfast, but

Newport House is especially known for its contemporary Irish cuisine and a vintage wine list that will make you drool. The bar and the surrounding gardens are also worth checking out, even if you're not a guest. The hotel staff can help arrange fishing excursions.

Hotel Newport (☎ 41155; www.hotelnewportmayo.com; Main St; s/d from €80/120; (P)) In the heart of the town, this hotel has updated rooms and a fine restaurant that specialises in local seafood (meals are included in the room rate), and a pub.

Getting There & Away

The frequent **Bus Éireann** (☎ 096-71800) services between Westport and Achill Island pass through Newport, though you'll need to request a stop here.

NEWPORT TO ACHILL ISLAND

Burrishoole Abbey

From a distance, the eerie shell of this wind-battered **abbey** (admission free; ☞ dawn-dusk) resembles a 2D film set. It was founded in 1486 by the Dominicans. In a strange twist of fate, the abbey actually plunged the surrounding devout community into holy hot water, when Rome threatened them with excommunication for not consulting them on the abbey's creation.

About 2.5km northwest towards Achill a sign points the way to the abbey, from where it's a further 1km.

Rockfleet Castle

Also known as **Carrigahowley**, this bluff 15th-century tower is one of the most tangible spots to be associated with 'pirate queen' Granuaile (see p449). She married her second husband, Richard an-Iarrain (impressively nicknamed 'Iron Dick' Burke) to gain control of this castle, and famously fought off an English attack here.

The tower is in a quiet outlet of Clew Bay. Turn south at the sign, about 5km west of Newport on the Achill road.

Mulrany

This elongated hillside village (An Mhala Raithní) is a great spot to try counting the approximately 365 saucer-sized islands that grace Clew Bay. Mulrany stands on the isthmus with Bellacagher Bay and boasts a stun-

ning, wide Blue Flag beach. Take the steps opposite the Park Inn, or the path beside the service station.

Sleeping

Midrange accommodation is best on Achill, but a few forlorn B&Bs with spectacular views can be found in Mulrany.

Traenlaur Lodge (☎ 098-41358; www.anoie.ie; Lough Feeagh, Newport; dm €15; ☞ Jun-Sep) A gorgeous An Óige hostel in a former fishing lodge with its own harbour on Lough Feeagh. It's often full of walkers resting their weary feet from the Western Way or Bangor Trail. It is 8km from Newport, signposted from the Achill road.

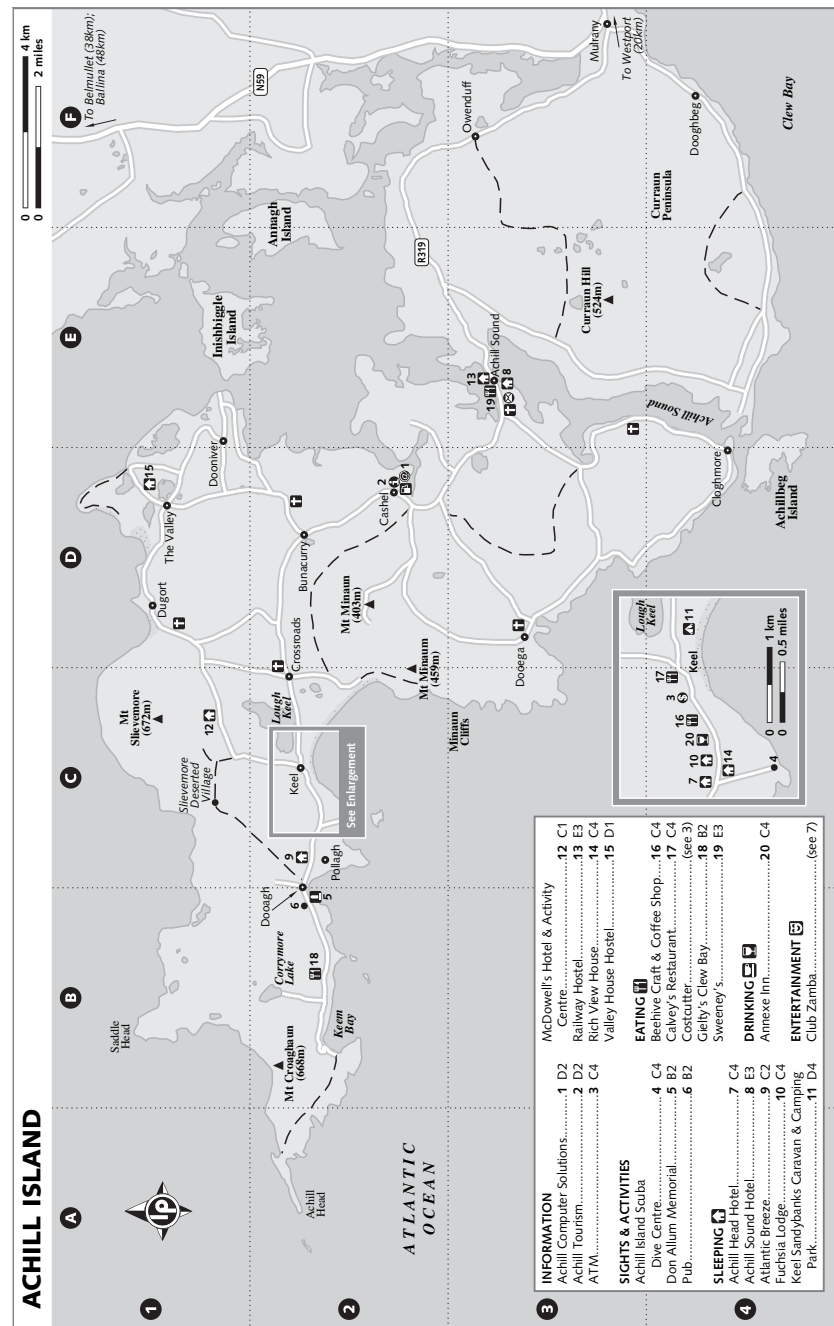
Park Inn Mulrany (☎ 098-36000; www.parkinnmulrany.ie; N59, Mulrany; s/d from €100/180; (P) (Q) (R)) Established in 1897, the Park Inn sits amid 42 wooded acres and boasts one of the most magical coastal views in Ireland. Room décor is up to date, the restaurant is highly regarded, and guests can keep in shape in the swimming pool and gym. Low-season midweek packages can bring the price way down.

ACHILL ISLAND

☎ 098 / pop 960

Ireland's largest off-shore island, Achill (An Caol), is connected to the mainland by a short bridge, making it accessible by car or bus. Despite this convenience, Achill has plenty of that far-flung island feeling. It is blessed with breathtaking cliff scenery, rocky headlands, sheltered sandy beaches, broad expanses of blanket bog and rolling mountains. It also has an interesting history, having been a frequent refuge during Ireland's numerous rebellions. It's at its most dramatic during winter, when high winds and a lashing sea can make the island seem downright inhospitable. The year-round population, though, remains as welcoming as ever. Few visitors choose to appreciate this temperamental side of Achill, however, preferring its milder summers, when the island spruces up with purple heather, rhododendrons and wildflowers. If it's beach weather, count on Achill's sprinkling of holiday chalets (some nicknamed the Toblerones), hotels and camping grounds reaching full occupancy.

A quiet hamlet known as the Valley is the island's most traditional quarter, and has a historic hostel. The village of Keel is the island's main centre of activity.



THE GREAT WESTERN GHOST TRAIN

A spooky footnote can be added to the Great Western Railway's short-lived history in Achill Sound. Local folklore likes to tell how a 17th-century prophet named Brian Rua O'Cearbhain had a vision that one day 'carts on wheels, blowing smoke and fire' would run here, and that their first and last journeys would carry corpses.

Chillingly, just as work was completed on the railway line to Achill in 1894, tragedy struck when 32 young locals were drowned in Clew Bay, and the very first train from Westport to Achill carried the bodies back to their grieving families. The prophecy reared its ugly head four decades later when the railway had already ceased to run. Ten migrant workers from Achill were killed in a fire at Kirkintilloch, Scotland in 1937. The railway line was reopened for one last run to bring the bodies back for burial.

Information

Achill Tourism (☎ 47353; www.achilltourism.com, www.visitachill.com; Cashel; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm Sep-Jun) is one of the best sources for information in all Mayo. It's next to Lavelle's petrol station. Behind the station, you can get on line at **Achill Computer Solutions** (☎ 47940; Cashel; per hr €4; ☎ 9.30am-5pm). Most of the villages have post offices. The supermarket in Keel has an ATM.

Sights

SLIEVEMORE DESERTED VILLAGE

The eerie remains of this deserted village at the foot of Slievemore Mountain are slowly but surely being reduced down to rock piles. The sight, seemingly neglected, is nevertheless an impressive and poignant reminder of the island's past hardships and a lost way of life. Until the mid-19th century, the village was divided between permanent inhabitants and transhumance farmers (known here as 'booleying'), but as the Potato Famine took grip, starvation forced the villagers to the sea and its sources of food. The adjacent graveyard completes the desolation.

DOOAGH

This village is where Don Allum, the first person to row across the Atlantic Ocean in both directions, landed in September 1982 in his 6m-long plywood boat, dubbed the *QE3*, after 77 days at sea. The Pub (that's its name) has memorabilia marking the feat, and there's a memorial opposite.

Activities

Some of Achill's lovely bays are tame enough for **swimming** and have clean strands for stretching out beneath a summer sky. Except in the height of the holiday season, the Blue

Flag beaches at Keel, Dooga, Keem, Dugort and Golden Strand (Dugort's other beach) are often deserted. The beaches at Dooga and Dooniver are just as appealing.

The island is a wonderful place for **walking** and even the highest point (Mt Slievemore, 672m) presents no problems. It can be climbed from behind the deserted village, and from the top there are terrific views of Blacksod Bay. A longer climb would take in Mt Croaghnaun (668m), Achill Head and a walk atop some of the highest cliffs in Europe. Achill Tourism produces a bilingual *Guide to Walking in Achill* (€3.50) detailing 14 walks.

Sea-angling can be arranged with **Tony Burke** (☎ 47257; tburke@eircom.net; Keel), owner of the 10-metre *Cuan na Cuime*. With its clear waters Achill is a good diving spot and **Achill Island Scuba Dive Centre** (☎ 087-234 9884; www.achilldivecentre.com; Purteen Harbour, Keel) offers training and equipment hire.

Windsurfing is also popular, and **Wind Wise** (☎ 43958; www.windwise.ie; Bunacurry) hires out gear and offers courses. Other activities include rock climbing, canoeing and surfing. Richie O'Hara at McDowell's Hotel & Activity Centre (opposite) southwest of Dugort, gives instruction and hires out canoes and surfboards (€15 per hour). Kite-surfing is increasingly spotted offshore, though there's nowhere to hire gear.

Less energetic activities include summer painting classes run by **O'Dálaigh** (☎ 36137; www.achillpainting.com). Instructor Seosamh Ó Dálaigh will lead you to a scenic spot and offer pointers on how to commit it to canvas.

Festivals

Traditional Irish music can be heard for miles around in the first two weeks of Au-

gust, during the **Scoil Acla Festival** (www.visitachill.com; ☎ 43063). The event also promotes Irish dancing, culture and music through numerous workshops (swiftly relocating to pubs come the evening).

Sleeping

BUDGET

Keel Sandbanks Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 094-903 2054; www.achillcamping.com; Keel; camp sites €10; ☎ June-mid-Sep) This camping ground is on a trim patch of greenery overlooking Keel Strand, a Blue Flag beach. It's a short stroll from the town. It has a lounge and a laundry room.

our pick **Valley House Hostel** (☎ 47204; www.valley-house.com; the Valley; camp sites/dm/d €10/15/36, f from €39.50; (P)) A hostel in a great old mansion that's gone just a tad to seed, Valley House adds to its charm with unruly gardens and a licensed pub with patio tables. Old stone houses dot the rugged terrain of the surrounding Valley. The hostel has still more in its favour – its infamous history. In 1894, the landlady was brutally attacked by a local man and JM Synge based his play *The Playboy of the Western World* on his misadventures. The subsequent film *Love and Rage* (1999) was also partially shot here. Take the road to Keel and turn right (northeast) at the Bunacurry junction signposted for Dugort.

Railway Hostel (☎ 45187; Achill Sound; camp sites/dm €10/15 (P)) Once a railroad station, this place now serves as a no-frills hostel. You're barely poking Achill with your big toe if you stay here, but in peak season it'll get you near enough to the island's top sights. It's just before the bridge you cross to reach the island.

Rich View House (☎ 43462; richviewhostel@hotmail.com; Keel; s/d €15/30) Facilities at this relaxed hostel-cum-home-stay are simple, even scarce, but the jolly live-in owner is extremely knowledgeable about Achill and quick to invite guests to the pub.

MIDRANGE

Atlantic Breeze (☎ 43189; www.atlantic-breeze.com; Pollagh, Keel; s/d €35/60; ☎ Apr-Oct; (P)) Welcoming Mary Sweeney's award-winning B&B has three rooms and lovely views from its conservatory. It's just a little ways beyond Keel.

Fuchsia Lodge (☎ 43350; fuchsialodge@eircom.ie; Keel; s/d €40/60; (P) ☎) This popular and convenient B&B is a short walk outside the village of Keel.

It has four cosy bedrooms, including two connecting rooms ideal for a family. It is one of few B&Bs open all year round.

McDowell's Hotel & Activity Centre (☎ 43148; Slievemore Rd, Dugort; s/d €50/100; (P)) Set inland, McDowell's makes up for its lack of sea views by offering a host of activities, including surfing, sailing and currach rowing. The hotel has 10 reasonable rooms, a decent bar-restaurant and can be a lively spot during July and August. It's within spitting distance of hill-walking trails.

Achill Sound Hotel (☎ 45245; www.achillsoundhotel.com; Achill Sound; s/d €55/100; (P)) Near the bridge, on the island side, this family-run hotel offers very basic but orderly rooms, some with fine views of the sound. There is a bar and restaurant off the lobby.

Achill Head Hotel (☎ 43108; www.achillhead.com; Pollagh, Keel; s/d €65/100; (P)) This medium-sized hotel has 19 modern rooms, some with rather grandiose four-poster beds and patchwork-style quilts. The hotel is in the heart of Keel and close to the seafront, though not so well located as its website would have you believe.

Eating

Most hotels will serve lunch or dinner to non-guests.

Beehive Craft & Coffee Shop (☎ 43018; Keel; snacks around €7; ☎ 10.30am-6pm Apr-Oct; (P)) As much a craft shop as a café, the Beehive dishes up wonderful homemade soups served with brown scones, and a more sinful selection of homebaked cakes.

Calvey's Restaurant (☎ 43158; Keel; mains €6-18; ☎ 6-10pm Mon-Sat) This award-winning restaurant serves up a mix of fresh local seafood and meat from its attached butchery. Its signature dish is local lamb, but there are also a few nonmeat dishes for vegetarians.

Gielty's Clew Bay (☎ 43119; www.gieltys.com; Dooagh; sandwiches €4-7, mains €10-14; ☎ 10am-9pm) It's modern and basically characterless, but Gielty's is an exceedingly friendly pub that churns out good Irish food. You can do a light lunch or a full-on meal here. On summer evenings, the place serves as one of the island's bigger live music venues, with trad céilidh jams several nights a week.

If you're camping or hostelling, stock up at **Sweeney's supermarket** (☎ 45211), just across the bridge as you enter Achill, or at **Costcutter** (☎ 43125), a deli and supermarket in Keel.

Drinking & Entertainment

From May to September, most pubs and hotels have live music.

Annexe Inn (☎ 43268; Keel) This cosy little pub delivers the best traditional music sessions all year round. It has music almost nightly in July and August, and on weekends the rest of the year.

Club Zamba (☎ 43108; Achill Head Hotel, Pollagh, Keel) Achill's most happening nightclub is strung with video screens and swirling lights. It has a text-message request-service to the DJ, so it's no good using the old 'not my kind of music' excuse to avoid dancing.

Getting There & Around

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) services run from Ballina and Westport Monday to Saturday year-round, with nine stops on the island, including at Dooagh, Keel, Dugort, Cashel and Achill Sound. Check the current schedule with the tourist office.

Bikes can be hired from **O'Malley's Island Sports** (☎ 43125; jomalley@eircom.net; Keel; ☹ Jun-Aug). Call ahead, as bikes go quickly during peak season. It's next to the post office in Keel.

BANGOR ERRIS

☎ 097 / pop 270

This unexceptional little village is the start or end point for the 48km **Bangor Trail**, which connects Bangor (Bain Gear) and Newport. It's an extraordinary hike that takes walkers through some of the bleakest, most remote countryside in Ireland. Unfortunately, you'll need several 1:50,000 OS maps to cover the trail (see p710).

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) runs an evening bus Monday to Saturday (and an additional midday bus in July and August) from Ballina (€11, one hour).

BALLYCROY NATIONAL PARK

Ballycroy National Park, comprising one of Europe's largest expanses of blanket bog, was founded in 1998, but at the time of writing the park was not yet fully operational. It is a gorgeously scenic region in which the Owen-duff River winds its way through intact bogs. Many migratory birds roost here. A visitor centre is due to be completed sometime in 2008, in the nearby town of Ballycroy. You'll be able to stop here for information on the

natural environment as well as some of the area's history and culture. Presumably, there will be guided walks as well as trails on which visitors can explore the park on their own, but very little information was available at the time of research.

MULLET PENINSULA

☎ 097

The Mullet Peninsula dangles some 30km out into the Atlantic, connected to the mainland by a flake of boggy earth. It feels more cut off than some islands, and has much of the same bleakness. Needless to say, it's thinly populated and infrequently visited, which is part of its appeal. The real draw, however, are the pristine beaches along its sheltered eastern shore. The peninsula is Irish speaking and the functional little town of **Belmullet** (Béal an Mhuirthead) is the main settlement.

Information

Atlantek Computers (☎ 82255; Carter Sq; per hr €6; ☹ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) For internet access.

Bank of Ireland (Carter Sq) Has an ATM and bureau de change.

Erris tourist office (☎ 81500; Barrack St; ☹ 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri Easter-Sep)

Post office (Main St)

Blacksod Point & Around

The road south from Belmullet loops round the tip of the peninsula to rejoin itself at Agh-learn. Near the point are the remains of an old **church**, and the view across the bay takes in the spot where *La Rata Santa Maria Encoronada*, part of the 1588 Spanish Armada, came in and was later burned by its captain.

The road to Blacksod Point passes **Elly Bay**, a pleasant beach and a favourite haunt of bird-watchers. Further south it passes stunning **Mullaghroe Beach**. In the early years of the 20th century, a whaling station operated at Ardlely Point, just north of here.

The weather centre here determined the eventual date for the D-Day Normandy landing.

Sleeping & Eating

Western Strands Hotel (☎ 81096; www.westernstrands.hotel.com; Main St, Belmullet; s/d €48/70) A cheerful atmosphere predominates in this fairly large hotel, upstairs from an old-timey pub. It's smack-dab in the centre of tiny Belmullet, and offers an array of services – while checking-in, enquire about fishing, cycling, beaches etc. En-

suite rooms are straightforward without being flashy, and good food is available in the bar.

Chez Nous (☎ 82167; chez_nous_belmullet@esatclear.ie; Church Rd, Belmullet; s/d €40/70; ☹ Mar-Dec; (P)) Wonderful snug rooms with cheerful colour schemes can be found at this modern B&B; take the road signposted Garda. It's a five-minute walk to the town's central roundabout.

Getting There & Around

Monday to Saturday **Bus Éireann** (☎ 096-71800) runs an evening bus (and an additional midday bus in July and August) from Ballina to Belmullet (€11, 1¼ hours), continuing on to Blacksod Point.

McNulty's Coaches (☎ 81086; www.mcultycoaches.com; Chapel St), with an office near the Belmullet post office, runs daily buses to and from Castlebar. The 1½-hour trip costs €9/13 one way/return.

POLLATOMISH

☎ 097 / pop 150

Irresistibly remote and pretty, Pollatomish (Poll an Tómais), also spelled Pullathomas, sits in a serene bay some 16km east of Belmullet, signposted on the road to Ballycastle (R314). There's a pleasant sandy **beach** and walks up to **Benwee Head** from where there are terrific views.

our pick **Kilcommon Lodge Hostel** (☎ 84621; www.kilcommonlodge.net; Pollatomish; dm/d €12/30; (P)), in a lovely setting, evokes quiet, somewhat quirky country living. The surrounding gardens are cluttered with unusual bric-a-brac, including whale bones, and the beach is just a short stroll away. It's family-run, and friendly. Evening meals are available.

BALLYCASTLE & AROUND

☎ 096 / pop 250

Fifty years ago, just one megalithic tomb was recorded in the region around Ballycastle (Baile an Chaisil). Now, the area claims one of the greatest concentrations of such tombs in Europe. It is also blessed with breathtaking coastal scenery. The pretty village consists of one sloping street. It's very quiet, with an unfussed, old-fashioned feel to it.

Sights

CÉIDE FIELDS

A famous wit once described archaeology as being all about 'a series of small walls'.

Well it's not often that such walls have had experts hopping up and down with such excitement than at **Céide Fields** (Achaídh Céide; www.museumsofmayo.com; ☎ 43325), 8km north-west of Ballycastle.

During the 1930s, a local man, Patrick Caulfield, was digging in the bog when he noticed a lot of piled-up stones buried beneath it. About 40 years later, his son Seamus, who had become an archaeologist on the basis of his father's discovery, began extensive exploration of the area. What he, and later others, uncovered was the world's most extensive Stone Age monument, consisting of stone-walled fields, houses and megalithic tombs – reckoned to total about half a million tonnes of stone. Astonishingly, five millennia ago a thriving farming community lived here, growing wheat and barley, grazing sheep and cattle, and fencing off land with an impressive level of planning.

Even for nonarchaeologists, the award-winning **Interpretive Centre** (☎ 43325; ceidefields@opw.ie; R314; adult/child under 6/student/concession incl tour €3.50/free/1.25/2.50; ☹ 10am-6pm Jun-Sep, 10am-5pm mid-Mar-May, Oct & Nov, groups only rest of year), in a glass pyramid overlooking the site, gives a fascinating glimpse into the past of 5500 years ago. However, it's recommended that you take a guided tour of the site itself, or it may seem nothing more than, well, a series of small walls.

Activities

The **Heathfield Lodge Stables** (☎ 43350; liz@heathfieldstables.com; Ballycastle) offers riding lessons, childrens' pony rides and trail rides through beautiful coastal hill country near Ballycastle. It's not quite 1km down the road towards Killala.

Sleeping & Eating

Stella Maris (☎ 43322; www.stellamarisireland.com; Ballycastle; s/d from €155/200; dinner around €50) Originally a British Coast Guard station, and later a nunnery, this grand old building has been successfully converted into one of Mayo's finest lodgings. Rooms were designed with a nice complement of antiques and stylish modern furnishings, and the restaurant is top notch. The setting is what really sells it, though. It's 2.5km outside the town, overlooking the ocean amid rolling green hills and fields of sheep.

Mary's Cottage Kitchen (☎ 43361; Lower Main St; dishes €2.50-11.50; ☹ 10am-3pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar, 10am-6pm Apr-Sep) Cosy grey-stone cottages like this

are always appealing, and never more so than when they house a bakery that advertises its wares with the ambrosial scent of apple pie. In addition to cakes and tea, the kitchen serves up light meals. During the summer tables are set up out back in a leafy garden. Evening meals are sometimes served during peak season.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 71800) runs between Ballycastle and Ballina (€9, 30 minutes) twice a day, Monday to Friday.

KILLALA & AROUND

☎ 096 / pop 650

The town itself is pretty enough, but Killala (Cill Alaidh or Cill Ála) is more famous for its namesake bay nearby, and its role in the French invasion and rebellion of Wolfe Tone in 1798.

It's claimed that St Patrick founded Killala, and the Church of Ireland cathedral sits on the site of the first Christian church. The 25m round tower still looms over the town's heart; it was struck by lightning in 1800 and the cap was later rebuilt. A seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 32166; ☎ 10am-5pm Jun-Sep) is located 500m outside town on the Ballina road.

Rathfran Abbey

The remains of this remote Dominican friary, dating from 1274, can be both tranquil and downright eerie. The silence is broken only by the cawing of crows and the whistling wind. In 1590 the friary was burned by the English, but the resilient monks stayed nearby until the 18th century.

Take the R314 road north out of Killala and, after 5km and crossing the River Cloonaghmore, turn right. After another 2km turn right at the crossroads.

Moyné Abbey

This 15th-century Franciscan structure is impressive, though it too was torched, by Richard Bingham in the 16th century. Reaching this lonely ruin requires trekking a little ways through private farmland. You'll reach Moyné Abbey by heading north from Ballina. It's 3km north of Rosserk Abbey (p460); you'll see it on the right across a field.

Breastagh Ogham Stone

This lonely lichen-covered stone, the height of a basketball player, is etched with an ob-

scure ogham script but the weathered markings are all but invisible. It's in a field left of the R314, just past the turning for Rathfran Abbey. Cross the ditch where the sign points to the stone.

Lackan Bay

Flush with revolutionary fervour and eager to hurt the English in their own backyard, on 22 August 1798 more than 1000 French troops commanded by General Humbert landed at Kilcummin in Killala Bay. It was hoped (or rather promised by Irish patriot Wolfe Tone) that their arrival would inspire the Irish peasantry to revolt against the English.

A right turn off the main R314 is signposted for Kilcummin. On the R314 just after the turning to Lackan Bay a **sculpture** of a French soldier helping a prostrate Irish peasant marks the place where the first French soldier died on Irish soil. Lackan Bay **beach** is a stunning expanse of golden sand, ideal for young children.

Getting There & Away

The Ballina-Ballycastle bus runs twice a day Monday to Friday, stopping outside McGregor's newsagency in Killala. Ring **Bus Éireann** (☎ 71800) for details.

BALLINA

☎ 096 / pop 9478

The bustling, workaday town of Ballina (Béal an Átha; balli-*nagh*) is the largest in the county. It's a convenient base for exploring northern Mayo, and is particularly attractive if you're interested in catching salmon. You'll be able to stock up on fishing supplies here. The town itself is not particularly pretty, though its streets retain traces of Victorian and Edwardian elegance, and the River Moy pumps right through the town's heart.

Information

Atlantek Computers (☎ 70658; Circular Rd; per hr €6; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) An internet café.

AIB (Pearse St) With ATM and bureau de change.

Moyné Valley Resources (☎ 70848; Cathedral Rd; per hr €9; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm) Internet access in same building as the tourist office.

Post office (O'Rahilly St) On the southern extension of Pearse St.

Tourist office (☎ 70848; Cathedral Rd; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, closed Nov-Mar) Across the River Moy from the centre.

Activities

In season, you'll see green-garbed waders heading for the River Moy in droves. This is one of the most prolific **salmon-fishing** rivers in Europe, and you can often see the scaly critters jumping in the Ridge (salmon pool), with otters and grey seals in pursuit.

A list of fisheries and permit contacts is available at the tourist office. The season is February to September, but the best fishing is June to August. Information, supplies and licensing are available at **Ridge Pool Tackle Shop** (☎ 72656; Cathedral Rd; ☎ 8am-5pm). Fly-casting lessons can also be arranged.

Lough Conn, southwest of Ballina, is an important brown-trout fishery, and there's no shortage of places with boats and *ghillies* (guides) round the lake. Pontoon, near Foxford, is a better base for **trout fishing** in both Lough Conn and Lough Cullen.

Festivals

One of the best outdoor parties in the country, the town's annual knees-up is the **Ballina Street Festival** (☎ 79814; www.ballinastreetfestival.ie), which lasts for a full two weeks in early July. It's a bit of everything, with parades, dances, cart racing, traditional dress-up days and a 'teenage gladiator' tournament.

Sleeping

Belleek Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 71533; www.belleekpark.com; Ballina; camp sites €18; ☎ Mar-Nov) This well-manicured, grassy site is a 1st-class choice for campers. It has a laundry, kitchen and plenty of space for the children to play. It's 2km from Ballina, 300m off the Killala road.

The Loft B&B (☎ 21881; www.theloftbar.ie; Pearse St; d€80) In the heart of town, this sleek and stylish hotel affords modern accommodation above one of Ballina's livelier pubs. Rooms in front may get noisy around closing time, but in the back it's quiet. The building has wireless internet access.

Belleek Castle (☎ 22400; www.belleekcastle.com; s/d from €100/150; ☎ Apr-Dec; ☎ P) A fabulously over-the-top neo-Jacobean manor, set deep in a 1000-acre woodland outside Ballina. It's a luxuriant romantic getaway, with four-poster beds and loads of historic artefacts. Organic foodies will love the restaurant, Granuailes, which along with the Armada bar is designed to look like the inside of a Spanish galleon.

Eating

Gaughan's (☎ 70096; O'Rahilly St; lunch €3-10; ☎ food served 11am-3pm) It's a dark old pub favoured by locals, but don't shy away. You'll get a good home-cooked lunch here.

Dillon's Bar & Restaurant (☎ 72230; Dillon's Tce; mains €14-25; ☎ food served 3-9pm Mon-Thu, 12.30-9pm Fri-Sun) This restaurant's vine-covered cobbled courtyard makes it everybody's favourite find, especially on a warm evening when the atmosphere is romantic. The menu exploits local produce, and the al fresco seating is a bonus in summer. Turn right at the south end of Pearse St and enter an arch to your left.

Drinking

Pub-crawlers will be kept busy in Ballina, which has some 60 watering holes to tick off. Many have traditional music sessions on Wednesday and Friday evenings.

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR NAME

Many people left Mayo during the Famine years, establishing family roots elsewhere in the world. If your family name is Barrett, Brennan, Doherty, Doyle, Foy, Gallagher, Harkin, Henry, Kelly, Lavelle, McNulty or McNicholas, there's a more than strong chance that your people originally hailed from north Mayo. (The Lavelles, interestingly, are believed to be of French origin – some say they arrived on Achill Island around the time of the 1798 Rebellion.) You can get in touch with your roots at the **Mayo North Family Heritage Centre** (☎ 096-31809; Enniscoe, Castlehill, Ballina; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri Apr-Sep; ☎ P), beginning with an initial assessment (€75). Attached is a piece-meal **museum** (adult/student museum only €4/2, museum & garden €8/3; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep) of old farm machinery and domestic implements. The tea room spills into walled gardens from Enniscoe House.

If your family name is Burke, Duffy, Gallagher, Joyce, Kelly, Moran, Murphy, O'Connor, O'Malley or Walsh, your people may have come from south Mayo. You can dig up information at the **South Mayo Family Research Centre** (☎ 094-954 1214; Main St, Ballinrobe).

An Bolg Bui (Yellow Belly; ☎ 22561; Tolan St) This well-worn, all-wood pub by the bridge is a great spot to savour a pint and swap fish tales. On Wednesday traditional musicians have a session here.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs daily express services from the **bus station** (☎ 71800; Kevin Barry St) to Westport (€10, one hour). Buses also go to Achill Island (€13, two to three hours, two daily), Sligo (€11, 1½ hours, five daily) and Dublin (€16, 3½ hours, six daily).

Trains to Dublin (€30, 3½ hours, three daily) leave from the **train station** (☎ 71818; Station Rd), at the southern extension of Kevin Barry St. Ballina is on a branch of the main Westport–Dublin line, so you'll have to change at Manulla Junction.

AROUND BALLINA

Rosserk Abbey

Dipping its toes into the River Rosserk, a tributary of the Moy, this handsome Franciscan abbey dates from the mid-15th century. There's an eye-catching double piscina (perforated stone basin) in the chancel: look for the exquisite carvings of a round tower and several angels. Rosserk was destroyed by Richard Bingham, the English governor of Connaught, in the 16th century.

Leave Ballina on the R314 for Killala and after 6.5km turn right at the sign and then left at the next crossroads. Continue for 1km, then turn right.

North Mayo Sculpture Trail

This trail of 15 outdoor sculptures essentially follows the R314 from Ballina to Blacksod Point. It was inspired by the discoveries at Céide Fields and was inaugurated in 1993 to mark 5000 years of Mayo history. Leading artists from eight different countries were commissioned to create sculptures reflecting the beauty and wilderness of the northern Mayo countryside.

The North Mayo Sculpture Trail (Tír Sáile) is a 60-page book detailing each sculpture. It's available from tourist offices and bookshops. The trail is about 90km and can be walked.

CROSSMOLINA & AROUND

☎ 096 / pop 940

It's a quiet country town and near the Lough Conn, but Crossmolina (Crois Mhaoiliona)

offers little in the way of services, which is perhaps why most visitors bypass it. If you're in a thoughtful frame of mind (as you may well be if you're whiling away your time at the end of a fishing pole) then perhaps this is your spot.

There's a Bank of Ireland with an ATM opposite Hiney's pub. For fishing gear you'll need to go to Ballina (p459). Crossmolina is 13km west of Ballina.

Sights & Activities

It's a rough 800m scramble over farmland to reach the ruined **Errew Abbey**, but you'll be rewarded by the picturesque location cupped on three sides by mirror-like Lough Conn. The disintegrating remains include a 13th-century house for Augustinian monks built on the site of a 7th-century church.

Take the Castlebar road south, and 1km past the heritage centre turn left at the sign and keep going for 5km. The entrance is by a farm.

To stretch your legs and get your heart pounding a little you can always take the scenic two-hour trek up to the top of **Mt Nephin** (806m).

Sleeping & Eating

Enniscoe House (☎ 31112; www.enniscoe.com; Castlehill; d €180-224, 2br apt per week €450-600; dinner €48; ☎ Apr-Oct; (P)) Life in a stately country manor, surrounded by hills and forests – it doesn't get much better. Built in 1750, Enniscoe House is truly impressive, and the interior has been kept up nobly. You can stay in the big house, or settle into a courtyard apartment (also historic) on a weekly basis. Its Victorian walled garden is only a tiny portion of the sprawling estate, which includes wild woodland walks and large grassy expanses.

Mount Falcon Country House Hotel (☎ 74472; www.mountfalcon.com; Foxford Rd; d €180-280; (P) (S)) If Enniscoe House can be topped, Mount Falcon just may pull it off. Hidden within 100 acres of woods between Lough Conn and the River Moy, the mansion has exquisite guest rooms, a spa and a fine restaurant. It has its own exclusive fishery along the river.

Healy's Restaurant and Country House Hotel (☎ 56443; www.healyspontoon.com; Pontoon, Foxford; s/d from €65/90; mains €10-27; (P)) Staring at the lake and backed by forest and hills, Healy's has the look of a relaxed country holiday spot. It's in an 1840s lodge, very sporting in look, and features modestly updated rooms and two

elegant dining rooms that squarely emphasise surf and turf classics. If not staying here or nearby, the wood tables out front are a tempting pit stop for a cool drink.

Dolphin Hotel (☎ 31270; www.thedolphin.ie; Crossmolina; s/d €60/90; dishes €8-17; ☎ food 8am-10pm) Looking like a very proud and trim country inn, the Dolphin offers comfortable B&B, a good restaurant, and one of the liveliest live music venues all in one building. The menu ranges from a carvery lunch to carefully prepared Irish dishes with local produce. National bands perform in the club several nights weekly.

Getting There & Away

There are regular **Bus Éireann** (☎ 71800) buses to Ballina and Castlebar. The bus stop is outside Hiney's on Main St.

CASTLEBAR & AROUND

☎ 094 / pop 10,290

Castlebar (Caisleán an Bharraigh's) has an up-and-coming feel to it, with construction sites at every turn and more energy on its streets than you'll find in just about any other Mayo town. Apart from a handful of hotels and eateries, most of what will interest a tourist here is actually outside the town, which means that, despite the town's hustle and bustle, the best reason to stop is if you're on your way somewhere else nearby.

Castlebar's place in Irish history was cemented in 1798, when General Humbert's outnumbered army of French revolutionary soldiers and Irish peasants pulled off an astonishing victory here. The ignominious cavalry retreat of the British became known as the Castlebar Races.

Orientation & Information

The main thoroughfare changes its name from Ellison St to Main St to Thomas St as you head north. The Mall is to the east.

Allied Irish Bank (Main St) ATM and bureau de change.

Chat'met (☎ 903 8474; New Antrim St; per hr €3.60; ☎ 10.30am-10.30pm) Internet café opposite the tourist office.

Tourist office (☎ 902 1207; Linenhall St; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm May-Sep) West off the northern end of Main St.

Sights

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF COUNTRY LIFE

This fine **museum** (☎ 903 1755; www.museum.ie; Turlough Park, Turlough; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, 2-

5pm Sun; (P) (S)) is not a nostalgic remembrance of a worry-free past, of course, but nor is it a gloomy Paddy-in-the-dung-heap equivalent of *Angela's Ashes*. What we have are four floors of very smartly presented, level-headed displays. A branch of the National Museum of Ireland (the other three are all in Dublin), this museum sets out to engender an enduring respect for the cultural richness of a way of life that hasn't yet faded from memory. Good timing! Many of the traditions and skills celebrated here (from wickerwork to boatbuilding), while not entirely obsolete, are certainly on their way out. If there is a message, or a point of view, it's one of admiration for the resourcefulness, ingenuity and self-sufficiency of the Irish people. The exhibits concentrate on the period from 1850 to 1950.

The extensive lakeside grounds invite picnics, and part of Turlough's 19th century manor is open for snooping. Interesting demonstrations and workshops are organised for Wednesdays and Sundays – see the website for schedules.

The museum is signposted off the N5, 5km northeast of Castlebar.

TURLOUGH ROUND TOWER

This impenetrable 9th-century tower calls to mind the fairy tale *Rapunzel* with its single lofty window. It stands on a hilltop by a ruined 18th-century church, a short distance northeast of the National Museum of Country Life.

MICHAEL DAVITT MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Housed in a pre-penal church where the man himself was christened (and next to the Straid Abbey, in which he was buried) is this small but passionate **museum** (☎ 903 1022; www.museumsofmayo.com; Straide; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 10am-6pm; (P)). The man we're talking about, of course, is Michael Davitt (1846–1906), a Fenian and zealous founding member of the Irish National Land League. Davitt's family was brutally evicted from his childhood home near here.

Take the N5 east and turn left onto the N58 to Straide (Strade on some maps). It's 16km from Castlebar.

BALLINTUBBER ABBEY

The history of this delightful little **abbey** (☎ 903 0934; www.ballintubberabbey.ie; Ballintubber; admission free; ☎ 9am-midnight; (P)) reads like a collection of

far-fetched folk tales. Commonly referred to as 'the abbey that refused to die', this is the only church in Ireland founded by an Irish king that is still in use. It was set up in 1216 next to the site of an earlier church founded by St Patrick after he came down from Croagh Patrick.

The abbey was burned by Normans, seized by James I and suppressed by Henry VIII. The nave roof was only restored in 1965 after the original was burned down by Cromwell's soldiers in 1653. Mass was outlawed and priests hunted down. Yet worship in the roofless remains continued against all the odds.

Take the N84 south towards Galway and after about 13km turn left at the Campus service station; the abbey is 2km along.

Sleeping & Eating

Imperial Hotel (☎ 902 1961; www.imperialhotelcastlebar.com; the Mall; s/d Sun-Thu €55/90, Fri & Sat €65/110) Established in 1795, and presiding over the Mall, Castlebar's oldest hotel still has a good dose of old-world character, reflected in its chequered floors and cosy old bar. Its spacious rooms, however, have been revamped to a wholly modern standard.

Welcome Inn Hotel (☎ 22288; cb.welcome@mayo-ireland.ie; s/d €60/120; (P)) Castlebar's second-largest hostel, this kitschy mock-Tudor establishment is almost as expensive as the Imperial but not nearly as nice. But it's right in the heart of town, and rooms are clean and upbeat.

Café Rua (☎ 902 3376; New Antrim St; dishes €3-12; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) This bright little coffee shop wins loyal support for its menu of filling and healthy Irish dishes and pastries. On your way in you might catch a whiff of a house specialty: champ, comprising of mashed potatoes and onions. It does a mean breakfast, and good coffee, too.

Getting There & Around

Bus Éireann (☎ 096-71800) travels to Westport (€4, 20 minutes, 10 daily), Dublin (€16, 4½ hours, one daily) and Sligo (€13, 1½ hours, three daily). Services on Sunday are less frequent. Buses stop on Market St.

McNulty's Coaches (☎ 902 9948; www.mcnultycoaches.com) runs daily buses to and from Belmullet. The 1½-hour trip costs €9/13 one way/return. The company also runs several buses to Galway on Friday and Sunday. Call for details.

The Westport-Dublin train stops at Castlebar (€30, 3½ hours) three times daily. The station is just out of town on the N84 towards Ballinrobe.

KNOCK

☎ 094 / pop 595

Perhaps you've heard of the shrine at Knock (Cnoc Mhuire), Ireland's answer to Lourdes and Fatima. It's a serious mecca for the faithful, particularly those in need of a miracle, and for that reason the elderly and infirm flock to Knock in droves.

Knock was nothing but a rather downtrodden rural village until 1879, when a divine apparition propelled this little settlement to become one of the world's most sacred Catholic shrines. The influx of earnest pilgrims naturally means big business for some (well, *most*) of the vendors here, adding a discordant note of cynicism to the place.

The Knock Marian Shrine consists of several churches and shrines in the town centre. Nearby are clustered shops, restaurants and the **tourist office** (☎ 938 8193; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep). The Bank of Ireland has an ATM.

Sights

CHURCH OF THE APPARITION

The story goes thus: in drenching rain during the evening of 21 August 1879, two young Knock women were startled by a vision of Mary, Joseph and St John the Evangelist freeze-framed in dazzling white light against the southern gable of the parish church. They were soon joined by 13 more villagers, and together they all gazed at the heavenly apparition for hours as the daylight faded.

A Church investigation quickly confirmed it as a bona fide miracle, and a sudden rush of other Vatican-approved miracles followed as the sick and disabled claimed amazing recoveries upon visiting the spot. Today, dutiful worshippers are always found praying at the modern chapel enclosing the scene of the apparition. Seemingly floating above the altar are ethereal sculptures of the apparition, carved from snow-white marble. Near the church is the enormous spiky-topped **Basilica of Our Lady, Queen of Ireland**.

KNOCK FOLK MUSEUM

A short stroll from the basilica, this petite **museum** (☎ 938 8100; adult/child/concession €4/3/3.50; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Oct, noon-4pm Nov-Apr) does its

best to encapsulate the Knock phenomenon. It follows the story from the first witnesses, through the miraculous cures, the repeated Church investigations and finally to the visit of Pope John Paul II on the event's centenary. One striking photograph shows rows of crutches left behind by miraculously cured pilgrims.

Sleeping

Pilgrims periodically swamp Knock, so there is no shortage of digs.

Belmont Hotel (☎ 938 8122; www.belmonthotel.ie; s/d €55/90; (P) (M)) This old hotel is slightly dated but well run, which merely complements its conservative atmosphere. It's about 800m southeast of the shrine.

Knock House Hotel (☎ 938 8088; www.knockhousehotel.ie; Ballyhaunis Rd; s/d from €66/110; (P)) It's a modern pile of stone and glass, with a few odd angles thrown in, making Knock House the most stylish place to stay in town. It's about 500m east of town.

Getting There & Away

Knock Airport (☎ 936 7222; www.knockairport.com), 15km north by the N17, has daily flights to Dublin (Aer Arann) and London Stansted (Ryan air). In May 2007, flyglobespan began direct flights to New York's JFK airport (three times weekly) and Boston (twice weekly). A €10 development fee is payable on departure.

Bus Éireann service 21 connects Knock's town centre with Westport (€9, one hour), Castlebar (€7, 45 minutes) and Dublin (€16, four hours) three times daily (and once Sunday).

Getting Around

A shuttle bus service is run by **Bus Éireann** (☎ 096-71800) to and from Knock airport and Charlestown (€4, 20 minutes), where connections can be made.

COUNTY SLIGO

Tiny County Sligo (Sligeach) packs as much poetry, myth and folklore into its lush landscape as any shamrock lover could ever hope for. This was the place that most inspired the Nobel laureate, poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), who helped cement Sligo's pastoral reputation with such verses as 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree',

in which he mused about the simple country life. That lake isle really exists, and the county's countryside retains much of its verdant splendour. Sligo also has a wealth of impressive prehistoric sites, and a pair of lovely flat-topped mountains, Knocknarea and Benbulbin, that seem to loom over the entire county. But Sligo is not a complacent backwater. Sligo town hops with a worldly-wise confidence, and the beautiful coast is home to an imported passion for surfing.

SLIGO TOWN

☎ 071 / pop 18,480

Sligo town is no 'tidy town' slumbering in dreams of past glories. To be sure, it's nicely arranged around the River Garavogue, with stone bridges, historic buildings, pedestrian streets and inviting shop fronts. But, displaying a modern vitality, Sligo dares to mix it up, thrusting glass towers upon prominent corners. Its citizens love to dine out in an impressive array of international eateries. The town seems quite comfortable with itself, in no hurry to shed its vaunted cultural traditions and seeing no need to be overly protective of them, either. The arts and nightlife here simmer with a healthy mix of excellent céilidh sessions and genre bending contemporary paintings. On warm days, it can seem like all the town is seated at restaurant tables along the quay. For so compact a burgh, there's an awful lot going on in Sligo.

Information

Bank of Ireland (Stephen St) ATM and bureau de change.

Cafe Online (☎ 914 4892; 1 Calry Cr, Stephen St; per hr €3.50; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) It's possible to plug your laptop into the broadband connection here.

Keohane's Bookshop (☎ 914 2597; Castle St) Great Irish interest section, and finely chosen fiction recommendations.

North-West Regional Tourism office (☎ 916 1201; www.irelandnorthwest.ie; Temple St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-May) South of the centre, especially useful if you need help finding accommodation.

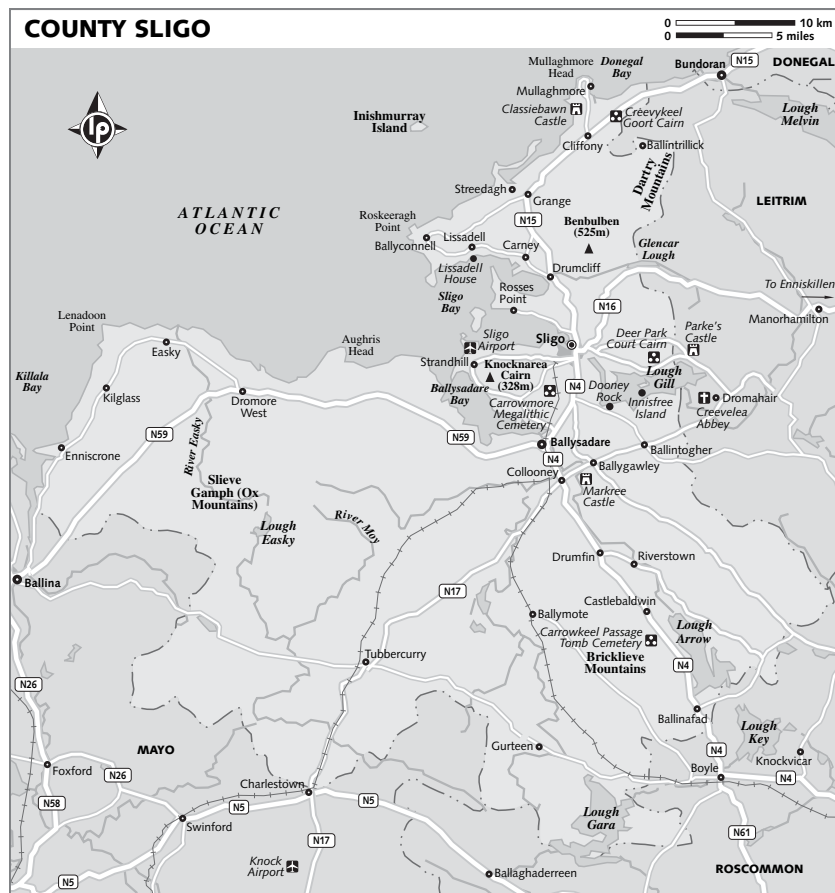
Post office (Wine St)

Wash & Dry Laundrette (☎ 914 1777; Connolly St; from €8; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Sights

SLIGO COUNTY MUSEUM

The main appeal of this **museum** (☎ 914 1623; Stephen St; admission free; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm &



2.30-4.30pm Mon-Sat Jun-Sep, 2-5pm Tue-Sat Apr, May & Oct) is the Yeats room. There are photographs, letters and newspaper cuttings connected with the poet WB Yeats, and drawings by Jack B Yeats, his brother. The room across the hall contains a prison apron dress worn by Countess Constance Markievicz after the 1916 Rising. The upstairs galleries exhibit contemporary art, mostly regional.

MODEL ARTS & NILAND GALLERY

In contrast to its imposing 19th-century façade, the interior of Sligo's excellent gallery (☎ 914 1405; www.modelart.ie; the Mall; admission free; ☞ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun; ♿) is pleasantly airy and contemporary. The wide-ranging collection includes works by

Charles Lamb and Sean Keating as well as Jack B Yeats, one of Ireland's most important modern artists (who said he never painted anything without putting a thought of Sligo into it). The gallery also hosts a rich schedule of travelling exhibitions, readings, film and music events. There's also a gourmet café, the Atrium (p467).

SLIGO ABBEY

The handsome husk that is Sligo's abbey (☎ 914 6406; Abbey St; adult/child €2/1.25; ☞ 10am-6pm mid-Mar-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Fri-Sun Nov-mid-Mar) has enjoyed the best and worst of luck. It was first built by the town's founder, Maurice FitzGerald, around 1252 for the Dominicans, but it burned down in the 15th century and was

rebuilt. Friends in high places then saved the abbey from the worst ravages of the Elizabethan era, and rescued the only sculpted altar to survive the Reformation. However, the abbey's fortunes reversed when it was put to the torch in 1641, and subsequently raided for stone. The doorways reach only a few feet high at the abbey's rear, and the ground around it was swollen by the mass graves from years of famine and war.

YEATS BUILDING

On the corner of Lower Knox and O'Connell Sts, near Hyde Bridge, the Yeats Building houses the hit-and-miss **Sligo Art Gallery** (☎ 914 5847; www.sligoartgallery.com; Lower Knox St; admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), with travelling exhibitions. There's a pleasant café with windows overlooking the busy street corner.

Festivals

Sligo kicks up its heels every now and then, with a couple of standout festivals.

Sligo Live (www.sligo.live) Live music festival features roots music and popular offshoots at the Sligo Race Course; in the first week of June.

Yeats Festival (www.yeats-sligo.com) Irish poetry, music and culture is celebrated with three weeks of performances and events around town. Held late July-mid-August.

Sleeping BUDGET

Eden Hill Holiday Hostel (☎ 914 3204; edenhill@eircom.net; Pearse Rd; camp sites per person €9, dm €11-15, d €36-40; ♿) Sharing honours as best hostel in Sligo, this converted Victorian home, originally owned by members of the Yeats family, has a cheery atmosphere, spotless dorms and an enormous communal kitchen. It's 1.5km from the station, but pick up may be arranged by phoning ahead to the hostel.

White House Hostel (☎ 914 5160; fax 914 4456; Markievicz Rd; dm €14; ☞ Mar-Oct; ♿) To stay closer to the action and mingle with more fellow hostellers, you could try this laid-back central spot. It looks a little rundown from the outside, but its dorm rooms are perfectly acceptable.

Harbour House (☎ 917 1547; www.harbourhousehostel.com; Finisklin Rd; dm €18-25, s/d €28/44; ♿) If you prefer mod-cons to quirkiness, then you'll be more than happy with this excellent, well-equipped IHH hostel, less than 1km northwest of the centre. It offers a

little budget luxury, in the form of colourful en-suite rooms with TV and firm beds.

MIDRANGE

B&Bs line Pearse Rd.

ourpick Pearse Lodge (☎ 916 1090; pearselodge@eircom.net; Pearse Rd; s €42-45, d €72; ♿) A smart choice. Its owners not only attend to details in upkeep and service, but are also up on what's happening in town. Rooms are impeccably clean and tastefully furnished, and the breakfast is superb, with a menu including smoked salmon, pancakes and vegetarian options. Good family choice.

McGettigan's (☎ 916 2857; www.bandbsligo.ie; Connolly St; standard/en suite s €45/58, d €75/85; ♿) This unfussy lodging's big selling point is its central location, near the centre of the action. It's not a private home, but does include a nice breakfast menu that offers grilled plaice (flatfish).

St Ann's (☎ 914 3188; Pearse Rd; d €70; ♿) With an al-fresco swimming pool (unheated), neatly snipped topiary and frilly feminine rooms, this well maintained B&B comes highly recommended.

Inisfree House (☎ 256 2532; High St; d €110; ♿) Projecting a nonchalant air, this hotel doesn't try to charm its guests, but it does win over with its central location and neat rooms. The downstairs pub is cool, and handy for a last round.

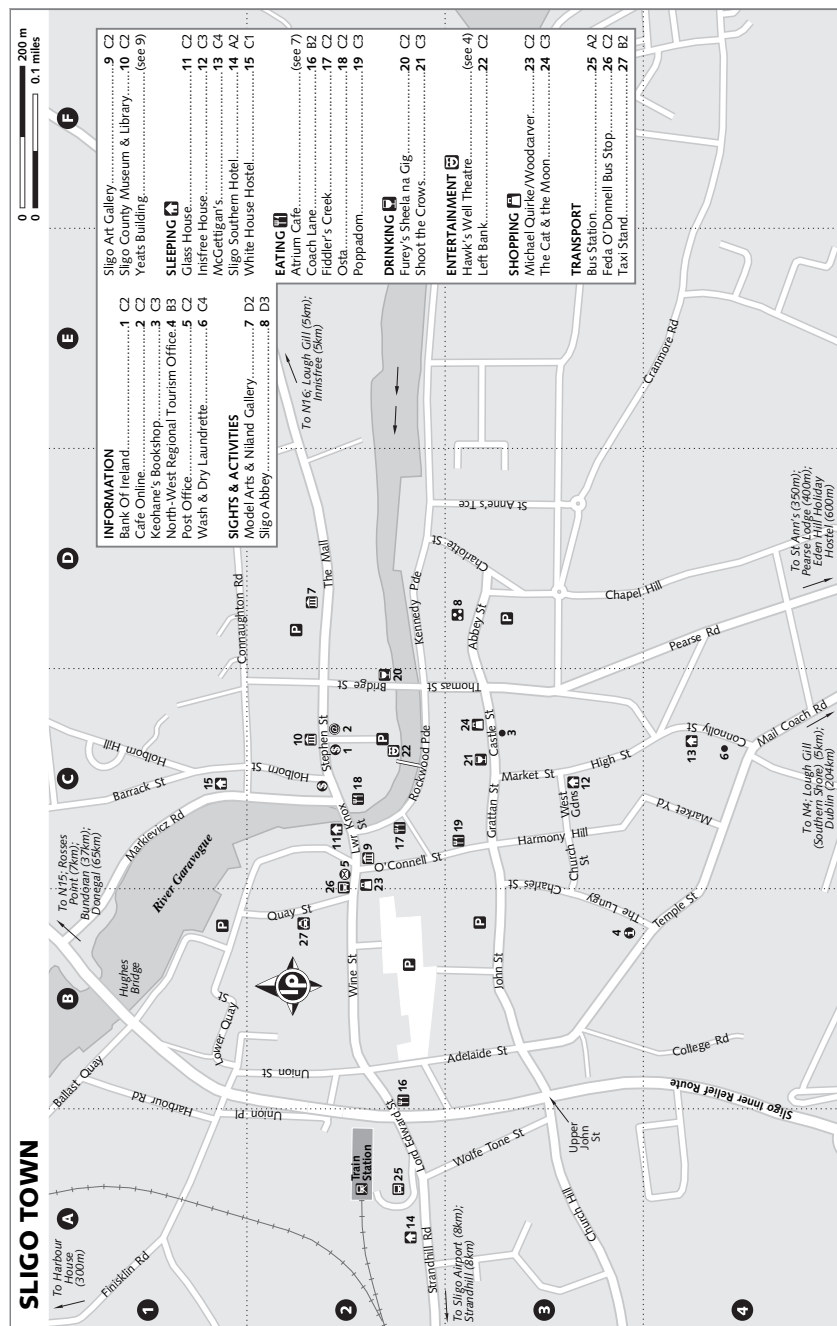
TOP END

Sligo Southern Hotel (☎ 916 2101; www.sligosouthernhotel.com; Strandhill Rd; s/d €95/150; ♿) The courtly gardens of this elegant hotel border the bus and train stations. Its boldly coloured interior manages to combine superb facilities (including swimming pool, plasma TV and broadband internet access) with comfortable charm.

The Glass House (☎ 919 4300; www.theglasshouse.ie; Swan Point; s/d €130/218; ♿) Central Sligo's boldest architectural statement is this svelte study in glass and geometry. It overlooks the river, so you can't miss it. Guest rooms are genuinely stylish and afford excellent views, and the hotel has a great bar and restaurant. You're at the cutting edge and smack in the middle of things here.

Eating

Coach Lane (☎ 916 2417; www.coachlane.com; 1-2 Lord Edward St; mains €14-28; ☞ 5.30-11pm) Consistently rated among Sligo's best dining options,



Coach Lane does top-notch Irish and international cuisine. The restaurant shares its kitchen with Donagh's Pub, but make sure you're seated in the dining room, where the atmosphere is superior. The seafood-slanted menu features juicy Lissadell clams and mussels, and there are some intriguing wild-card specials, such as roast Tipperary ostrich.

Atrium Cafe (☎ 914 1405; Model Arts & Niland Gallery; sandwiches & snacks €6-10; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sat, 11am-3pm Sun) To enjoy a healthy bite while hobnobbing with the Sligo art set, head to this gourmet gallery café. It's understandably popular for Sunday brunch. Also good for coffee and dessert.

Fiddler's Creek (☎ 914 1866; www.fiddlerscreek.ie; Rockwood Pde; mains €10-20; ☎ 5-11.30pm) Excellent Indian cuisine makes it worth the trek upstairs to Poppadam. The atmosphere is a real surprise: minimalist elegance rather than the usual exotica. Service is smooth and professional. If you're staying in a hostel, the take-away menu's prices are greatly reduced (€6 to €13).

Poppadam (☎ 914 7171; www.poppadam.ie; 34 O'Connell St; mains €10-20; ☎ 5-11.30pm) Excellent Indian cuisine makes it worth the trek upstairs to Poppadam. The atmosphere is a real surprise: minimalist elegance rather than the usual exotica. Service is smooth and professional. If you're staying in a hostel, the take-away menu's prices are greatly reduced (€6 to €13).

Osta (Hyde Bridge, Left Bank; light meals €5-10; ☎ 8am-9pm) Osta is a café and a wine bar, and it's well suited to both callings. It's intimate and well lit, and has a prime location for gazing at the river as it charges beneath Hyde Bridge. Quay tables make this a choice spot on warm days.

Drinking

Sligo enjoys some of the best night-time fun in Ireland's northwest, with impromptu sessions striking up at every opportunity, although the town also has a reputation for late-night wildness.

Shoot the Crows (☎ 916 2554; www.shootthecrows.ie; Castle St) This dark and somewhat dishevelled old pub oozes bohemian atmosphere. Early evening draws a good-natured crowd of regulars, and even when the place is packed to the gills it generally has an easy going vibe. Sing-alongs and sessions happen frequently here. You'll know you've found it when you spot the nude women painted on the façade.

Furey's Sheela na Gig (☎ 914 3825; Bridge St) Named after a Gaelic fertility symbol of a naked woman, this old-style bar is Irish traditional band Dervish's local watering hole, and has superb traditional music most nights.

Entertainment

Left Bank (☎ 914 0100; 15 Stephen St) With its long bar and casual wide-open space, Left Bank is among Sligo's best venues for live music performances. The place often books bands on the cool, modern end of the jazz spectrum, and even when there's no band the place generates a happening, upbeat vibe.

Hawk's Well Theatre (☎ 61526; www.hawkswell.com; Temple St) This well-regarded theatre presents a varied programme of concerts, dance and drama.

Shopping

The Cat & the Moon (☎ 914 3686; www.thecatandthemoon.com; 4 Castle St; ☎ 9am-6pm) Quality Irish crafts and arts are sold here – no cheesy shamrock stuff. Designer jewellery is a specialty, but you'll also find fine woollen goods, and objects to pretty up the home.

Getting There & Away

AIR

From **Sligo Airport** (☎ 916 8280; www.sligoairport.com; Strandhill Rd) there are direct Aer Arann flights to Dublin twice daily (from €25; 40 minutes).

BUS

Bus Éireann (☎ 916 0066) leaves from the terminal below the train station, on Lord Edward St. Destinations include Ballina (€11, 1½ hours, five daily), Westport (€15, two hours, twice daily) and Dublin (€16, four hours, four daily). Services are less frequent on Sunday.

Feda O'Donnell (☎ 074-954 8114; www.fedaodonnell.com) operates a service between Crolly (County Donegal) and Galway via Donegal town and Sligo town twice daily (four times Friday). The buses leave by Matt Lyon's shop on the corner of Wine and Quay Sts.

TRAIN

Trains leave the **station** (☎ 916 9888) for Dublin (€26, 3½ hours, four or five daily) via Boyle, Carrick-on-Shannon and Mullingar.

Getting Around

Local buses run to Strandhill (€2.70, five to seven Monday to Saturday) and sometimes continue to the airport. A taxi to the airport costs about €15. There's a taxi stand on Quay St. **Feehily's Taxis** (☎ 914 3000) offer a 24-hour service.

AROUND SLIGO TOWN

Rosses Point

☎ 071 / pop 780

Rosses Point (An Ros) is a picturesque seaside resort with a lovely Blue Flag beach, grassy dunes rolling down to the strand, birdlife and Benbulbin, Sligo's most recognisable landmark, arching skywards in the distance. It holds special appeal for the golf-minded traveller, as some of the prime real estate here is dominated by lovingly trimmed greens. It's expensive to stay here, unless you're camping. Rosses Point is Sligo town's backyard, so you can pop in for the day or for dinner.

ACTIVITIES

Established in 1894, **County Sligo Golf Course** (☎ 917 7134; www.countywigolffclub.ie) is one of Ireland's most challenging and renowned links courses, attracting golfers from all over Europe. Its position on the peninsula is simply stunning. Green fees cost from €70 Monday to Thursday, and €85 Friday to Sunday; fees are less in the winter.

SLEEPING & EATING

Greenlands Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 917 7113; noelineha@eircom.net; camp sites per person €11; ☹ Easter-mid-Sep) Peering over the Atlantic from the point's extreme, with easy access to the beaches, this site manages to feel isolated despite its proximity to local amenities. You'll just need to keep your head down if errant golfers are swinging nearby.

Yeats Country Hotel (☎ 917 7211; www.yeatscountryhotel.com; s/d from €90/140; P ☹) There isn't much of a town centre, so this huge three-star hotel more or less stands in for the heart of Rosses Point. It has a commanding presence, overlooking the beach and the golf course, and attracts golfers and families. Rooms are large and many afford sea views.

Waterfront (☎ 917 7122; mains €13-28; ☹ 5-9.30pm) One of the drawing cards of Rosses Point is this pub/restaurant, overlooking the estuary and Oyster Island. It has a spirited atmosphere, and naturally the kitchen conjures up excellent seafood. The menu also offers a few worthy vegetarian dishes and children's portions.

Deer Park Court Cairn

A 10-minute walk from the car park through pine-scented forest leads to this enigmatic court tomb (also called Magheraghanrush). Dating from around 3000 BC, the crumbling

structure is comparable to a crude human form, with a large belly-like central court and several protruding burial chambers positioned as though the head and legs.

Take the N16 east from Sligo and turn onto the R286 for Parke's Castle. Almost immediately, turn left at the Y-junction onto a minor road for Manorhamilton. Continue for 3km to the car park, then follow the trail for 50m before veering right up a small hill.

Knocknarea Cairn

Sligo's ultimate rock pile, 2km northwest of Carrowmore, Knocknarea is deeply mired in myth. The cairn is popularly believed to be the grave of legendary Queen Maeve (Queen Mab in Welsh and English folk tales). The 40,000 tonnes of stone have never been excavated, despite speculation that a tomb on the scale of the one at Newgrange lies buried below.

The enormous stone heap, perched high atop its limestone plateau (328m), seems to be looking over your shoulder everywhere you dare tread in its ancestral backyard. It's a 45-minute trek to the top, from which a spectacular panoramic view pulls in Ben Bulbin, Rosses Point and the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

Leave Sligo as though for Carrowmore, then follow signs to Knocknarea. Or from Carrowmore, continue down the road, turn right by a church then follow signs.

Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery

The largest Stone Age cemetery in Ireland and the second-biggest in Europe, **Carrowmore** (☎ 916 1534; adult/child/concession €2.10/1.10/1.30; ☹ 10am-6pm Easter-Sep; P) impresses for its variety as well as its scale. Everywhere you look the gently rolling hills are beaded with stone circles, passage tombs and dolmens – there are about 60, all told.

Attempts to date the site have had both diverse and divisive results. The conventional wisdom is that the site pre-dates Newgrange in County Meath by some 700 years. Over the centuries, many of the stones have been destroyed, and several remaining stones are on private land.

The delicately balanced dolmens were originally covered with stones and earth, so it requires some effort to picture what this 2.5km-wide area might once have looked like. To help (or some would say hinder) the imagination, the Dúchas-operated site has launched a decapitated reconstruction of

one cairn, caged by wire and sliced open by a gaping entrance. An exhibit in the roadside visitor centre gives the full low-down on this fascinating site.

To get there, leave town by Church Hill and continue south for 5km; the route is clearly signposted.

Strandhill

☎ 071 / pop 1000

The great Atlantic rollers that sweep into the long, red-gold beach by Strandhill (An Leathras), 8km west of Sligo off the R292 airport road, have made it a surfing mecca of international renown. Its handy 24-hour **surfcam** (www.strandhillsurfcam.com) brings enthusiasts scurrying whenever the surf's good.

Enquire at **Perfect Day Surf Shop** (☎ 087-202 9399; www.perfectdaysurfing.com; Shore Rd) for gear and lessons. The **Strandhill Surf School** (☎ 916 8483; www.strandhillsurfschool.com; Beach Front) is another helpful resource, especially for beginners or intermediate surfers.

Another of Strandhill's big attractions is the **Celtic Seaweed Baths** (☎ 916 8686; www.celticseaweedbaths.com; Shore Rd; s/tw bath €18/22; ☹ 11am-8pm), which caters to the growing number of people who crave the sensation of skinny dipping in a tub filled with cool seaweed. It's sort of a mermaid fantasy. This is a modern facility that inspires with its high standards of sanitation.

A few kilometres towards Sligo, there is a point from which, at low tide, you can walk to **Coney Island**: its New York namesake was supposedly named by a man from Rosses Point. The island's wishing well is reputed to have been dug by St Patrick (who, if all these tales are to be trusted, led a very busy life).

VOICES: MICHAEL QUIRKE, THE WOODCARVER OF WINE ST

While strolling Sligo's streets, be sure to duck into the shop of Michael Quirke, a woodcarver, raconteur and local character. Mr Quirke's studio, you'll notice, is a converted butcher shop, and among the stumps of beechwood are some of the implements of the butcher's trade, including an electric bone saw. Quirke, himself formerly a butcher, began to use his tools for cutting and carving wood in 1968. He divided his time between his twin callings for 20 years, after which he gave up meat, so to speak.

Much of his art is inspired by Irish mythology, a subject about which he is passionate and knowledgeable. He seems pleased to hold court with the customers and the curious who enter his shop.

'Irish mythology, unlike Greek mythology, is alive and constantly changing,' he says. 'It's not set in stone, and that's why it's interesting.' To demonstrate what he means, as he talks Quirke makes unforced connections between Irish myths, music, history, flora, fauna and contemporary events. He goes on frequent tangents, and often makes a point of debunking misconceptions. For instance: 'You'll hear talk about bunnies in Ireland, but in fact we have hares, which are very different. Bunnies are nervous, skittish animals. That's why they live in holes. On the other hand, the Irish hare has nerves of steel. It does not hide in burrows, and when it runs it does not hesitate. When I walk my dog, if a hare runs by, no more than 20 feet away, my dog will never notice it. It's a grey streak.'

Quirke talks while he carves. When he's done talking to you, he will put down his carving, shake your hand and tell you it's been lovely to chat.

TOP FIVE PEEPS INTO PREHISTORY

- Creepy cairns of Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery (left)
- Groundbreaking archaeology at Céide Fields (p457)
- Vast monuments of Carrowkeel Passage Tomb Cemetery (p470)
- Queen Maeve's Knocknarea Cairn (left)
- Well-preserved Creevykeel Goort Cairn (p474)

SLEEPING

Strandhill Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 916 8111; sxl@iol.ie; camp sites per person €11; ☽ Jun-Sep) Ideally positioned by the long beach, separated only by grassy dunes. This large flat camp site has 100 sites and good facilities.

Strandhill Lodge & Hostel (☎ 916 8313; www.strandhillaccommodation.com; Shore Rd; dm/d €15/30; (P)) This cheerful and orderly budget haunt, just a few paces from the strand, is the place to mingle with surfer dudes and dudettes. It has 33 beds distributed between dorms of different sizes, a few twin rooms, and a self-catering kitchen.

Dunes Tavern (☎ 916 8131; www.accommodationstrandhill.com; Top Rd; dm/d €20/35) Along the main highway, this tavern offers the traditional sleeps-over-a-pub combo. All rooms are ensuite, very clean and have views of the beach or Knocknarea. The pub, with billiards and the odd céilidh session, is a social spot.

DRINKING

Strand Bar (☎ 916 8140; Shore Rd) A terrific pub with snugs, décor worth studying and music on the weekends. It's also a great place to glean the surfing low-down, as it is run by three Irish champions. There's a seafood restaurant above.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 916 0066) buses run from Sligo to Strandhill and Rosses Point (€2.70, five to seven Monday to Saturday), but there's no public transport to other places of interest in the area. While it's possible to walk to Carrowmore and Knocknarea from town, it's a long day's return trek.

SOUTH OF SLIGO TOWN**Collooney & Riverstown**

☎ 071

our pick **Markree Castle** (☎ 071-916 7800; www.markreecastle.ie; Collooney; s/d from €100/140; dinner €47; (P) (♿)), Sligo's oldest inhabited castle, is a three-star hotel near the village of Collooney. It's topped by showy battlements, more for fancy than fortification, and a whimsical Gothic façade. What sets Markree Castle apart from other castles, however, is personality. Somewhat faded and a little eccentric, the castle manages to feel comfortable, even a little homey – an admirable switch from the haughty nobility that castles generally project. The restaurant is another fine excuse to come out this way. To get here, follow the N4 to the roundabout in

Collooney. It's not signposted at the roundabout, but if you follow the sign to the Castle Dargon, you'll reach the gate to Markree Castle, about 1km up the road.

The exceedingly charming **Sligo Folk Park** (☎ 916 5001; www.sligofolkpark.com; Millview House, Rivers town; adult/child €5/3; ☽ 10am–4.30pm Mon–Sat, 12.30–5pm Sun May–Oct, Dec) revolves around an immaculately restored 19th-century cottage. A number of humble, thatched structures complement this centrepiece, along with scattered farm tools and an exhibit that honours the old country life. In December, the park sets up Santa Town, which just may be pushing things a bit too far.

Every summer the town kicks up its heels for the **James Morrison Traditional Music Festival** (www.morrison.ie; ☽ first week of Aug). It's a three-day weekend filled with live music in a dancehall setting. Just as fun are informal seminars on how to sing *sean nós* ballads or perform traditional Irish reels on instruments such as the button accordion and the fiddle.

Coopershill House (☎ 916 5108; www.coopershill.com; Riverstown; s/d €145/230; 5-course dinner from €45; ☽ Apr–Oct; (P)), a grey-stone mansion, seems to exist in a world of its own. It's an idyllic Georgian retreat in an estate speckled by wildflowers, alive with birdsong and home to a deer farm. Most of the eight bedrooms have lovely canopy beds.

Carrowkeel Passage Tomb Cemetery

With a God's-eye view of the county from high in the Bricklieve Mountains, there's little wonder why this hill-top site was sacred in prehistoric times. The windswept location is simultaneously uplifting and downright eerie, dotted with around 14 cairns, dolmens and the scattered remnants of other graves. It's possible to squeeze into at least one limestone chamber, although bigger folk are liable to get stuck. The place has been dated to the late Stone Age (3000 to 2000 BC).

West off the N4 road, Carrowkeel is closer to Boyle than Sligo town. If coming from the latter, turn right in Castlebaldwin, then left at the fork. The site is 2km uphill from the gateway. You can take an Athlone bus from Sligo and ask to be dropped off at Castlebaldwin.

Ballymote

☎ 071 / pop 980

This pretty little town merits a visit if only to see the immense ivy-covered shell of **Ballymote Castle**. It was from this early-14th-century

castle, fronted by formidable drum towers, that O'Donnell marched to disaster at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. It's on the Tubbercurry road.

Temple House (☎ 918 3329; www.templehouse.ie; Ballymote; s/d €85/170; dinner €35; ☽ Apr–Nov; (P)) is a glorious Georgian mansion surrounded by 1000 acres of woods, sheep-studded fields and a crystalline lake. Also on the grounds is a 13th-century Knights Templar castle. The house itself is packed with period décor, dusty natural-history collections and decapitated hunting trophies. It's 4km northwest of Ballymote, close to the N17.

Tubbercurry

☎ 071 / pop 1170

Sleepy Tubbercurry (Tobar an Choire), also spelled Tobercurry, is shaken awake in mid-July, when the week-long **South Sligo Summer School** (☎ 912 0912; www.ssss.school.org) celebrates Irish music and dance with infectious gusto. Try your hand at anything from the tin whistle to an Irish jig, or simply enjoy the eruption of local concerts and recitals.

Easky & Enniscrone

☎ 096

Easky (Eascaigh) is little more than a widening along the coast road, but it gets singled out as one of Europe's best year-round surfing destinations. In summer the little town can be overrun with wetsuited Aussies and Californians. The helpful **Easky Surfing & Information Centre** (Irish Surfing Association; ☎ 49428; www.isasurf.ie) ought to be your first stop if you're planning on hitting the waves anywhere near here.

MERMAID DREAMS

Sinking into a sea-water bath and slathering yourself with seaweed may sound like madness, but in Ireland it's considered to be good for the health. Seaweed baths have been part of Irish homeopathy for centuries and are considered a cure for rheumatism and arthritis, even hangovers. Although some claims are unproven, one thing's for sure – a single session wallowing in the soupy waters will leave your skin feeling baby-soft. Seaweed's silky oils contain a massive concentration of iodine, a key presence in most moisturising creams.

Several places offer seaweed baths in Sligo, but two spots stand out. **Kilcullen's Seaweed Baths** (☎ 36238; www.kilcullenseaweedbaths.com; Enniscrone; s/tw bath €17/27.50, 30min massage €25; ☽ 10am–9pm May–Oct, noon–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–8pm Sat & Sun Nov–Apr) is the most traditional. Set within a grand Edwardian structure, Kilcullen's has loads of character, with original gigantean porcelain baths and stout brass taps still operating.

For a more modern setting, **Celtic Seaweed Baths** (☎ 916 8686; www.celticseaweedbaths.com; Shore Rd, Strandhill; s/tw bath €18/22; ☽ 11am–8pm) inspires confidence with its high standards of sanitation.

South at Enniscrone (Innis Crabhann), a stunning Blue Flag beach known as the Hollow stretches its sandy arm for 5km. The town is also famous for its seaweed baths (see boxed text, below).

Atlantic Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 36132; atlanticcaravanpk@eircom.net; Enniscrone; camp sites €10–15, caravans per week €205–420; ☽ Mar–Sep), a sandy two-star camping ground, is a spit from Hollow beach. For the tentless, it has furnished caravans that can sleep four or more.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 071-916 0066) express service 23 to Sligo from Dublin (€16, 3½ hours) and service 64 between Galway (€13, 2½ hours) and Derry (€18, three hours) stop outside Quigley's in Collooney. On Saturday only, the Sligo–Castlereagh bus 460 stops at Collooney (€3, 15 minutes), Ballymote (€5, 30 minutes) and Tubbercurry (€7, 40 minutes). Buses run from Sligo to Collooney, Monday to Saturday. From Easky, buses run four times daily (once on Sunday) to Sligo (€8, 50 minutes) and Ballina (€5, 30 minutes). From Enniscrone, buses also run four times daily (once on Sunday) to Sligo (€9, 65 minutes) and Ballina (€2.50, 15 minutes).

The Sligo train stops at Collooney and Ballymote en route to Dublin (both €24, four to six five times daily). Call **Sligo station** (☎ 071-916 9888) for times.

LOUGH GILL

The mirror-like 'Lake of Brightness', Lough Gill is home to as many legends as fish; one that can be tested easily is the story that

a silver bell from the abbey in Sligo was thrown into the lough and only those free from sin can hear it pealing. We didn't hear it, but perhaps you will? Yeah, right.

The lake, southeast of Sligo, and other attractions are all within a day trip of anywhere in the county. A return trip of 48km takes in most of the lough and Parke's Castle, which, though in County Leitrim, is included here.

Dooney Rock

This huge limestone knoll bulges awkwardly upward by the lough's southern shore. Yeats immortalises it in *The Fiddler of Dooney*. There's a good lake view from the top, and tranquil woodland walks below its fissured flanks.

Leave Sligo south on the N4, but turn left at the sign to Lough Gill. Another left at the T-junction brings you onto the R287 towards Dooney car park.

Innisfree Island

This pint-sized island (Inis Fraoigh) lies tantalisingly close to the lough's southeastern shore. Its air of tranquillity so moved Yeats that he famously wrote *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*:

I will arise and go now, and go to
Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay
and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a
hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

Continue east from Dooney Rock and turn left at the crossroads. After 3km turn left again for another 3km. A small road leads down to the lake.

Creevelea Abbey (County Leitrim)

A short riverside walk from Dromahair village leads to the ruinous remains of this unfortunate Franciscan friary. A monument to bad timing, the abbey was founded just a few decades before the orders were suppressed in 1539. Yet despite being gutted by fire on several occasions, and desecrated by Richard Bingham and later Cromwell, the hardy monks kept coming back. The cloister has some curious carvings of St Francis, one displaying stigmata and another depicting the saint preaching to birds.

From Innisfree, return to the R287 and follow signs to Dromahair and the abbey.

Parke's Castle (County Leitrim)

The tranquil surrounds of **Parke's Castle** (☎ 071-916 4149; Fivemile Bourne; adult/child €2.75/1.25; ☹ 10am-6pm mid-Mar-Oct; 📍), with swans drifting by on Lough Gill and neat grass cloaking the old moat, belies the fact that its early Plantation architecture was created out of an unwelcome English landlord's insecurity and fear.

The thoroughly restored, three-storey castle forms part of one of the five sides of the bawn, which also has three rounded turrets at its corners. Join one of the entertaining guided tours after viewing the 20-minute video.

From Creevelea Abbey, continue east along the R287, turn left towards Dromahair and continue northwards. To return to Sligo from Parke's Castle turn west onto the R286.

Rose of Innisfree

The **Rose of Innisfree** (☎ 071-916 4266; www.roseofinnisfree.com; adult/child €12/6) offers live recitals of Yeats' poetry accompanying music during 1½-hour cruises on Lough Gill that run from Parke's Castle at 11am, 12.30pm, 1.30pm, 3.30pm and 4.30pm Easter to October. The company runs a bus from Sligo to the castle. Call for departure times and location.

Getting There & Away

CAR & BICYCLE

Leave Sligo east via the Mall past the hospital, and turn right off the N16 onto the R286, which leads to the northern shore of Lough Gill. The southern route is less interesting until you reach Dooney Rock.

NORTH OF SLIGO TOWN

Drumcliff & Benbulbin

Visible all along Sligo's northern coast, and one of the most recognisable hills in Ireland, is the limestone plateau of Benbulbin (525m). Its high plateau is uncommonly flat for Ireland, and its near-vertical sides are scored by earthen ribs that make the mountain appear to be straining against unseen forces pulling it down.

Benbulbin's extraordinary beauty was not lost on WB Yeats. Before the poet died in Menton, France, in 1939, he had requested: 'If I die here, bury me up there on the mountain, and then after a year or so, dig me up and bring me privately to Sligo'. His wishes weren't honoured until 1948, when his body was interred in the churchyard at Drumcliff, where his great-grandfather had been rector.

EXTREME COPYRIGHT

We might take plagiarism seriously these days, but we ain't got nothing on the early Irish church. What might incur a hefty fine and slap on the wrist in the modern day cost the lives of 3000 men in battle in the year AD 561. The aptly named 'Battle of the Book' took place in Cooledrummen, near Drumcliff, after St Colmcille (or Columba) provoked rage by copying rare religious manuscripts. The matter initially went to the local king to settle, who famously declared 'to every cow its calf, to every book its copy', siding against St Colmcille. But the matter persisted, and the battle commenced. It's said that the ensuing loss of life drove St Colmcille to devote himself to saving as many souls as had been lost in the bloody battle. Thus he founded the Drumcliff monastery and set about spreading Christianity far and wide.

Yeats' grave is next to the Protestant church's doorway, and his youthful bride Georgie Hyde-Lee is buried alongside. Almost three decades her senior, Yeats was 52 when they married. The poet's epitaph is from his poem *Under Ben Bulbin*:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

Visiting the grave is somewhat disturbed by traffic noise along the N15 that no doubt has Yeats rolling over.

In the 6th century, St Colmcille chose the same location for a monastery. You can still see the stumpy remains of the **round tower**, which was struck by lightning in 1936, on the main road nearby. Also in the churchyard is an extraordinary 11th-century **high cross**, etched with intricate biblical scenes.

In summer, the church shows a 15-minute audiovisual on Yeats, St Colmcille and Drumcliff. There's also a little tea shop in which to browse at books, pick up local ceramics and peruse novelty shamrock badges.

SLEEPING & EATING

Benbulbin Farm (☎ 071-916 3211; hennigan@eircom.net; Barnaribbon, Drumcliff; s/d €45/66; ☹ Mar-Oct; 📍) If you want to slumber in the heart of Yeats Country, you can't do much better than this isolated farmhouse B&B, at the base of Benbulbin. It's 2km north of Drumcliff.

Yeats Tavern (☎ 071-916 3117; N15, Drumcliff; mains €11-24; ☹ noon-9.30pm; 📍) This vast and popular pub/restaurant is the top road stop in northern Sligo. You'll get a quality pint of Guinness or Irish coffee, but most come for the food. The menu covers all the local surf and turf bases, and a few pasta and vegetarian selections. It's about 300m north from Yeats' grave.

Glencar Lough

As well as **fishing**, a feature of this lake is the beautiful **waterfall**, signposted from all directions. Yeats refers to this picturesque spot in *The Stolen Child*. The surrounding countryside is best enjoyed by walking east and taking the steep trail north to the valley.

From Drumcliff it's less than 5km to the lake, and there's a **Bus Éireann** (☎ 071-60066) service from Sligo. Call for details.

Lissadell House

The building is nearly as foreboding as a prison, but don't be put off by the grim, exterior of **Lissadell House** (☎ 087-629 6928; www.lissadellhouse.com; Lissadell; adult/child €6/3; ☹ 11am-6pm Mar-Oct; 📍) or you'll miss out on a fascinating peek into the life of one of Ireland's most colourful families.

The house was built by Sir Robert Gore-Booth back in 1830, and it reflects a taste for Georgian architecture that must have appeared stodgy even then. The interior has all the pomp missing from the bunker-like exterior. However, the family itself is remembered more for its activism than for its affluence.

Sir Robert took to calling himself 'Count Markiewicz', an affectation that passed onto his famous granddaughter Constance Gore-Booth (1868-1927). She was a committed activist for Irish independence, and earned a death sentence (later commuted) for her part in the Easter Rising. In 1918 she became the first woman elected to the British House of Commons but - like most Irish rebels - refused to take her seat.

Her sister Eva was just as fiery a character, an ardent suffragette and poet. WB Yeats immortalised his close friendship with the Markiewicz women in the verse *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz*.

The 45-minute guided tour is filled with stories of the family's adventures, quirks and peccadillos. The murals of domestic servants standing alongside family members in the dining hall are just one illustration of how they liked to thumb their noses at convention.

To get there, follow the N15 north from Sligo and turn west at Drumcliff, just past Yeats Tavern.

Streedagh

From the village of Grange, signs point towards Streedagh Beach, a grand crescent of sand that saw some 1100 sailors perish when three ships from the Spanish Armada were wrecked nearby. Swimming is dangerous, but the beach is ideal for horse riding. **Island View Riding Stables** (☎ 916 6156; www.islandviewridingstables.com; Grange; adult/child per hr €20/15) offers a variety of riding opportunities, including equestrian holiday packages.

Mullaghmore

The delightful **beach** at Mullaghmore (An Mullach Mór) is a sweeping arc of dark-golden sand and shallow waters, wide and safe. Mind you, it wasn't so safe for poor old Lord Mountbatten. It was in this bay that the IRA rigged his boat with explosives and assassinated him in 1979.

The road loops around Mullaghmore Head, where wide shafts of rock slice into the Atlantic surf. It also passes the rather smug-looking **Classiebawn Castle** (closed to the public) a neo-Gothic turreted pile built

for Lord Palmerston in 1856 and later home to the ill-fated Lord Mountbatten.

Creevykeel Goort Cairn

Shaped like a lobster's claw, this intriguing prehistoric **court tomb** (admission free; ☒ dawn-dusk) encloses several burial chambers. The structure was originally constructed around 2500 BC, with several more chambers added later. Once in the unroofed oval court, smaller visitors can duck under the stone-shielded entrance to reach the site's core.

The tomb is north of Cliffony on the N15.

Sleeping

Benwiskin Centre (☎ 071-917 6721; www.benwiskincentre.com; Ballinrillick; dm/f €15/60; ☐ ☑) In the nether reaches of the county, 4km east of Cliffony, this superb hostel-cum-community-centre is worth seeking out. The setting couldn't be more picturesque, and the hostel has impeccable en-suite dorms, and leafy garden. Book ahead in summer. Take the lane by Creevykeel and follow signs.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 071-916 0066) buses run from Sligo to Drumcliff (€3, 15 minutes), Grange (€4, 20 minutes) and Cliffony (€5, 25 minutes), as most buses to Donegal and Derry follow the N15. In Drumcliff the bus stop is near the church; in Grange it's outside Rooney's newsagency; and in Cliffony it's O'Donnell's Bar. The North-West Regional Tourism office (p463) has schedules.

DETOUR: INISHMURRAY ISLAND

It takes some trouble to arrange a visit to **Inishmurray**, an island that was abandoned in 1948. Early-Christian remains sit cheek-by-jowl with fascinating pagan relics on this uninhabited isle. There are three well-preserved **churches**, **beehive cells** and **open-air altars**. The old monastery is surrounded by a thickset oval wall. It was founded in the early-6th century by St Molaise, and his wooden statue once stood in the main church, but is now in the National Museum in Dublin.

The pagan relics were also assembled by Inishmurray monks. There's a collection of cursing stones: those who wanted to lay a curse did the Stations of the Cross in reverse, turning the stones as they went. There were also separate burial grounds for men and women, and a strong belief that if a body was placed in the wrong ground it would move itself during the night.

Only 6km separates Inishmurray from the mainland, but there's no regular boat service, and the lack of a harbour makes landing subject to the weather. Excursions can be arranged for €30 return with **Lomax Boats** (☎ 071-916 6124; tlomax@eircom.net; Mullaghmore) or **Joe McGowan** (☎ 071-916 6267; www.sligoheritage.com; Streedagh Point) in July and August. McGowan, in fact, is an enthusiastic historian and a fine source of information. Trips can also be arranged throughout spring and autumn, but get a group together as you'll be asked to cough up a collective €300 for the boat hire.

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