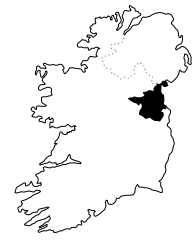


# Counties Meath & Louth



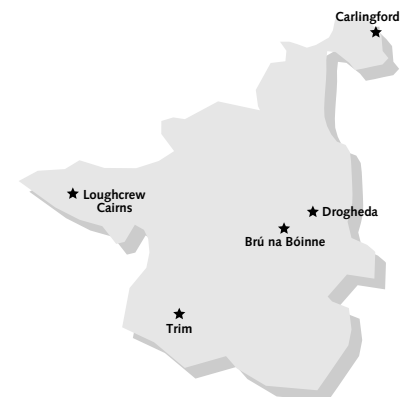
History's march has left a trail across the adjoining counties of Meath and Louth. At Brú na Bóinne and Loughcrew you'll find the amazing relics of the earliest Irish who, some 4000 years ago, built tombs that are the Pyramids of Ireland. At Monasterboice, Mellifont and Kells, the first Christians created abbeys, towers and other religious structures that survive today and recall a time lit only by fire. In recent centuries, the counties have been the location of often violent conflicts between the locals and the invaders from across the Irish Sea; much of the fighting was along the River Boyne, and places such as Drogheda still bear the scars.

Today the invasions are much more local. The counties are becoming Dublin suburbs as cityfolk search for affordable housing – something that is both a blessing and a curse, as the greater range of activities and nightlife is offset by urban sprawl and congestion. History and preservation have run headlong into the demands of sprawl and convenience in the Tara Valley with controversy around the new M3 motorway.

Although the top sites in the region can easily be explored as day trips from Dublin, you'll find greater rewards by spending some time in the counties. Drogheda makes an excellent base for must-see sights such as Newgrange, while Carlington has a scenic location near the border and hosts many activities on both land and sea. Or, better yet, wander the back roads of the counties – you'll find some surprising bit of history around every corner.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Egyptian Ireland** Extraordinary prehistoric remains underground at Newgrange (p543) and Knowth (p544) in the richly interesting Brú na Bóinne
- **Lost Ireland** The surprising and rarely visited ancient sites known as the Loughcrew Cairns (p557)
- **Fortified Ireland** The authentic walled castle at Trim (p553)
- **Modern Ireland** The many pleasures to be found in cosmopolitan Drogheda (p558)
- **Summer Ireland** A backdrop of multihued hills and sun-dappled waters in Carlington (p574)



■ POPULATION: 237,000

■ AREA: 2849 SQ KM

## COUNTY MEATH

In the original Gaelic divisions of Ireland, Meath (An Mhí) was Mide, 'the Middle Kingdom', and one of five provinces. The seat of the high kings until the 6th century, Meath was a fairly heavy hitter in Irish affairs.

These days, Meath's influence doesn't extend far beyond agricultural matters, but in that domain it still packs a solid punch: a farm in Meath is worth two in any other county, so goes the old saying. The fecund earth has attracted settlers since earliest times, and Meath's principal attractions are its don't-miss ancient sites in the Boyne Valley and among the hills of Tara, and the surprising town of Trim.

The county's towns have experienced rapid growth in the last decade, as Dubliners searching for affordable housing have invaded Navan, Slane and Kells. The changes brought by the cityfolk are mixed. You'll see new houses and businesses, and have plenty of time to ponder them as you sit in traffic.

Meath's tourism authority is one of the best in Ireland. Its publications are of a high standard; you'll get loads of info at [www.meathtourism.ie](http://www.meathtourism.ie).

### History

Meath's rich soil, laid down during the last Ice Age, attracted settlers as early as 8000 BC. They worked their way up the banks of

the River Boyne, transforming the landscape from forest to farmland. The extensive necropolis at Brú na Bóinne, dating from when the Egyptian pyramids were still but a dream, lies on a meandering section of the Boyne between Drogheda and Slane. There's a group of smaller passage graves in the Loughcrew Hills near Oldcastle.

For a thousand years the Hill of Tara was the seat of power for Irish high kings (*ard ríthe*), until the arrival of St Patrick in the 5th century. Later, Kells became one of the most important and creative monastic settlements in Ireland, and lent its name to the famed *Book of Kells*, a 9th-century illuminated manuscript now displayed at Trinity College, Dublin.

It has regional tourism info, a good café and a bookshop.

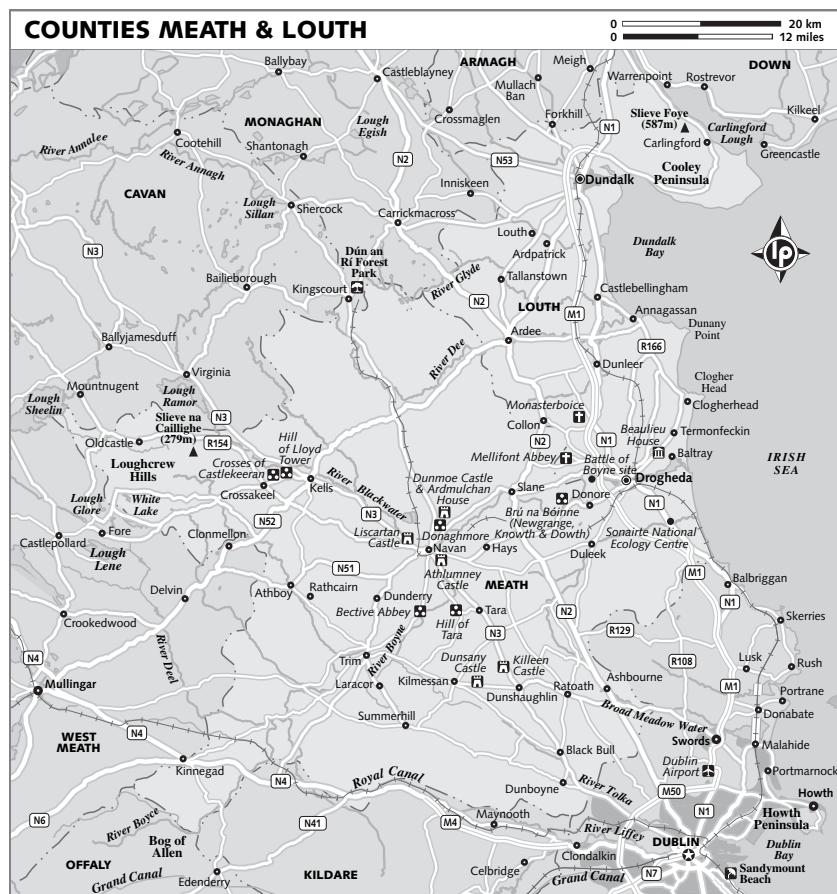
You should allow plenty of time to visit Brú na Bóinne. If you're only planning on taking the guided tour of the interpretive centre, give yourself about an hour. If you plan a visit to Newgrange or Knowth, allow at least two hours. If, however, you want to visit all three in one go, you should plan at least half a day. In summer, particularly at the weekend, and during school holidays, the place gets very crowded, and you will not be guaranteed a visit to either of the passage tombs; call ahead to book a tour as there are 750 slots and on peak days 2000 people show up. In summer, the best time to visit is midweek or early in the morning.

The important thing to note is that if you turn up at either Newgrange or Knowth (Dowth is not open for tourists) first, you'll be sent to the visitor centre. Tours depart from a bus stop that you reach by walking across a spiral bridge over the River Boyne, and the buses take just a few minutes to reach the sites. Technically you can walk the 4km to either site from the visitor centre but you're discouraged from doing this as you might get mowed down on the very narrow lanes by the tour bus you've chosen not to take.

The visitor centre is on the south side of the river. It's 2km west of Donore and 6km east of Slane, where bridges cross the river from the N51. Newgrange itself lies just north of the River Boyne, about 13km southwest of Drogheda and around 5km southeast of Slane; Dowth is between Newgrange and Drogheda; while Knowth is about 1km northwest of Newgrange, or almost 4km by road.

### Sights NEWGRANGE

Even from afar, you know that **Newgrange** (adult/child visitor centre & Newgrange €5.80/2.90) is something special. Its white, round stone walls topped by a grass dome look otherworldly, and just the size is impressive: 80m in diameter and 13m high. But underneath it gets even better. Here lies the finest Stone Age passage tomb in Ireland, and one of the most remarkable prehistoric sites in Europe. It dates from around 3200 BC, predating the Pyramids by some six centuries. The purpose for which it was constructed remains uncertain. It could have been a burial place for kings or a centre for ritual – although the alignment with the sun



### BRÚ NA BÓINNE

Not to be missed, the vast Neolithic necropolis known as Brú na Bóinne (the Boyne Palace) is one of the most extraordinary sites in Europe. A thousand years older than Stonehenge, this is a powerful and evocative testament to the mind-boggling achievements of prehistoric humans.

The complex was built to house the remains of the people who were at the top of the social heap. Its tombs were the largest artificial structures in Ireland until the construction of the Anglo-Norman castles 4000 years later. Over the centuries the tombs decayed, were covered by grass and trees and were plundered by everybody from Vikings to Victorian treasure hunters, whose carved initials can be seen on the great stones of Newgrange. The countryside around the tombs is littered with countless other ancient mounds (tumuli) and standing stones.

The area consists of many different sites, with the three principal ones being Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.

### Orientation & Information

To keep visitors from mucking up the ruins, all visits to Brú na Bóinne have to start at the **Brú na Bóinne visitor centre** (☎ 041-988 0300; [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie); Donore; adult/child visitor centre €2.90/1.60, visitor centre, Newgrange & Knowth €10.30/4.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Apr). Happily, this is a superb interpretive centre with an extraordinary series of interactive exhibits on the passage tombs and prehistoric Ireland in general. The building is a stunner, picking up the spiral design of Newgrange.

at the time of the winter solstice also suggests it was designed to act as a calendar.

The name derives from 'New Granary' (the tomb did in fact serve as a repository for wheat and grain at one stage), although a more popular belief is that it comes from the Irish for 'Cave of Gráinne', a reference to a Celtic myth taught to every Irish child. *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne* tells of the illicit love between the woman betrothed to Fionn McCumhaill (or Finn McCool), leader of the Fianna, and Diarmuid, one of his most trusted lieutenants. When Diarmuid was fatally wounded, his body was brought to Newgrange by the god Aengus in a vain attempt to save him, and the despairing Gráinne followed him into the cave, where she remained long after he died. This suspiciously Arthurian tale (for Diarmuid and Gráinne read Lancelot and Guinevere) is undoubtedly a myth, but it's still a pretty good story. Newgrange also plays another role in Celtic mythology, as the site where the hero Cúchulainn was conceived.

Over time, Newgrange, like Dowth and Knowth, deteriorated and was even used as a quarry at one stage. The site was extensively restored in 1962 and again in 1975.

A superbly carved kerbstone with double and triple spirals guards the tomb's main entrance. The front façade has been reconstructed so that tourists don't have to clamber in over it. Above the entrance is a slit, or roof box, which lets light in. Another beautifully decorated kerbstone stands at the exact opposite side of the mound. Some experts say that a ring of standing stones encircled the mound, forming a Great Circle about 100m in diameter, but only 12 of these stones remain, with traces of some others below ground level.

Holding the whole structure together are the 97 boulders of the kerb ring, designed to stop the mound from collapsing outwards. Eleven of these are decorated with motifs similar to those on the main entrance stone, although only three have extensive carvings.

The white quartzite was originally obtained from Wicklow, 70km to the south – in an age before horse and wheel, it was transported by sea and then up the River Boyne – and there is also some granite from the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland. Over 200,000 tonnes of earth and stone also went into the mound.

You can walk down the narrow 19m passage, lined with 43 stone uprights (some of

them engraved), which leads into the tomb chamber about one-third of the way into the colossal mound. The chamber has three recesses, and in these are large basin stones that held cremated human bones. As well as the remains, the basins would have held funeral offerings of beads and pendants, but these were stolen long before the archaeologists arrived.

Above, the massive stones support a 6m-high corbel-vaulted roof. A complex drainage system means that not a drop of water has penetrated the interior in 40 centuries.

At 8.20am during the winter solstice (19 to 23 December), the rising sun's rays shine through the slit above the entrance, creep slowly down the long passage and illuminate the tomb chamber for 17 minutes. There is little doubt that this is one of the country's most memorable, even mystical, experiences; be sure to add your name to the list that is drawn by lottery every 1 October. Even if you miss out, there is a simulated winter sunrise for every group taken into the mound.

#### KNOWTH

Northwest of Newgrange, the burial mound of **Knowth** (Cnóbha; visitor centre & Knowth adult/child €4.50/1.60; ☎ Easter-Oct) was built around the same time and seems set to surpass its better-known neighbour in both its size and the importance of the discoveries made here. It has the greatest collection of passage-grave art ever uncovered in Western Europe, and has been under excavation since 1962.

The excavations soon cleared a passage leading to the central chamber, which at 34m is much longer than the one at Newgrange.

#### NEWGRANGE FARM

Here's one for the kids. Situated a few hundred metres down the hill to the west of Newgrange tomb is a 135-hectare **working farm** (☎ 041-982 4119; www.newgrangefarm.com; Newgrange; adult €8, family €12-30; ☎ 10am-5pm Easter-Aug). The truly hands-on family-run farm allows visitors to feed the ducks and lambs, and stroke the bunnies. Amiable Farmer Bill keeps things interesting, and demonstrations of threshing, sheepdog work and shoeing a horse are absorbing. You reach the farm by following signs off the N51.

In 1968 a 40m passage was unearthed on the opposite side of the mound. Although the chambers are separate, they're close enough for archaeologists to hear each other at work. Also in the mound are the remains of six early-Christian souterrains (underground chambers) built into the side. Some 300 carved slabs and 17 satellite graves surround the main mound.

Human activity at Knowth continued for thousands of years after its construction, which accounts for the site's complexity. The Beaker folk, so called because they buried the dead with drinking vessels, occupied the site in the Bronze Age (c 1800 BC), as did the Celts in the Iron Age (c 500 BC). Remnants of bronze and iron workings from these periods have been discovered. Around AD 800 to 900, it was turned into a *ráth* (earthen ringfort), a stronghold of the very powerful Uí Néill (O'Neill) clan. In 965, it was the seat of Cormac MacMaelmíth, later Ireland's high king for nine years. The Normans built a motte (raised, flattened mound with a keep on top) and bailey (outer wall of a castle) here in the 12th century. In about 1400 the site was finally abandoned.

Further excavations are likely to continue at least for the next decade, and one of the thrills of visiting Knowth is being allowed to watch archaeologists at work (although given the cramped conditions inside, you won't be jealous!).

#### DOWTH

The circular mound at **Dowth** (Dubhadh, meaning 'Dark') is similar in size to Newgrange – about 63m in diameter – but is slightly taller at 14m high. It has suffered badly at the hands of everyone from road builders and treasure hunters to amateur archaeologists, who scooped out the centre of the tumulus in the 19th century. For a time, Dowth even had a tearoom ignobly perched on its summit. Relatively untouched by modern archaeologists, Dowth shows what Newgrange and Knowth looked like for most of their history. Because it's unsafe, Dowth is closed to visitors, though the mound can be viewed from the road. Excavations began in 1998 and will continue for years to come.

There are two entrance passages leading to separate chambers (both sealed), and a 24m early-Christian underground passage at either end, which connect up with the western pas-

sage. This 8m-long passage leads into a small cruciform chamber, in which a recess acts as an entrance to an additional series of small compartments, a feature unique to Dowth. To the southwest is the entrance to a shorter passage and smaller chamber.

North of the tumulus are the ruins of **Dowth Castle** and **Dowth House**.

#### Tours

Brú na Bóinne is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Ireland, and there are oodles of organised tours transporting busloads of eager tourists to the visitor centre (everybody must access the sites through there), especially from Dublin.

The **Mary Gibbons Tours** (☎ 01-283 9973; www.newgrangetours.com; tour €35) are highly recommended. Tours depart from numerous Dublin hotels, beginning at 9.30am Monday to Saturday, and take in the whole of the Boyne Valley, including Newgrange, and the Hill of Tara. The expert guides offer a fascinating insight into Celtic and pre-Celtic life in Ireland, and you'll get access to Newgrange even on days when all visiting slots are filled.

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111; www.buseireann.ie; adult/child €29/18; ☎ Mon-Thu, Sat & Sun mid-Mar-Sep) runs Newgrange and the Boyne Valley tours departing from **Busáras** (Map pp82-3; Store St) in Dublin at 10am, returning at approximately 5.45pm.

#### Sleeping & Eating

Drogheda is close to Brú na Bóinne and has many hotels, while the nearby village of Slane is especially good for lunch. There are some excellent sleeping options close to the sites, and Brú na Bóinne itself has a good café.

**Newgrange Lodge** (☎ 041-988 2478; www.newgrangelodge.com; dm/d €15/50; ☎) A beautiful new place just east of the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre, this place has dorm beds and hotel-standard rooms with TVs. Reception is open 24 hours, and there is a café, outdoor patios, bicycle hire and much more.

**Rosnaree** (☎ 041-982 0975; rosnaaree@eircom.net; Newgrange; s/d €100/160; ☎ mid-Mar-Oct; ☎) At a sharp corner on the narrow road between Donore and Slane is this magnificent Italianate country house overlooking the Boyne and surrounded by a working farm. The three bedrooms are quite luxurious, and you can book dinner (€45) a day in advance. The

### FIONN & THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the best-known stories in the Fenian Cycle tells of the old druid Finnegan, who struggled for seven years to catch a very slippery salmon that, once eaten, would bestow enormous wisdom on the eater, including the gift of foresight. The young Fionn McCumhaill arrived at his riverside camp one day looking for instruction, and no sooner did the young hero arrive than Finnegan managed to land the salmon. As befits the inevitable tragedy of all these stories, Finnegan set the fish to cook and went off for a bit, ordering Fionn to keep an eye on it without eating so much as the smallest part. You'd think that after all these years of labour Finnegan could have put off his errand until after dinner, but it wasn't to be: as Fionn turned the fish on the spit a drop of hot oil landed on his thumb, which he quickly put in his mouth to soothe. Finnegan returned, saw what had happened and knew that it was too late; he bade Fionn eat the rest of the fish, and so it was that Fionn acquired wisdom and foresight.

events related in *Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge* are said to have taken place in this very spot (above).

**Glebe House** (☎ 041-983 6101; www.glebenouse.ie; Dowth; r €120; (P)) This charming 17th-century, wisteria-clad country house has four gorgeous rooms with open, log fires and vibrant purple carpet. It is 7km west of Drogheda, and has views of Newgrange and Dowth. Children under 10 are not allowed.

### Getting There & Away

From Drogheda, **Bus Éireann** (☎ 041-983 5023) runs a service that drops you off at the entrance to the visitor centre (€2, 20 minutes, four to six daily).

**Newgrange Shuttlebus** (☎ 1800 424 252; return ticket €18) runs one or two trips daily to the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre from central Dublin. Book in advance.

### BATTLE OF BOYNE SITE

More than 60,000 soldiers of the armies of King James II and King William III fought on this patch of farmland on the border of counties Meath and Louth in 1690; in the end, William prevailed and James sailed off to France. Today the **battle site** (☎ 041-980 9950; www.battleoftheboyne.ie; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep) is part of the Oldbridge Estate farm. The Heritage Service is slowly developing the area and there are plans for a visitor centre and exhibits. In the meantime, the site is eerily low-key. You can wander the fields and think about the events that saw Protestant interests remain in Ireland – although the roar you hear isn't the ghosts of the soldiers, it's the M1. The site, 3km north of Donore, is signposted off the N51.

### SLANE

☎ 041 / pop 900

Pretty little Slane (Baile Shláine) grew up around the enormous castle whose grounds dominate the town; the massive grey gate to the privately owned castle lies southwest of the town centre, which is made up of pleasant 18th-century stone houses and cottages. At the junction of the main roads are four identical houses facing each other: local lore has it that they were built for four sisters who had taken an intense dislike to one another and kept a beady-eyed watch from their individual residences.

Slane is a convenient base for Newgrange, located 6km east.

### Orientation

Slane is perched on a hillside at the junction of the N2 and N51, some 15km west of Drogheda. To the south, at the bottom of the hill, the Boyne glides by under a narrow bridge. The hairpin turn on the northern side of the bridge is considered to be one of the most dangerous in the country, as there is a steep hill preceding it. Throughout the day, there's a fair amount of traffic here.

### Sights

#### HILL OF SLANE

About 1km north of the village is the Hill of Slane, a fairly plain-looking mound that only stands out for its association with a thick slice of Celto-Christian mythology. According to legend, St Patrick lit a paschal (Easter) fire here in AD 433 to proclaim Christianity throughout the land. Patrick's fire infuriated Laoghaire, the pagan high king of Ireland, who had expressly ordered that no fire be lit within sight of the Hill of Tara. Thankfully –

at least for the future of Irish Christians – he was restrained by his far-sighted druids, who warned that 'the man who had kindled the flame would surpass kings and princes'. Laoghaire went to meet Patrick, and all but one of his attendants – a man called Erc – greeted Patrick with scorn.

Here the story *really* gets far-fetched. During the meeting, Patrick killed one of the king's guards and summoned an earthquake to subdue the rest. After his Herculean efforts, Patrick calmed down a little and plucked a shamrock from the ground, using its three leaves to explain the paradox of the Holy Trinity – the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in one Godhead. Laoghaire wasn't convinced, but he agreed to let Patrick continue his missionary work. Patrick's success that day – apart from keeping his own life, starting an earthquake and giving Ireland one of its enduring national symbols – was good old Erc, who was baptised and later became the first bishop of Slane. To this day, the local parish priest lights a fire here on Holy Saturday.

The Hill of Slane originally had a church associated with St Erc and, later, a round tower and monastery, but only an outline of the foundations remains. Later a motte and bailey were constructed, and are still visible on the western side of the hill. The ruined church, tower and other buildings here once formed part of an early-16th-century Franciscan friary. On a clear day, you can see the Hill of Tara and the Boyne Valley from the top of the tower, which is always open, as well as (it's said) seven Irish counties.

St Erc is believed to have become a hermit, and the ruins of a small Gothic **church** (☎ 15 Aug) mark the spot where he is thought to have spent his last days, around AD 512 to 514. It's on the northern riverbank, behind the Protestant church on the Navan road, and lies within the private Conyngham estate.

### SLANE CASTLE

The private residence of Lord Henry Conyngham, earl of Mountcharles, **Slane Castle** (☎ 988 4400; www.slancastle.ie; adult/child €7/5; ☎ noon-5pm Sun-Thu May-early Aug) is west of the town centre along the Navan road and is best known in Ireland as the setting for major outdoor rock concerts.

Built in 1785 in the Gothic revival style by James Wyatt, the building was later altered by Francis Johnson for George IV's visits to Lady

Conyngham. She was allegedly his mistress, and it's said the road between Dublin and Slane was built especially straight and smooth to speed up the randy king's journeys.

U2 fans may recognise the castle from the cover of their 1984 album *The Unforgettable Fire*, which was recorded here. Seven years later, a *really* unforgettable fire gutted most of castle, whereupon it was discovered that the earl was underinsured. A major fundraising drive – of which the summer concerts were a part – led to a painstaking restoration and the castle finally reopened for tours in 2001.

### LEDWIDGE MUSEUM

Simple yet moving, the **Ledwidge Museum** (☎ 982 4544; www.francisledwidge.com; Janesville; adult/child €2.50/1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm) is located in the birthplace of poet Francis Ledwidge (1891–1917). He died on the battlefield at Ypres, having survived Gallipoli and Serbia. A keen political activist, Ledwidge was thwarted in his efforts to set up a branch of the Gaelic League in the area, but he found an outlet in verse:

A blackbird singing,  
I hear in my troubled mind,  
Bluebells swinging  
I see in a distant wind,  
But sorrow and silence  
are the wood's threnody,  
the silence for you,  
and the sorrow for me.

Lethbridge aside, the cottage is a good example of how farm labourers lived in the 19th century. It is about 1.5km northeast of Slane on the Drogheda road (N51).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Slane Farm Hostel** (☎ 988 4985; www.slanefarmhostel.ie; Harlinstown House, Navan Rd; dm/s/d €18/35/50) These former stables, built by the marquis of Conyngham in the 18th century, have been converted into a fabulous hostel that is part of a working farm surrounding Harlinstown House, where the owners reside. Our readers consistently rave about this place and we concur. It's 2.5km west from Slane and also has self-catering cottages – contact the hostel for rates.

**Conyngham Arms Hotel** (☎ 982 4155; www.conynghamarms.com; s/d from €75/140) This fairly elegant 19th-century hotel maintains that village-inn feel and look. The four-poster bed in each room is a real treat. The hotel's restaurant

serves up a menu of Irish favourites (mains €9 to €13; open noon to 8pm), and the lovely back garden is a fine place for a pint.

**our pick** **Millhouse Boutique Hotel** (☎ 982 0878; www.themillhouse.ie; r €160-220; (P) (Q)) Set in the 18th-century Georgian manor house of the bossman for the nearby mill, this newly opened hotel is a stunner. The 10 rooms are luxurious, and are decorated in stylish combinations of taupes, creams and mauves. Many have huge tubs and some have sweeping views of the River Boyne. Guests can enjoy artful meals here after time in the sauna. The hotel is 500m downhill from town, right before the N2 bridge.

**Boyle's Licensed Tea Rooms** (☎ 982 4195; Main St; snacks from €3; ☎ 10am-5pm) Guaranteed to make any granny swoon, this tearoom and café lies behind a beautiful shop front decorated with gold lettering. The menu – written in 12 languages – is strictly of the tea-and-scones type, but people come here for the ambience, which is straight out of the 1940s.

**George's** (☎ 982 4493; Chapel St; meals €4-8; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat) This deli-patisserie is just east of the crossroads. Creative organic soups, salads and sandwiches are on offer, as are luscious scones, tortes and cakes. Get your picnic here.

### Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann has four to six buses daily to Drogheda (€2.50, 35 minutes), Dublin (€8.20, one hour) and Navan (€2, 20 minutes).

### SLANE TO NAVAN

The 14km journey southwest on the N51 from Slane to Navan is dotted with a few manor houses, ruined castles, round towers and churches don't get too excited, however, as they're not nearly as impressive as sites elsewhere in Meath.

**Dunmoe Castle** lies down a poorly signposted cul-de-sac to the south, 4km before reaching Navan. This D'Arcy family castle is a 16th-century ruin with good views of the countryside and the impressive red-brick **Ardmulchan House** (closed to the public), on the opposite side of the River Boyne. Cromwell is supposed to have fired at the castle from the riverbank in 1649, and local legend holds that a tunnel used to run from the castle vaults under the river.

You can't miss the fine 30m-high round tower and 13th-century church of **Donaghmore**, on the right, 2km nearer to Navan. The site has a profusion of modern gravestones, but

the 10th-century tower with a Crucifixion scene above the door is interesting, and there are carved faces near the windows and the remains of the church wall.

### NAVAN

☎ 046 / pop 3400

You won't want to waste too much time in Navan (An Uaimh), Meath's main town and the crossroads of the busy Dublin road (N3) and the Drogheda–Westmeath road (N51). You might find yourself here changing buses.

If you need local information, the **tourist office** (☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) is in the impressive new **Solstice Arts Centre** (☎ 909 2300; cnr Railway St & Circular Rd), which has a gallery and live acts.

Under 2km from town, **Athlumney Manor** (☎ 907 1388; www.athlumneymanor.com; Athlumney, Duleek Rd; s/d from €50/70; (P) (Q)) is a large, modern house with six well-appointed, comfortable rooms. In the centre, **Newgrange Hotel** (☎ 353 4690; www.newgrangehotel.ie; Bridge St; r from €90; (P) (Q)) is a posh place with 62 rooms and a good old-style pub.

**Ryan's Pub** (☎ 902 1154; 22 Trimgate St; bar food from €4; ☎ noon-8pm) is Navan's best trad pub. The food is good, especially the smoked salmon. Ask if they have a Felix special.

Bus Éireann has hourly service here on route the from Dublin (€9, 50 minutes) to Cavan via Kells (€3.30, 15 minutes).

### AROUND NAVAN

The impressive and relatively intact **Athlumney Castle** lies about 2km southeast of town. It was built by the Dowdall family in the 16th century, with additions made a hundred years later. After King James' defeat at the Battle of the Boyne, Sir Lancelot Dowdall set fire to the castle to ensure that James' conqueror, William of Orange, would never shelter or confiscate his home. He watched the blaze from the opposite bank of the river before leaving for France and then Italy. As you enter the estate, take a right toward the Loreto Convent, where you can pick up the keys to the castle. In the convent yard is another **motte**, which at one time it had a wooden tower on it.

There are some pleasant **walks** around Navan, particularly the one following the towpath that runs along the old River Boyne canal towards Slane and Drogheda. On the southern bank, you can go as far as Stackallen and the Boyne bridge (about 7km), passing Ardmul-

chan House and, on the opposite bank, the ruins of Dunmoe Castle (opposite).

Close to the Kells road (N3), 5km north-west of Navan, is the large ruin of a castle that once belonged to the Talbot family. **Liscartan Castle** is made up of two 15th-century square towers joined by a hall-like room.

### TARA

It's Ireland's most sacred stretch of turf, a place at the heart of Irish history, legend and folklore. It was the home of the mystical druids, the priest-rulers of ancient Ireland, who practised their particular form of Celtic voodoo under the watchful gaze of the all-powerful goddess Maeve (Medbh). Later it was the ceremonial capital of the high kings – 142 of them in all – who ruled until the arrival of Christianity in the 6th century. It is also one of the most important ancient sites in Europe, with a Stone Age passage tomb and prehistoric burial mounds that date back up to 5000 years.

The **Hill of Tara** (Teamhair) may look like a bumpy pitch 'n' putt course, but its historic and folkloristic significance is immense: it is Ireland's own Camelot. And like Camelot it's had a lot of drama, most recently when a proposed route for the new M3 motorway would have gone right through the site. Years of arguing resulted in the government mostly ignoring the concerns of preservationists and deciding to ram the road right through the valley. Many laughed derisively when on the very first day of digging in 2007, an ancient site that could rival Stonehenge was uncovered. Work on the M3 was halted, although the government still seems set to put the needs of sprawl over the needs of heritage.

From the site, there are expansive views of the rolling green countryside and its web of hedgerows.

### History

The Celts believed that Tara was the sacred dwelling of the gods and the gateway to the otherworld. The passage grave was thought to be the final resting place of the Tuatha de Danann, the mythical fairyfolk – who were real enough, but instead of pixies and brownies, they were earlier Stone Age arrivals on the island.

As the Celtic political landscape began to evolve, the druids' power was usurped by warlike chieftains who took kingly titles; there was

no sense of a united Ireland, so at any given time there were countless *ri tuaithe* (petty kings) controlling many small areas. The king who ruled Tara, though, was generally considered the big kahuna, the high king, even though his direct rule didn't extend too far beyond the provincial border. The most lauded of all the high kings was Cormac MacArt, who ruled during the 3rd century.

The most important event in Tara's calendar was the three-day harvest *feis* (festival) that took place at Samhain, a precursor to modern Halloween. During the festival, the high king pulled out all the stops: grievances would be heard, laws passed, and disputes settled amid an orgy of eating, drinking and all-round partying.

When the early Christians hit town in the 5th century, they targeted Tara straight away. Although the legend has it that Patrick lit the paschal fire on the Hill of Slane (p546), some people believe that Patrick's incendiary act took place on Tara's sacred hump. The arrival of Christianity marked the beginning of the end for Celtic pagan civilisation, and the high kings began to desert Tara, even though the kings of Leinster continued to be based here until the 11th century.

In August 1843, Tara saw one of the greatest crowds ever to gather in Ireland. Daniel O'Connell, the 'Liberator' and the leader of the opposition to union with Great Britain, held one of his monster rallies at Tara, and up to 750,000 people came to hear him speak.

### Information

A former Protestant church (with a window by the well-known artist Evie Hone) is home to the useful **Tara Visitor Centre** (☎ 046-902 5903; www.heritageireland.ie; adult/child €2.10/1.10; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-May–mid-Sep, last admission 5.15pm), where a 20-minute audiovisual presentation about the site, *Tara: Meeting Place of Heroes*, is shown. Tara itself is always open and there's no charge; people walk their dogs here. There are good explanatory panels by the entrance, and a shop and café are nearby.

### Sights

#### RÁTH OF THE SYNODS

The names applied to Tara's various humps and mounds were adopted from ancient texts, and mythology and religion intertwine with the historical facts. The Protestant church grounds and graveyard spill onto the remains

of the **Ráth of the Synods**, a triple-ringed fort where some of St Patrick's early synods (meetings) supposedly took place. Excavations of the enclosure suggest that it was used between AD 200 and 400 for burials, rituals and living quarters. Originally the ring fort would have contained wooden houses surrounded by timber palisades.

During a digging session in the graveyard in 1810, a boy found a pair of gold torques (crescents of beaten gold hung around the neck), which are now in the National Museum in Dublin. Later excavations discovered Roman glass, shards of pottery and seals, showing links with the Roman Empire even though the Romans never extended their power into Ireland.

The poor state of the enclosure is due in part to a group of British 'Israelites' who in the 1890s dug the place up looking for the Ark of the Covenant, much to the consternation of the local people. The Israelites' leader claimed to see a mysterious pillar on the enclosure, but unfortunately it was invisible to everyone else. After they failed to uncover anything, the invisible pillar moved to the other side of the road but, before the adventurers had time to start work there, the locals chased them away.

#### ROYAL ENCLOSURE

To the south of the church, the **Royal Enclosure** (Ráth na Ríogh) is a large, oval Iron Age hill fort, 315m in diameter and surrounded by a bank and ditch cut through solid rock under the soil. Inside the Royal Enclosure are smaller sites.

#### Mound of the Hostages

This bump (Dumha na nGiall) in the northern corner of the enclosure is the most ancient known part of Tara and the most visible of its remains. Supposedly a prison cell for hostages of the 3rd-century king Cormac MacArt, it is in fact a small Stone Age passage grave dating from around 1800 BC that was later used by Bronze Age people. The passage contains some carved stonework, but it's closed to the public.

The mound produced a treasure trove of artefacts, including some ancient Mediterranean beads of amber and faience (glazed pottery). More than 35 Bronze Age burials were found here, as well as a mass of cremated remains from the Stone Age.

#### Cormac's House & the Royal Seat

Two other earthworks found inside the enclosure are Cormac's House (Teach Cormaic) and the Royal Seat (Forradh). Although they look similar, the Royal Seat is a ringfort with a house site in the centre, while Cormac's House is a barrow (burial mound) in the side of the circular bank. Cormac's House commands the best views of the surrounding lowlands of the Boyne and Blackwater Valleys.

Atop Cormac's House is the phallic **Stone of Destiny** (Lia Fáil), originally located near the Mound of the Hostages, which represents the joining of the gods of the earth and the heavens. It's said to be the inauguration stone of the high kings, although alternative sources suggest that the actual coronation stone was the Stone of Scone, which was removed to Edinburgh, Scotland, and used to crown British kings. The would-be king stood on top of the Stone of Destiny and, if the stone let out three roars, he was crowned. The mass grave of 37 men who died in a skirmish on Tara during the 1798 Rising is next to the stone.

#### ENCLOSURE OF KING LAOGHAIRE

South of the Royal Enclosure is the **Enclosure of King Laoghaire** (Ráth Laoghaire), a large but worn ringfort where the king, a contemporary of St Patrick, is supposedly buried dressed in his armour and standing upright.

#### BANQUET HALL

North of the churchyard is Tara's most unusual feature, the **Banquet Hall** (Teach Míodh-chuarta, meaning 'House of Meadcircling'). This rectangular earthwork measures 230m by 27m along a north-south axis. Tradition holds that it was built to cater for thousands of guests during feasts. Much of this information comes from the 12th-century *Book of Leinster* and the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, which even includes drawings of the hall.

Opinions vary as to the site's real purpose. Its orientation suggests that it was a sunken entrance to Tara, leading directly to the Royal Enclosure. More recent research has uncovered graves within the compound, and it's possible that the banks are in fact the burial sites of some of the kings of Tara.

#### GRÁINNE'S FORT

Gráinne was the daughter of King Cormac who was betrothed to Fionn McCumhaill (Finn McCool) but eloped with Diarmuid

ÓDuibhne, one of the king's warriors, on her wedding night, becoming the subject of the epic *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne*. **Gráinne's Fort** (Ráth Gráinne) and the northern and southern **Sloping Trenches** (Claoin Fhearta) off to the northwest are burial mounds.

#### Tours

The **Mary Gibbons Tours** (☎ 01-283 9973; www.newgrangetours.com; tour €35) to Brú na Bóinne take in the whole of the Boyne Valley, including the Hill of Tara.

**Bus Éireann** tours to Newgrange and the Boyne Valley (see p545) include a visit to Tara on certain days.

#### Drinking

**O'Connell's** (☎ 046-902 5122; Skryne) An unspoilt and atmospheric country pub with all the essentials – a nice open fire, friendly service and plenty of local lore on the walls. It is in Skryne, not far from Tara.

#### Getting There & Away

Tara is 10km southeast of Navan, just off the Dublin-Cavan road (N3). **Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111) services linking Dublin and Navan pass within 1km of the site (€8.40, 40 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday and four times on Sunday). Ask the driver to drop you off at the Tara Cross and then follow the signs.

#### AROUND TARA

See how the other 1% lives at **Dunsany Castle** (☎ 046-902 5198; www.dunsany.net; Dunsany; adult/child €15/free; ☺ summer). It's the residence of the lords of Dunsany, the former owners of the lands around Trim Castle. The Dunsanys are related to the Plunkett family, the most famous of whom was St Oliver, whose head is kept in a church in Drogheda (p559). As it's very much a lived-in property, opening hours vary in accordance with the family's schedule; major refurbishment has limited hours even further. Call for details.

There's an impressive private art collection and many other treasures related to important figures in Irish history, such as Oliver Plunkett and Patrick Sarsfield, leader of the Irish Jacobite forces at the siege of Limerick in 1691. A number of upstairs bedrooms have been restored and are now included in an expanded tour (though there's an extra charge to visit these). Maintenance and restoration are ongoing (as it would be in a castle built in

1180!) and different rooms are open to visitors at different times.

Housed in the old kitchen and in part of the old domestic quarters is a **boutique** (☎ 902 6202; ☺ 10am-5pm) that proudly sells the Dunsany Home Collection – it's your chance to buy an item that will make you feel like the other 1%. Locally made table linen and accessories are featured, as well as various articles for the home designed by Lord Dunsany himself, known to plebeians as Edward C Plunkett.

About 1.5km northeast of Dunsany is the ruined **Killeen Castle**, the seat of another line of the Plunkett family. The 1801 mansion was constructed around a castle built by Hugh de Lacy, lord of Meath, originally dating from 1180. It comprises a neo-Gothic structure between two 12th-century towers. It is closed to the public.

The castles are about 5km south of Tara on the Dunshaughlin-Kilmessan road.

#### TRIM

☎ 046 / pop 1600

The snoozy but most worthy town of Trim (Baile Átha Troim, meaning 'Town at the Ford of the Elder Trees') was at one time a major player in local affairs, and a cursory exploration of the town will reveal some inviting relics of its medieval past, none more so than the very obvious and very big castle that was Ireland's largest Anglo-Norman fortification. The medieval town was a busy jumble of streets, and once had five gates and as many as seven monasteries in the immediate area.

It's hard to imagine nowadays, but a measure of Trim's importance was that Elizabeth I genuinely considered building Trinity College here. One student who did go to school here – at least for a short time – was Arthur Wellesley, the duke of Wellington, who studied in Talbot Castle and St Mary's Abbey. Local legend has it that the duke was born in a stable round these parts, which would explain the duke's famous exclamation that simply being born in a stable doesn't make one a horse. Sadly for the legend, if he did say it – which is hardly definite – he didn't mean it literally: for stable and horse read Ireland and Irish, for he was in fact born in Dublin. The local burghers dedicated a **Wellington column** at the junction of Patrick and Emmet Sts, which was less a tribute to his views on his own birth and more to the fact that his impressive career did actually benefit Ireland. After defeating



Just in case the locals didn't get the symbolism of the gesture, the soldiers destroyed the abbey as well. An artists' rendition of the statue is by the roadside in front of the ruins.

Part of the abbey was converted in 1415 into a fine manor house by Sir John Talbot, then viceroy of Ireland; it came to be known as **Talbot Castle**. The Talbot coat of arms can be seen on the northern wall. Talbot went to war in France, where in 1429 he was defeated at Orleans by none other than Joan of Arc. He was taken prisoner, released and went on fighting the French until 1453. He was known as 'the scourge of France' or 'the whip of the French', and Shakespeare wrote of this notorious man in Henry VI: 'Is this the Talbot so much feared abroad/That with his name the mothers still their babes?'

Talbot Castle was owned in the early 18th century by Esther 'Stella' Johnson, the mistress of Jonathan Swift. She bought the manor house for £65 sterling and lived there for 18 months before selling it to Swift for a tidy £200 sterling; he lived there for a year. Swift was rector of Laracor, 3km southeast of Trim, from around 1700 until 1745, when he died. From 1713 he was also – and more significantly – dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

Just northwest of the abbey building is the 40m **Yellow Steeple**, once the bell tower of the abbey, dating from 1368 but damaged by Cromwell's soldiers in 1649. It takes its name from the colour of the stonework at dusk.

Part of the 14th-century town wall stands in the field to the east of the abbey, including the **Sheep Gate**, the lone survivor of the town's original five gates. It used to be closed daily between 9pm and 4am, and a toll was charged for sheep entering to be sold at market.

## NEWTOWN

About 1.5km east of town on Lackanash Rd, Newtown Cemetery contains an interesting group of ruins. What had been the **parish church of Newtown Clonbun** contains the late-16th-century tomb of Sir Luke Dillon, chief baron of the Exchequer during the reign of Elizabeth I, and his wife Lady Jane Bathe. The effigies are known locally as the Jealous Man and Woman, perhaps because of the sword lying between them.

Rainwater that collects between the two figures is claimed to cure warts. Place a pin in the puddle and then jab your wart. When the pin becomes covered in rust your warts will

vanish. Some say you should leave a pin on the statue as payment for the cure.

The other ruins here are Newtown's **Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul**, and the 18th-century **Newtown Abbey** (Abbey of the Canons Regular of St Victor of Paris). The cathedral was founded in 1206 and burned down two centuries later. Parts of the cathedral wall were flattened by a storm in 1839, which also damaged sections of the Trim Castle wall. The abbey wall throws a superb echo back to **Echo Gate** across the river.

Southeast of these ruins, and just over the river, is the **Crutched Friary**. There are ruins of a keep, and traces of a watchtower and other buildings from a hospital set up after the Crusades by the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, who wore a red crutch (cross), on their cassocks. **St Peter's Bridge**, beside the friary, is said to be the second-oldest bridge in Ireland.

## Sleeping

**Bridge House Tourist Hostel** (☎ 943 1848; silvertrans@eircom.net; Bridge St; dm/d from €20/50; (P) (Q)) Each night global travellers gather here to say something along the lines of 'I hadn't known Trim would be so cool'. Dorm beds are tight, the private rooms not bad at all.

**White Lodge** (☎ 943 6549; www.whitelodgetrim.com; New Rd; s/d €44/64; (P) (Q)) This American-style house has lines that may cause some to whistle the *Brady Bunch* theme, albeit with a brogue. The six light-filled rooms are quite spacious. It's 500m east of the centre at the northern end of New Rd.

**Woodtown House** (☎ 943 5022; woodtown@iol.ie; Athboy; r €45-76; (P)) It's well worth the 12km trip on the R154 north out of Trim to stay at this relaxing country house. The restored 18th-century interiors compete with the beautiful, tree-filled grounds for your attention. Of the four rooms, two are en suite.

**Cranmór House** (☎ 943 1635; www.cranmormor.com; Dunderry Rd; s/d from €50/68; (P)) Five acres of rolling farmland and paddocks surround this vine-covered period residence about 2km along the road to Dunderry. The owner will arrange guided fishing trips.

**Tigh Cathain** (☎ 943 1996; www.tighcathaintrim.com; Longwood Rd; s/d €50/76; (P)) A Tudor-style country house about 1km southwest of the town centre, Tigh Cathain has three pastel bedrooms decorated in pink, yellow and blue. The house is surrounded by a handsome 1-acre garden.

**Brogan's Guesthouse** (☎ 943 1237; www.brogans.ie; High St; s/d from €55/75; (P) (Q)) Brogan's has been taking care of its guests since 1915, both in the handsome pub and in the attractive, comfortable rooms. Of the 14 rooms, eight are in the converted stables out the back and the rest are in the main building. Note: those easily made bilious should avoid the hotel's brochure.

**Highfield House** (☎ 943 6386; www.highfieldguesthouse.com; Maudlins Rd; s/d from €55/80; (P)) This elevated, elegant 18th-century country house has lavish common spaces that have been restored to their former grandeur. There are seven comfortable rooms – get one away from road noise.

**Castle Arch Hotel** (☎ 943 1516; www.castlearchhotel.com; Summerhill Rd; s/d from €60/100; (P) (Q)) The 22 rooms at this modern business-class hotel have a posh, heavy-drapery design accented with vintage touches. The namesake arch nicely frames the entrance. Breakfasts are good.

**Trim Castle Hotel** (☎ 948 3000; www.trimcastlehotel.com; Castle St; s/d from €85/120; (P) (Q)) This stylish new boutique hotel is part of a development that is spiffing up an area close to the castle. The 68 rooms here have wi-fi, and a compact but comfortable modern design. There are interesting features such as terraces and balconies with views of the castle.

## Eating & Drinking

Most pubs do decent food, and the stirrings of tourism are broadening the choice of restaurants.

**Egos Lunch Club** (☎ 948 6731; Emmet St; meals €5-10; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Boast about your accomplishments at this bright and open modern café. It has a full coffee bar and a long menu of hot specials, sandwiches and salads.

**Sally Rodgers** (☎ 943 8926; Bridge St; meals €6-15; ☎ kitchen 5-9pm) The generic bar here is saved by the random statuary and tables overlooking the River Boyne. Upstairs there's a restaurant where the Malaysian chefs prepare Asian food that's more interesting than usual, as well as some excellent fish and chips.

**Watson's Elementary Café** (Market St; meals €7-10; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) You don't have to be a Sherlock to find this quality café with solid renditions of standards ranging from omelettes to shepherd's pie.

**Franzini O'Brien's** (☎ 943 1002; French Lane; mains €12-20; ☎ 6.30-10pm Tue-Sat, 1-9pm Sun) The Irish menu at this bistro-cum-bar has global in-

fluences. It's always gourmet night here, and you can enjoy some fine seafood and other interesting fare made from locally sourced produce; on the other hand you may just want to enjoy a pint and some nachos at the bar.

**Marcy Regan's** (☎ 943 6103; Lackanash Rd, Newtown, Trim; ☎ Thu-Tue) This small pub beside St Peter's Bridge claims to be Ireland's second-oldest pub. Many Fridays see trad music sessions.

## Getting There & Away

The influx of commuters means that Bus Éireann runs a bus at least once an hour between Dublin and Trim (one way €8, 70 minutes). Buses stop in front of the newsagent at the northern end of Haggard St.

## AROUND TRIM

There are a couple of evocative Anglo-Norman remains in the area around Trim. Some 7.5km northeast of Trim on the way to Navan is **Bective Abbey**, founded in 1147 and the first Cistercian offspring of magnificent Mellifont Abbey in Louth. The remains seen today are 13th- and 15th-century additions, and consist of the chapter house, church, ambulatory and cloister. In 1543, after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, it was used as a fortified house and the tower was built.

In 1186, Hugh de Lacy, lord of Meath, began demolishing the abbey at Durrow in County Offaly in order to build a castle. A workman, known both as O'Miadaigh and O'Kearney, was so offended by this desecration that he lopped off de Lacy's head and fled. Although de Lacy's body was interred in Bective Abbey, his head went to St Thomas' Abbey in Dublin. A dispute broke out over who should possess all the bodily remains, and it required the intervention of the pope to, well, pontificate on the matter, with a ruling in favour of St Thomas' Abbey.

Some 12km northwest of Trim, on the road to Athboy, is **Rathcairn**, the smallest Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) district in Ireland. Rathcairn's population is descended from a group of Connemara Irish speakers, who were settled on an estate here as part of a social experiment in the 1930s.

## KELLS

☎ 046 / pop 2400

Kells is best known for the magnificent illuminated manuscript that bears its name, and which so many visitors queue to see on their



visits to Trinity College in Dublin. Generally, they don't make the trip to where it was stashed from the end of the 9th century until 1541, when it was removed by the Church. Apart from the remnants of the monastic site that housed the *Book of Kells* – some interesting high crosses and a 1000-year-old round tower – there's not a lot to see or do here.

### Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 924 9336; Kells Heritage Centre, Headfort Pl; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) is in the heritage centre, located behind the town hall. It can help with info on some Meath's remote sights, such as Loughcrew Cairns.

### Sights

#### KELLS HERITAGE CENTRE

Spread across two detail-packed floors, the town's **heritage centre** (☎ 924 9336; Headfort Pl; adult/child €4/3; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) has a rather beautiful copy of the area's most famous object, the *Book of Kells*, which was brought here from the monastery on Iona in Scotland in 807 after a Viking raid. Surrounding the book are various 6th- to 12th-century relics and artefacts, as well as a highly detailed scale model of the town in the 6th century.

#### MARKET CROSS

Until 1996, the **Market Cross** had stood for centuries in Cross St, at the heart of the town centre. Besides inviting the pious admiration of the faithful, the cross was used as a gallows in the aftermath of the 1798 revolt; the British garrison hanged rebels from the crosspiece, one on each arm so the cross wouldn't fall over. But what 1000 years of foul weather and the sacrilegious British couldn't do, a careless bus driver did with one bad turn-and-reverse – in 1996, the cross was toppled. It was eventually repaired and re-erected outside the Kells Heritage Centre.

On the eastern side of the Market Cross are depictions of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the brothers Cain and Abel, the Fall of Adam and Eve, guards at the tomb of Jesus and a wonderfully executed procession of horsemen. On the western face, the Crucifixion is the only discernible image. On the northern side is a panel of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

#### ROUND TOWER & HIGH CROSSES

The Protestant church of **St Columba** (admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, services only Sun), west of the town centre, has a 30m-high 10th-century **round tower** on the southern side. It's without its conical roof, but it's known to date back at least as far as 1076, when Muirchearach Maelsechnaill, the high king of Tara, was murdered in its confined apartments.

Inside the churchyard are four 9th century high crosses in various states of repair. The **West Cross**, at the far end of the compound from the entrance, is the stump of a decorated shaft, which has scenes of the baptism of Jesus, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the Judgement of Solomon on the eastern face, and Noah's ark on the western face. All that is left of the **North Cross** is the bowl-shaped base stone.

Near the tower is the best preserved of the crosses, the **Cross of Patrick and Columba**, with its semi-legible inscription *Patrici et Columbae Crux* on the eastern face of the base. Above it are scenes of Daniel in the lions' den, the fiery furnace, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and a hunting scene. On the opposite side of the cross are depictions of the Last Judgement, the Crucifixion, and riders with a chariot, as well as a dog on the base.

The other surviving cross is the unfinished **East Cross**, with a carving of the Crucifixion and a group of four figures on the right arm.

#### ST COLMCILLE'S HOUSE

From the churchyard exit on Church St, **St Colmcille's House** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) is left up the hill, among the row of houses on the right side of Church Lane. It is usually open in summer; otherwise, pick up the keys from **Mrs Carpenter** (☎ 924 1778; 1 Lower Church View), at the brown-coloured house as you ascend the hill.

This squat, solid structure is a survivor from the old monastic settlement. Its name is a misnomer, as it was built in the 10th century and St Colmcille was alive in the 6th century. Experts have suggested that it was used as a scriptorium, a place where monks illuminated books.

#### Sleeping & Eating

**Teltown House B&B** (☎ 902 3239, 087-665 9022; Teltown; s/d €45/90; ☎) History abounds at this three-room B&B set in a restored ivy-covered stone farmhouse: Ireland's own Olympic games were held here 2000 years ago, and some 2000

years before *that*, somebody carved classic circular art into a rock next to the B&B. Read about it at [www.mythicalireland.com/ancient-sites/news/teltown-rock-art.htm](http://www.mythicalireland.com/ancient-sites/news/teltown-rock-art.htm). The B&B is 6km south of Kells, east of the N3 at the Silver Tankard pub.

**Headfort Arms Hotel** (☎ 924 0063; [www.headfortarms.ie](http://www.headfortarms.ie); John St; s/d from €70/120; ☎) Family run and right in the town centre, the Headfort Arms has 45 modern rooms with wi-fi; 32 are in a new wing, while the rest are in a charming old building. It hosts the Vanilla Pod restaurant (below).

**In the Dock** (☎ 924 7840; Kells Heritage Centre, Headfort Pl; meals €5-8; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-5.30pm Sun May-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Fresh banana smoothies are just one of the treats at this popular café in the heritage centre.

**Vanilla Pod** (☎ 924 0084; Headfort Arms Hotel, John St; mains €11-17; ☎ 5.30-9.30pm, noon-3pm Sun) Located in the Headfort Arms Hotel but independently run, this bistro wins plaudits for its interesting international variations on regional foods.

#### Getting There & Away

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 01-836 6111) has services from Kells to Dublin (€9.80, one hour, hourly) via Navan. There are also buses to Cavan (€9, 45 minutes, hourly).

#### AROUND KELLS Hill of Lloyd Tower

It's easy to see why this 30m-high **tower** (☎ 924 0064; adult/child €3/2; ☎) by appointment) on the Hill of Lloyd became known as the 'inland light-house'. Built in 1791 by the earl of Bective, in memory of his father, it has been renovated, and if it's open you can climb to the top or picnic in the surrounding park. The tower is 3km northwest of Kells, off the Crossakeel road.

#### Crosses of Castlekeeran

Lost in the ruins of an ancient hermitage are the **Crosses of Castlekeeran**. They're not overly impressive in themselves – three plainly carved, early-9th-century crosses (one in the river) – but there's something invitingly peaceful about the quiet, overgrown cemetery that surrounds them. The **ruined church** in the centre has some early grave slabs and an Ogham stone (stone inscribed with Ireland's earliest form of writing).

To get to the crosses, head through a farmyard about 2km further down the Crossakeel road from the Hill of Lloyd tower.

#### LOUGHCREW CAIRNS

With all the hoopla over Brú na Bóinne, this amazing place is often overlooked. That's just as well because it means you can enjoy Loughcrew Cairns in peace. There are 30-odd Stone Age passage graves strewn about three summits of the Loughcrew Hills, but they're hard to get to and relatively few people ever bother. But this is about as moody and evocative place as you'll want to find, and it's well worth the effort.

The hills, also known as Slieve (Sliabh) na Caillighe and the Mountains of the Witch, are northwest of Kells, along the R154, near Oldcastle. From here there are some splendid views of the surrounding countryside. The main passage graves are grouped on three summits – Carnbane East (194m), Carnbane West (206m) and Patrickstown (279m) – although the last has been so ruined by 19th-century builders that there's little to see.

Like Brú na Bóinne, the graves were all built around 3000 BC, but, unlike their better-known and better-excavated peers, were used at least until 750 BC. As at Newgrange, larger stones in some of the graves are decorated with spiral patterns. Some of the graves look like large piles of stones, while others are less obvious, their cairn having been removed. Archaeologists have unearthed bone fragments and ashes, stone balls and beads.

#### Carnbane East

Carnbane East has a cluster of sites; **Cairn T** (☎ 049-854 2009; [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie); admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-Jun-Aug; ☎) is the biggest at about 35m in diameter and has numerous carved stones. One of its outlying kerbstones is called the Hag's Chair, and is covered in gouged holes, circles and other markings. You need the gate key to enter the passage-way and a torch to see anything in detail. It takes about half an hour to climb Carnbane East from the car park. From the summit on a reasonably clear day, you should be able to see the Hill of Tara to the southeast, while the view north is into Cavan, with Lough Ramor to the northeast, and Lough Sheelin and Oldcastle to the northwest.

In summer, access to Cairn T is controlled by the Heritage Service, which provides guides. But locals are passionate about the place and at any time of the year you can arrange for guides who will not only show

you Cairn T but take you to some of the other cairns as well. Enquire at the **Loughcrew Historic Garden** (☎ 049-854 1060; ☞ noon-5pm mid-Mar-Sep, 1-4pm Sun Oct-mid-Mar) or at the Kells tourist office.

### Carnbane West

From the car park, it takes about an hour to reach the summit of Carnbane West, where Cairn D and L, both some 60m in diameter, are located. Cairn D has been disturbed in an unsuccessful search for a central chamber. Cairn L, northeast of Cairn D, is also in poor condition, though you can enter the passage and chamber, where there are numerous carved stones and a curved basin stone in which human ashes were placed.

Cairn L is administered by the Heritage Service, which only gives out the key to those with an authentic research interest.

## COUNTY LOUTH

The Wee County is a sobriquet borne with pride round these hardscrabble parts. And if you don't like it, well, take this! The coast has an industrial legacy but Drogheda is emerging from its sweaty past to become an appealing regional town and a good base for visiting nearby Brú na Bóinne, just over the border in County Meath. Other attractions include the prehistoric and monastic sites north and east of the Boyne Valley, such as Mellifont Abbey and Monasterboice. In the north, there's the lonely and evocative Cooley Peninsula, north of Dundalk.

### History

As part of the ancient kingdom of Oriel, Louth is the setting for perhaps the most epic of all Irish mythological tales, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley), which includes a starring role for Ireland's greatest mythological hero, Cúchulainn. *The Táin*, by Thomas Kinsella, is a modern version of this compelling and bloody tale.

Louth is home to a number of monastic ruins dating from the 5th and 6th centuries; the monastery at Monasterboice and the later Cistercian abbey at Mellifont, both near Drogheda, are Louth's most interesting archaeological sites.

The arrival of the Normans in the 12th century ushered in a period of great change

and upheaval; attracted by the fertile plains of the Boyne, the Anglo-Norman gentry set about subduing the local population and building mighty houses and castles. The Norman invaders were responsible for the development of Dundalk and the two towns on opposite banks of the Boyne that united in 1412 to become what is now Drogheda.

### DROGHEDA

☎ 041 / pop 30,200

Surprising Drogheda. There, we wrote them a new slogan. Long dismissed by some, Drogheda is easily the most interesting town north of Dublin. This once fortified town straddling the River Boyne has a clutch of fine old buildings, a handsome cathedral and a riveting museum that offers at least a partial insight into the city's eventful past, while an ongoing spate of development and a rising population of Dublin commuters have slowly begun to breathe new life into the place.

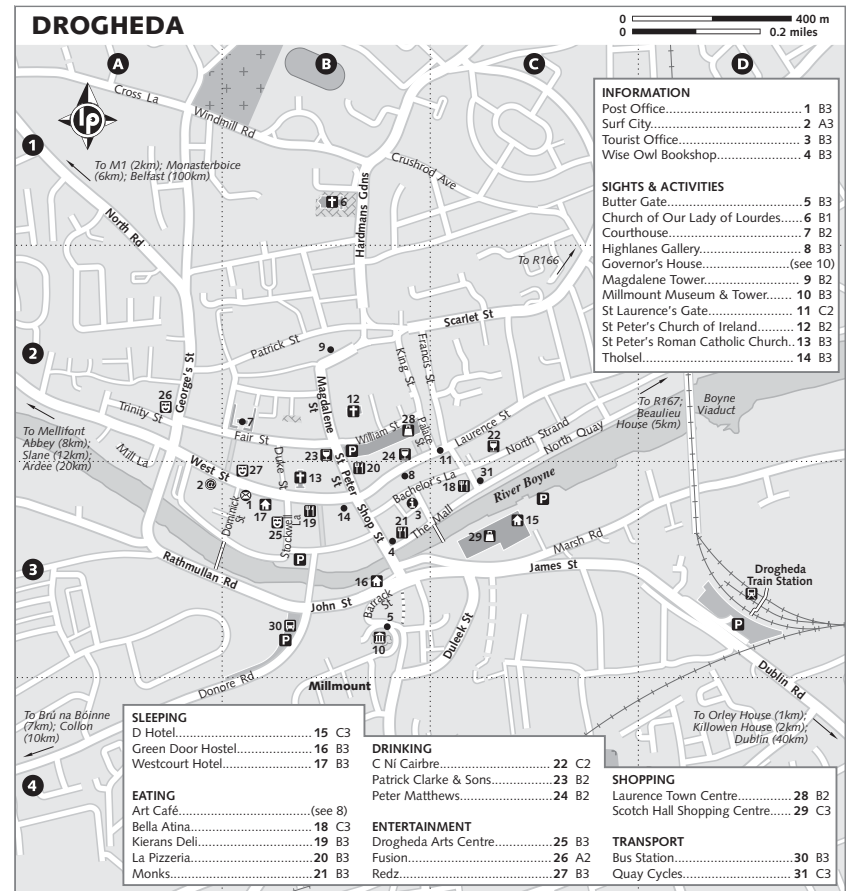
With its wonderful old pubs, fine restaurants, narrow streets, good transport and numerous sleeping options, Drogheda is an excellent base for exploring the world-class attractions that surround it in the Boyne Valley. Brú na Bóinne is only 7km west.

### History

This bend in the Boyne has been desirable right back to 910, when the Danes built a fortified settlement here. In the 12th century, the Normans added a bridge and expanded the two settlements on either side of the river. They also built a large defensive motte-and-bailey castle on the southern side at Millmount. By the 15th century, Drogheda was one of Ireland's four major walled towns and a major player in Irish affairs.

In 1649, Drogheda was the scene of Cromwell's most notorious Irish slaughter (see p560) and things went from bad to worse in 1690 when the town backed the wrong horse at the Battle of the Boyne and surrendered the day after the defeat of James II.

Despite a boom in the 19th century, when Drogheda became a textile and brewing centre, the town has never really hit its stride and today it struggles to break the shackles of a century-long torpor, although the current economy is starting to make some big differences.



### Orientation

Drogheda sits astride the River Boyne, with the principal shopping area on the northern bank along West and Laurence Sts. South of the river is the site of some trendy new developments, and is where you'll find the mysterious Millmount mound. The M1 motorway to Belfast skirts round the town to the west, and there's traffic congestion in the city centre. There's parking in small lots scattered everywhere.

### Information

**Post office** (West St) Next to the Westcourt Hotel.

**Surf City** (☎ 983 6826; 45 West St; per 30min €3;

☞ 10am-6pm) Internet access.

**Tourist office** (☎ 983 7070; www.drogheda.ie; Mayoralty St; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4.30pm Sat) On

the northern side of the river, just off the docklands. There is also a good regional office at Brú na Bóinne (p543).

**Wise Owl Bookshop** (☎ 984 2847; The Mall; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) A large store with good local books and maps.

### Sights

#### ST PETER'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The shrivelled little head of the martyr St Oliver Plunkett (1629-81) is the main draw of the 19th-century **Catholic church** (West St), which is actually two churches in one: the first, designed by Francis Johnston in classical style and built in 1791; and the newer addition, built in the Gothic style visible today. Plunkett's head – from which the rest of him was separated following his hanging in 1681 – is in a glittering brass-and-glass

case in the north transept. The stained-glass windows glow at night.

### ST LAURENCE'S GATE

Astride the eastwards extension of the town's main street is St Laurence's Gate, the finest surviving portion of the city walls.

The 13th-century gate was named after St Laurence's Priory, which once stood outside the gate; no traces of it now remain. The gate consists of two lofty towers, a connecting curtain wall and the entrance to the portcullis. This imposing pile of stone is not in fact a gate but instead a barbican, a fortified structure used to defend the gate, which was further behind it. When the walls were completed in the 13th century, they ran for 3km around the town, enclosing 52 hectares.

### HIGHLANES GALLERY

A new and impressive gallery (☎ 980 3311; www.highlanes.ie; St Laurence St; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm, 10am-8pm Thu, noon-6pm Sun), the Highlanes is in a massively rebuilt 19th-century monastery, which is on the site of a 15th-century monastery. All the visual arts can be found here, as well as a good permanent collection of paintings. There are regular special exhibits and the entire complex is worth a look – as is the view down to the Boyne.

### MILLMOUNT MUSEUM & TOWER

Across the river from town in a villagelike enclave amid a sea of dull suburbia, is Mill-

mount, an artificial hill overlooking the town. Although it may have been a prehistoric burial mound along the lines of nearby Newgrange, it has never been excavated. There is a tale that it was the burial place of Amergin, a warrior-poet who arrived in Ireland from Spain around 1500 BC. Throughout Irish history, poets have held a special place in society, and have been both venerated and feared.

The Normans constructed a motte-and-bailey fort on top of this convenient command post overlooking the bridge. It was followed by a castle, which in turn was replaced by a **Martello tower** in 1808. The tower played a dramatic role in the 1922 Civil War – there are fine views over the town from the top. Admission is included as part of entry to the Millmount Museum (below).

It was at Millmount that the defenders of Drogheda, led by the governor Sir Arthur Ashton, made their last stand before surrendering to Cromwell. Later, an 18th-century English barracks was built round the base, and today this houses craft shops, museums and a restaurant.

A section of the army barracks is now used as the **Millmount Museum** (☎ 983 3097; www.millmount.net; adult/child €4.50/2.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2.30-5.30pm Sun), with interesting displays about the town and its history. Displays include three wonderful late-18th-century guild banners, perhaps the last in the country. There is also a room devoted to Cromwell's siege of Drogheda and the Battle of the Boyne. The

pretty cobbled basement is full of gadgets and kitchen utensils from bygone times, including a cast-iron pressure cooker and an early model of a sofa bed. There's also an excellent example of a coracle. Across the courtyard, the **Governor's House** opens for temporary exhibitions.

You can drive up to the hilltop or climb Pitcher Hill via the steps from St Mary's Bridge.

The 13th-century **Butter Gate**, just northwest of Millmount, is the only surviving genuine town gate in Drogheda. This tower, with its arched passageway, predates the remains of St Laurence's Gate by about a century.

### OTHER STRUCTURES

**Tholsel** (nr West & Shop Sts), an 18th-century limestone town hall, is now occupied by the Bank of Ireland.

North of the centre is **St Peter's Church of Ireland** (William St), containing the tombstone of Oliver Goldsmith's uncle Isaac, as well as another image on the wall depicting two skeletal figures in shrouds, dubiously linked to the Black Death. This is the church whose spire was burned by Cromwell's men, resulting in the death of 100 people seeking sanctuary inside. Today's church (1748) is the second replacement of the original destroyed by Cromwell. It stands in an attractive close approached through lovely wrought-iron gates. Note the old 'Blue School' of 1844 on one side. Off Hardmans Gardens is the rather charming and more recent **Church of Our Lady of Lourdes**.

At the time of writing, the modest 19th-century **courthouse** (Fair St) was being renovated. It is home to the sword and mace presented to the town council by William of Orange after the Battle of the Boyne.

Topping the hill behind the main part of town is the 14th-century **Magdalene Tower**, the bell tower of a Dominican friary founded in 1224. Here, England's King Richard II, accompanied by a great army, accepted the submission of the Gaelic chiefs with suitable ceremony in 1395, but peace lasted only a few months and Richard's return to Ireland led to his overthrow in 1399. The earl of Desmond was beheaded here in 1468 because of his treasonous connections with the Gaelic Irish; the tower is also reputed to be haunted by a nun.

Finally, you can't help but admire the 1855 **Boyne Viaduct** carrying trains over the river

east of the centre. Each of the 18 beautiful stone arches has a 20m span; erecting the piers bankrupted one company.

### Sleeping

Most of the B&Bs are slightly out of town; the only centrally located options are the hostel and a business hotel.

**Green Door Hostel** (☎ 983 4422; www.greendoorireland.com; 13 Dublin Rd; dm/d from €18/52) This long-running hostel has moved to improved digs in a heritage building some 250m from the train station towards the town centre. Dorm rooms have from four to 10 beds, and some doubles come with TVs and bathrooms. There are summer shuttles to Newgrange and other sites.

**Killowen House B&B** (☎ 983 3547; www.killowen-house.net; Woodgrange, Dublin Rd; s/d from €45/66; (P)) The formal exterior of the suburban home tells you that you're at a well-run place, and this will be confirmed once you step inside. The four rooms here are spick-and-span, and there's lots of Boyne Valley tour info available.

**Orley House** (☎ 983 6019; www.orleyhouse.com; Bryans-town, Dublin Rd; s/d from €45/70; (P)) This very professional B&B is about 2km out of town on the Dublin road. Rooms are well furnished, and breakfast is in a sun-filled conservatory.

**Westcourt Hotel** (☎ 983 0965; www.westcourt.ie; West St; s/d from €65/130; (P) (A)) A rambling veteran, the Westcourt is located in the dead centre of town. The 27 rooms have wi-fi and a timeless décor that could be from any time in the last 40 years. It's a popular place and has several venues from café to pub.

**D Hotel** (☎ 987 7700; www.thed.ie; Scotch Hall; s/d from €90/150; (P) (A)) Flash comes to Drogheda – or, in this hotel's parlance, the 'big D'. Part of a swish new development on the south bank of the Boyne, this place has 104 rooms, all with wi-fi and most with cool views of the city. Everything's stylish, sometimes excessively so: some lamps look like an exploding H-bomb in a marshmallow factory.

### Eating

You'll find a good variety of foods throughout the centre.

**Monks** (☎ 984 5630; 1 North Quay; mains €6-9; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-5pm Sun) At the southern end of Shop St, on the corner of North Quay, this lovely espresso bar and café is a local institution. The sandwiches are inventive and the coffee's good.

### BE GOOD OR CROMWELL WILL GET YOU

England's first democrat and protector of the people is an Irish nightmare, and the name Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) is still used to scare children at bedtime.

Cromwell hated the Irish. To him, they were treacherous infidels, a dirty race of papists who had sided with Charles I during the Civil War. When 'God's own Englishman' landed his 12,000 troops at Dublin in August 1649, he immediately set out for Drogheda, a strategic fort town and bastion of royalist support.

When Cromwell arrived at the walls of Drogheda, he was met by 2300 men led by Sir Arthur Aston, who boasted that 'he who could take Drogheda could take hell'. After Aston refused to surrender, Cromwell let fly with heavy artillery and after two days the walls were breached. Hell, it seems, was next.

In order to set a terrifying example to any other town that might resist his armies, Cromwell taught the defenders a brutal lesson. Over a period of hours, an estimated 3000 were massacred, mostly royalist soldiers but also priests, women and children. Aston was bludgeoned to death with his own leg. Of the survivors, many were captured and sold into slavery in the Caribbean.

Cromwell defended his action as God's righteous punishment of treacherous Catholics, and he was quick to point out that he had never ordered the killing of noncombatants: it was the 17th century's version of 'collateral damage'.

**Art Café** (☎ 980 3295; Highlanes Gallery, St Laurence St; meals €6-10; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Located in the impressive new Highlanes Gallery, this lunch spot is breath of fresh air. Everything is home-made and you're sure to get a tasty bowl of soup, sandwich or hot special. There's wi-fi.

**Kierans Deli** (☎ 983 8728; 15 West St; meals €6-12; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) When you think pork, think Kierans. This renowned deli is well known for its bacon, ham, pasties and perfect picnic food. Its café out the back has a full coffee bar, excellent salads and a good line-up of daily specials.

**Bella Atina** (☎ 984 4878; The Mall; mains €9-15; ☎ 6-10.30pm Mon-Sat) Old Country charm combines with new ideas at this excellent Italian place down by the river. It's red, red, red inside – and that's before you spill marinara sauce on your shirt. Pastas are fresh and the cannelloni is a treat.

**La Pizzeria** (☎ 983 4208; St Peter St; pizzas €10; ☎ 5-10pm Thu-Tue) Watch the dough fly as beautiful pizzas are handcrafted in the traditional open kitchen up front. With wine bottles hanging from the ceiling, this is an Italian joint straight out of central casting. It's busy when everywhere else is empty.

## Drinking & Entertainment Pubs

Drogheda has dozens of bars and pubs. Check the tourism **website** ([www.drogheda.ie](http://www.drogheda.ie)) for a full schedule of live music around town. There's usually at least one trad session every night.

**our pick** **C Ní Cairbre** (Carberry's; ☎ 984 7569; North Strand) This pub is a national treasure. Owned by the same family since 1880, C Ní Cairbre has brown walls that look every decade of their age, and old newspaper clips and long-faded artwork covering most surfaces. But the real joy here is the music. This is the centre for traditional music in the region. There's not a mike in sight – rather, musicians find a table and start playing, just as it should happen in a proper session. You're likely to hear music most nights; however, Wednesday is always devoted to singing and Sunday night is often bluesy.

**Peter Matthews** (McPhail's; ☎ 984 3168; Laurence St) Popular with those on the make, McPhail's (as it's always called, no matter what the sign says) favours a poppy, chart-oriented soundtrack. Some nights feature live music, mostly cover bands.

**Patrick Clarke & Sons** (☎ 983 6724; St Peter St) This wonderful old boozier is right out of a time capsule. The unrestored wooden interior features snugs and leaded-glass doors that read Open Bar. The pints just taste better at this corner classic.

## VENUES

**Fusion** (☎ 983 5166; [www.fusiononline.ie](http://www.fusiononline.ie); 12 George's St) The beer garden is a big pull here, as is the heaving disco, which runs from Thursday to Sunday night with a mix of '60s, rock, house and dance music. Can you say alcopop?

**Redz** (☎ 983 5331; 79 West St) A small, chilled-out bar at the front hides a big club out back. DJs, live acts and lots of people getting down keep things going until late.

**Drogheda Arts Centre** (☎ 983 3946; [www.droichead.com](http://www.droichead.com); Stockwell Lane) Theatrical and musical events are staged in this lively public cultural centre. There are often late-night sessions of trad, rock, jazz, samba and more.

## Shopping

Large glitzy malls are coming to Drogheda. Located on the south bank with the D Hotel is **Scotch Hall Shopping Centre** (Marsh Rd); looking down from the centre is the equally large **Laurence Town Centre** (Laurence St), which was once a grammar school.

## Getting There & Away BUS

Drogheda is only 48km north of Dublin, on the main M1 route to Belfast. The bus station is just south of the river on the corner of John St and Donore Rd. This is one of the busiest bus routes in the country, and **Bus Éireann** (☎ 983 5023) regularly serves Drogheda from Dublin (€6.30, one hour, one to four hourly). Drogheda to Dundalk is another busy route (€4.50, 30 minutes, hourly).

From Drogheda you can get a bus that drops you off at the entrance of the Brú na Bóinne visitor centre (€2, 20 minutes, four to six daily).

## TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 983 8749) is just south of the river and east of the town centre, off the Dublin road. Drogheda is on the main Belfast–Dublin line (Dublin €12, 30 minutes; Belfast €24, 1½ hours), and there are five or six express trains (and many slower ones) each way, with five on Sunday. This

is the best line in Ireland, with excellent on-board service.

## Getting Around

Drogheda itself is excellent for walking, and many of the surrounding region's interesting sites are within easy cycling distance. **Quay Cycles** (☎ 983 4526; 11A North Quay; per day from €20), near the bridge, rents bikes.

## AROUND DROGHEDA

There are a number of stellar attractions around Drogheda. A few kilometres north of town, Mellifont and Monasterboice are two famous monastic sites that are definitely worth the visit. Drogheda is also a good base for exploring the Boyne Valley; Brú na Bóinne and the Battle of Boyne site are just a few minutes west over the border in County Meath. If you're travelling on to Dundalk and into Northern Ireland, you can go for one of three routes: the quicker but duller M1; the circuitous inland route via Collon and Ardee, along which you can also visit Monasterboice and Mellifont; or the scenic coastal route that leads you up to Carlingford.

## Beaulieu House

Before Andrea Palladio and the ubiquitous Georgian style that changed Irish architecture in the early decades of the 18th century, there was the Anglo-Dutch style, a simpler, less ornate look that is equally handsome. **Beaulieu House** (☎ 041-984 5051; [www.beaulieu.ie](http://www.beaulieu.ie); house & garden €12, garden only €6; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Fri May–mid-Sep, 1-5pm Jul & Aug), about 5km east of Drogheda on the Baltray road, is a particularly good example of the style and – apparently – the first unfortified mansion to be built in Ireland, which doesn't say a lot for neighbourliness up to that time. It was built between 1660 and 1666 on lands confiscated from the Plunkett family (the family of the headless Oliver) by Cromwell and given to the marshal of the army in Ireland, Sir Henry Tichbourne. The red-brick mansion, with its distinctive steep roof and tall chimneys, has been owned by the same family ever since.

Besides the house and elegant gardens, the real draw is the superb art collection spread about the stunning interior, a motley collection ranging from lesser Dutch masters to 20th-century Irish painters.

## Mellifont Abbey

In its Anglo-Norman prime, **Mellifont Abbey** (☎ 041-982 6459; [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie); Tullyallen; adult/child €2.10/1.10; ☎ visitor centre 10am-6pm May-Sep; P) was the Cistercians' first and most magnificent centre in the country. Although the ruins are highly evocative and worth exploring, they don't do real justice to the site's former significance.

In the mid-12th century, Irish monastic orders had grown a little too fond of the good life and were not averse to a bit of corruption. In 1142 Malachy, bishop of Down (later canonised for his troubles), was at the end of his tether and he invited a group of hard-core monks from Clairvaux in France to set up shop in a remote location, where they would act as a sobering influence on the local monks. The Irish monks didn't quite get on with their French guests, and the latter soon left for home. Still, the construction of Mellifont – from the Latin *mellifons* (honey fountain) – continued, and within 10 years nine more Cistercian monasteries were established. Mellifont was eventually the mother house for 21 lesser monasteries, and at one point as many as 400 monks lived here.

Mellifont not only brought fresh ideas to the Irish religious scene, it also heralded a new style of architecture. For the first time in Ireland, monasteries were built with the formal layout and structure that was being used on the Continent. Only fragments of the original settlement remain, but the plan of the extensive monastery can easily be traced.

Like many other Cistercian monasteries, the buildings clustered round an open cloister. To the northern side of the cloister are the remains of a principally 13th-century cross-shaped church. To the south, the chapter house has been partially floored with medieval glazed tiles, originally found in the church. Here also would have been the refectory, kitchen and warming room – the only place where the austere monks could enjoy the warmth of a fire. The eastern range would once have held the monks' sleeping quarters.

Mellifont's most recognisable building, and one of the finest pieces of Cistercian architecture in Ireland, is the lavabo, an octagonal washing house for the monks. It was built in the early 13th century and used lead pipes to bring water from the river. A number of other buildings would have surrounded this main part of the abbey.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, a fortified Tudor manor house was built on the site in 1556 by Edward Moore, using materials scavenged from the demolition of many of the buildings.

In 1603 this house was the scene of a poignant and crucial turning point in Irish history. After the disastrous Battle of Kinsale, the vanquished Hugh O'Neill, last of the great Irish chieftains, was given shelter here by Sir Garret Moore until he surrendered to the English lord deputy Mountjoy. After his surrender, O'Neill was pardoned but, despairing of his position, fled to the Continent in 1607 with other old-Irish leaders in the Flight of the Earls. In 1727 the site was abandoned altogether.

The visitor centre next to the site describes monastic life in detail. The ruins themselves are always open and there's good picnicking next to the rushing stream. It's about 1.5km off the main Drogheda–Collon road (R168). A back road connects Mellifont with Monasterboice. There is no public transport to the abbey.

### Monasterboice

Crowing ravens lend just the right atmosphere to **Monasterboice** (Mainistir Bhuíthe; admission free; ☀ sunrise-sunset; ♿), an intriguing monastic site containing a cemetery, two ancient church ruins, one of the finest and tallest round towers in Ireland, and two of the best high crosses. The site can be reached directly from Mellifont via a winding route along narrow country lanes.

Down a leafy lane and set in sweeping farmland, Monasterboice has a special atmosphere, particularly at quiet times. The original monastic settlement at Monasterboice is said to have been founded in the 5th or 6th century by St Buiithe, a follower of St Patrick, although the site probably had pre-Christian significance. St Buiithe's name somehow got converted to Boyne, and the river is named after him. It's said that he made a direct ascent to heaven via a ladder lowered from above. An invading Viking force took over the settlement in 968, only to be comprehensively expelled by Donal, the Irish high king of Tara, who killed at least 300 of the Vikings in the process.

The high crosses of Monasterboice are superb examples of Celtic art. The crosses had an important didactic use, bringing the

gospels alive for the uneducated – a type of cartoon of the Scriptures, if you like. Like Greek statues, they were probably brightly painted, but all traces of colour have long disappeared.

The cross near the entrance is known as **Muirnach's Cross**, named after a 10th-century abbot. The subjects of the carvings have not been positively identified. On the eastern face, from the bottom up, are thought to be the Fall of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, the battle of David and Goliath, Moses bringing water from the rock to the waiting Israelites, and the three wise men bearing gifts to Mary and Jesus. The Last Judgement, with the risen dead waiting for their verdict, is at the centre of the cross and further up is St Paul in the desert.

The western face relates more to the New Testament, and from the bottom depicts the arrest of Christ, Doubting Thomas, Christ giving a key to St Peter, the Crucifixion, and Moses praying with Aaron and Hur. The cross is capped by a representation of a gabled-roof church.

The **West Cross** is near the round tower and stands 6.5m high, making it one of the tallest high crosses in Ireland. It's much more weathered, especially at the base, and only a dozen or so of its 50 panels are still legible. The more distinguishable ones on the eastern face include David killing a lion and a bear, the sacrifice of Isaac, David with Goliath's head, and David kneeling before Samuel. The western face shows the Resurrection, the crowning with thorns, the Crucifixion, the baptism of Christ, Peter cutting off the servant's ear in the garden of Gethsemane, and the kiss of Judas.

A third, simpler cross in the northeastern corner of the compound is believed to have been smashed by Cromwell's forces and has only a few straightforward carvings. Photographers should note that this cross makes a great evening silhouette picture, with the round tower in the background.

The **round tower**, minus its cap, stands in a corner of the complex. It's closed to the public but is still over 30m tall – imagine being at the top and seeing some Vikings headed your way. Records suggest the tower interior went up in flames in 1097, destroying many valuable manuscripts and other treasures.

(Continued on page 573)

(Continued from page 564)

The church ruins are from a later era and are of less interest, although the modern gravestones are often quite sad.

There's a small gift shop outside the compound in summer. There are no set hours but come early or late in the day to avoid the crowds. It's just off the M1 motorway, about 8km north of Drogheda.

### DUNDALK

☎ 042 / pop 28,200

Dundalk is all business and always has been. Not as grim as it once was, the town is a pleasant enough place for those who live here. It has a couple of interesting sites, and you may pause as you hurry along the M1 or drop down as a day trip from Carlingford.

The town grew under the protection of a local estate controlled by the de Verdon family, who were granted lands here by King John in 1185. In the Middle Ages, Dundalk was at the northern limits of the English-controlled Pale, strategically located on one of the main highways heading north.

The **tourist office** (☎ 933 5484; www.eastcoastmidlands.ie; Jocelyn St; ☹ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri year-round, plus 9am–1pm & 2–5.30pm Sat Jun–mid-Sep) is next to County Museum Dundalk.

Right in the centre, the richly decorated 19th-century **St Patrick's Cathedral** was modelled on King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England. In front of it is the **Kelly Monument** (Jocelyn St), in memory of a local captain drowned at

sea in 1858. Also here is the interesting **County Museum Dundalk** (☎ 932 7056; Jocelyn St; adult/concession €4/2.50; ☹ 10.30am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 2–6pm Sun, closed Mon Oct–Apr). Different floors in the museum are dedicated to the town's early history and archaeology, and to the Norman period. One floor deals with the growth of industry in the area, from the 1750s up to the 1960s – including the cult classic Heinkel Bubble Car, which was manufactured in the area.

The **courthouse** (cnr Crowe & Clanbrassil Sts) is a fine neo-Gothic building with large Doric pillars designed by Richard Morrison, who also designed the courthouse in Carlow. In the front square is the stone **Maid of Éireann**, commemorating the Fenian Rising of 1798.

Should you need sustenance, **Rosso** (☎ 935 6502; 5 Roden Pl; lunch €10, dinner mains €20–24; ☹ noon–2.30, 5.30–9.30pm Sun–Fri) is one of several restaurants of distinction here. Across from St Patrick's Cathedral, Rosso has popular lunch specials, such as creamy risottos; dinners are elegant and feature local seafood. Its modern stylish interior contrasts nicely with the heritage exterior.

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 041-982 8251) runs an almost hourly service to Dublin (one way/return €6.30, 1½ hours) and a less frequent one to Belfast. The **bus station** (☎ 933 4075; Long Walk) is near the courthouse. If you're connecting to, say, Carlingford, the bus station's address is all too appropriate, as the **Clarke Train Station** (☎ 933 5521) is 900m west of the bus station and centre on Carrickmacross Rd. It has trains to Dublin (€18.50, one hour, 10 daily) on the Dublin–Belfast line.

### DETOUR: THE COAST ROAD

Most people just zip north along the M1 motorway but if you want to double your travel time, see some sea and enjoy a little rural Ireland – at least before Dubliners put up houses everywhere – then opt for the R166 from Drogheda north along the coast.

The sleepy little village of **Termonfeckin** (Tearmann Féichín) was, until 1656, the seat and castle of the primate of Armagh. The 15th-century **castle** (admission free; ☹ 10am–6pm), or tower house, is tiny and worth a five-minute stop.

About 2km further north is the busy seaside and fishing centre of **Clogherhead** (Ceann Chlochair), with a good, shallow Blue Flag beach. Try to ignore the caravan parks.

The 33km route comes to an end in **Castlebellingham**. The village here grew up around an 18th-century crenulated **mansion**, and generations of mud farmers served the landlord within. Buried in the local graveyard is Dr Thomas Guither, a 17th-century physician supposed to have reintroduced frogs to Ireland by releasing imported frog spawn into a pond in Trinity College, Dublin. Frogs, along with snakes and toads, had supposedly received their marching orders from St Patrick a thousand years earlier.

From here you can continue 12km north to Dundalk along the suburban R132 or join the M1 and zip off.

## COOLEY PENINSULA

There is an arresting beauty in the forested slopes rising out of the dark waters of Carlingford Lough up to the sun-dappled, multihued hills of the peninsula. There are crisp views across the waters to Northern Ireland's Mourne Mountains and good views across the windswept land here. Tiny country lanes wind their way down to 'beaches' where there are stones of every size. You'll feel solitude and maybe even calm.

But there's something unsettling about the place too. Isolated and remote, the Cooley Peninsula may be a political part of the Republic of Ireland, but its spirit is in the wilds of South Armagh, a fiercely independent territory in Northern Ireland that is deeply suspicious of outsiders, and a bastion of republican support.

### Carlingford

☎ 042 / pop 1400

The Cooley Peninsula's mountains and views display themselves to dramatic effect in Carlingford (Cairlinn). This pretty three-street village, with its cluster of whitewashed houses, nestles on Carlingford Lough, beneath Slieve Foye (587m). Hard though it is to believe, not much of this was appreciated until the late 1980s, when the villagers got together to show what can be done to revive a dying community. The story of their efforts is vividly told in the heritage centre. Today this is an excellent stop on your journey to/from the north, particularly on long summer evenings, when you'll pub-hop along the stony streets.

### INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (☎ 937 3033; www.carlingford.ie; ☎ 10am-5pm, closed Tue Oct-Mar) is in an old train station right next to the bus stop on the waterfront. It has parking.

### SIGHTS

#### Holy Trinity Heritage Centre

The **heritage centre** (☎ 937 3454; Churchyard Rd; adult/concession €3/1.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-4pm Mon-Fri, noon-4.30pm Sat & Sun) is in the former Holy Trinity Church. The information boards are encased within closable doors so that the centre can double as a concert hall outside visiting hours. A mural shows what the village looked like in its heyday, when the Mint and Taafe's Castle were right on the water-

front, and a short video describes the village history and explains what has been done to give it new life in recent years.

#### King John's Castle

Carlingford was first settled by the Vikings, and in the Middle Ages became an English stronghold under the protection of the castle, which was built on a pinnacle in the 11th to 12th centuries to control the entrance to the lough. On the western side, the entrance gateway was built to allow only one horse and rider through at a time.

King John's name stuck to quite a number of places in Ireland, given that he spent little time in or near any of them! In 1210 he spent a couple of days here en route to a battle with Hugh de Lacy at Carrickfergus Castle in Antrim. It's suggested by boosters that the first few pages of the Magna Carta, the world's first constitutional bill of rights, were drafted while he was here.

#### Other Sights

Near the tourist office is **Taafe's Castle**, a 16th-century tower house that stood on the waterfront until the land in front was reclaimed to build a short-lived train line. The **Mint**, near the square, is of a similar age. Although Edward IV is thought to have granted a charter to a mint in 1467, no coins were produced here. The building has some interesting Celtic carvings round the windows. Near it is the **Tholsel**, the only surviving gate to the original town, although it was much altered in the 19th century, when its defensive edge was softened in the interests of letting traffic through.

West of the village centre are the remains of a **Dominican friary**, built around 1305 and used as a storehouse by oyster fishermen after 1539.

Carlingford is the birthplace of Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-68), one of Canada's founding fathers. A bust commemorating him stands opposite Taafe's Castle.

#### ACTIVITIES

For a wide range of activities, including rock climbing, orienteering, hiking and windsurfing, contact the **Carlingford Adventure Centre** (☎ 937 3100; www.carlingfordadventure.com; Tholsel St).

Carlingford is the starting point for the 40km **Táin Trail**, which makes a circuit of the Cooley Peninsula through the Cooley Mountains. The route is a mixture of sur-

fronted roads, forest tracks and green paths. For more information contact the tourist office here (opposite) or the **Dundalk tourist office** (☎ 042-933 5484; www.eastcoastmidlands.ie; Jocelyn St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, plus 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Sat Jun-mid-Sep).

**Carlingford Pleasure Cruises** (☎ 937 3239; adult/child €12/6) runs one-hour cruises between May and September; there's no set time as departure depends on the tides.

Feel like a bit of peeping? The tourist office has full details on the **Cooley Birdwatching Trail**. Much of the area is protected and among the species you can see are godwits, red-breasted mergansers, buzzards, tits and various finches.

#### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Almost every weekend from June to September, Carlingford goes event crazy: there are summer schools, medieval festivals, leprechaun hunts, homecoming festivals and anything that'll lure folks in off the M1. The mid-August **Oyster Festival** is a favourite.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

Carlingford is a far nicer option for a night's sleep than Dundalk, but it gets pretty crowded during summer, especially at weekends; book well in advance. As for food, you won't go far wrong; excellent seafood dominates virtually every menu.

**Carlingford Adventure Centre** (☎ 937 3100; www.carlingfordadventure.com; Tholsel St; dm/s/d €22/35/56) Popular with groups, the dorms are often filled by mobs of school kids that flood here during summer. Individual travellers not put off by the hullabaloo downstairs can stay in simple singles and doubles on the second floor.

**McKevitt's Village Hotel** (☎ 937 3116; www.mckevittshotel.com; Market Sq; s/d €60/90; (P)) With 17 modern rooms all kitted out in light creams and whites, this hotel offers quality accommodation, as well as a lovely bar that draws lots of locals and a well-respected seafood restaurant, Schooners (dinner €20 to €25).

**Beaufort House** (☎ 937 3879; www.beauforthouse.net; Ghan Rd; r €65-100; (P)) This spacious six-room B&B with stunning front-lawn views of the sea is along the road towards the pier. Its main business is taking care of guests – which

it does with considerable skill – but it also runs a yacht charter and sailing school.

**Oystercatcher Lodge & Bistro** (☎ 937 3989; www.theoystercatcher.com; Market Sq; s/d from €70/125) Renowned for the superb quality of its oysters, this white-tablecloth restaurant does local seafood just right (mains from €15; open 6.30pm to 9.30pm Monday to Saturday, 5pm to 8.30pm Sunday). Upstairs are seven comfortable and large rooms. On weekends there's a two-night minimum; midweek the rates are much less.

**Ghan House** (☎ 937 3682; www.ghanhouse.com; Main Rd; s/d from €75/190; (P)) This magnificent 18th-century Georgian house is about 1km outside the village, just off the Dundalk road. There are 12 rooms, each tastefully decorated with period antiques and original artworks, though many guests prefer the four original rooms in the main house. There's wi-fi throughout. The exceptional restaurant (five-course set menu from €45; open 7pm to 9.30pm Monday to Saturday, 12.30pm to 3.30pm Sunday) features a classical menu of traditional dishes, most made with foods sourced locally; learn its secrets in the cooking school.

**Magee's Bistro** (☎ 937 3751; Tholsel St; mains €20-24; ☎ 10am-9pm) Full Irish breakfasts start the day before the huge lunch menu takes over. There are loads of specials, depending what's fresh each day. Dinner sees more complex and interesting creations. Tables outside make this a true bistro.

#### DRINKING

This tiny village supports a few pubs, although most are nothing special.

**PJ O'Hares** (☎ 937 3106; Newry St) Behind the old-style grocery at the front is a classic, stone-floor pub where a peat fire burns and drinkers sit in animated conversation over a cool pint. The owners have done a good job of melding a modern bar and outdoor seating with the original, untouched pub. This is the place for summertime music.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

**Bus Éireann** (☎ 933 4075) has services to Dundalk (€5, 50 minutes, four to five daily Monday to Saturday). There are no Sunday services.

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