

County Clare



Clare (An Clár) is a trip in itself. It combines an Atlantic-pounded coast, and dramatic and unique wind-swept landscapes with artefacts from prehistory through medieval times. Of course all this physical attraction is fine, but what will really get into your soul is that Clare carries a song in its heart. This is the centre for traditional Irish music. From tiny village pubs to large venues, you'll hear the county's musicians not just keeping the legacy of song alive but refining and developing it.

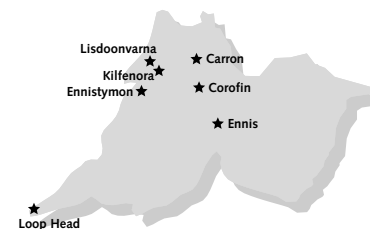
Ennis is the main city. From this hub of narrow streets and nightlife, the entire county is a short trip away. But you'll want to take your time becoming part of Clare's fabric. Wander the coast. The desolate barrens south of Kilkee to Loop Head have dramatic cliffs and sweeping vistas and a surprising paucity of visitors. North, you'll find absolutely wonderful villages such as Miltown Malbay, Ennistymon and Kilfenora, where you'll find character and characters ready to make you feel right at home.

The iconic headlands of the Cliffs of Moher and the music-filled pubs of Doolin are a draw for many. Use them as an excuse to plunge further, for you'll be right on the edge of the Burren, a stark, alien landscape of wild beauty and delightful villages such as Corofin.

Learn the fabric of this water-dashed, windswept land and soon you'll be singing your own songs of joy.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Urban Jungle** Enjoying the many pubs, songs and nightlife of Ennis (p372)
- **Rural Idle** Delighting in the amazing drives, walks and villages of Loop Head (p384)
- **The Real Deal** Swooning to the music in the uncompromised traditional pubs of Kilfenora (p399), Lisdoonvarna (p394) and Corofin (p399).
- **Barren Burren** Finding lost dolmens and abandoned abbeys amongst the rocky expanse of the Burren at Carron (p398)
- **Village Life** Becoming part of the scene in the artful, tuneful town of Ennistymon (p386)



■ POPULATION: 105,000

■ AREA: 3147 SQ KM

ENNIS & AROUND

ENNIS

☎ 065 / pop 18,900

Ennis (Inis) is a busy commercial centre and lies on the banks of the River Fergus, which runs east, then south into the Shannon Estuary.

It's the place to stay if you want a bit of urban flair; from Ennis, you can reach any part of Clare in under two hours. Short on sights, the town's strengths are its food, lodging and traditional entertainment. The town centre, with its narrow, pedestrian-friendly streets, is home to large, modern stores.

History

The town's medieval origins are indicated by its irregular, narrow streets. Its most important historical site is Ennis Friary, founded in the 13th century by the O'Briens, kings of Thomond, who also built a castle here in the 13th century. Much of the wooden town was destroyed by fire in 1249 and again in 1306, when it was razed by one of the O'Briens.

Orientation

The old town centre is on the Square, and the principal streets, O'Connell St, High St (becoming Parnell St), Bank Pl and Abbey St, radiate from there. There has been an effort to create some pedestrian quarters around Parnell St with mixed results. The large but fairly

mundane cathedral (1843) is at the southern end of O'Connell St; its spire is a useful landmark from afar.

The completion of the N18 bypass east of the city has done much to improve traffic, although trips to the coast still take you through the centre.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Abbey News Agency (36 Abbey St) Good selection of local and international newspapers. It also sells Ordnance Survey maps.

Ennis Bookshop (☎ 682 9000; 13 Abbey St) Good independent shop for maps and books of local interest.

O'Mahony's (☎ 682 8355; Merchant Sq) Large local branch of 100-year-old Limerick store.

INTERNET ACCESS

Linkserve (☎ 689 3767; 4A Lower Market St; per hr €1; ☎ 10.30am-9pm) Upstairs, bargain prices on surfing and internet calling.

LIBRARIES

De Valera Library (☎ 682 1616; Harmony Row; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon, Wed & Thu, to 8pm Tue & Fri, to 2pm Sat) Offers one hour of free internet access. Also has dedicated email screens for short-term use.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Cassidy's Pharmacy (☎ 682 8765; 10 O'Connell St; ☎ 8am-6pm)

MONEY

You can change money and use ATMs at various banks on the Square.

POST

The post office is on Bank Pl, northwest of the Square.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Ennis tourist office (☎ 682 8366; www.shannonregiontourism.ie; Arthur's Row; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat Mar-Jun & Sep-Dec, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri Jan & Feb) Very helpful and efficient. Can book accommodation for a €4 fee; lots of green blarney gifts.

Sights

MONUMENTS & SCULPTURES

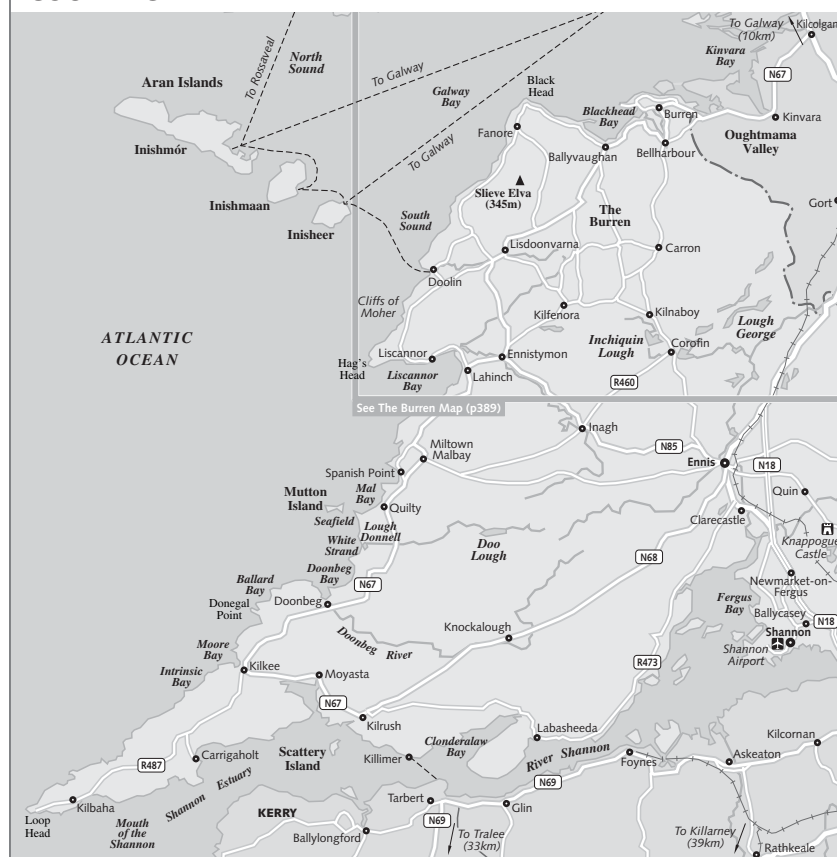
In the town centre, the Square, is a **Daniel O'Connell monument**. His election to the British parliament by a huge majority in 1828 forced Britain to lift its ban on Catholic MPs and led to the Act of Catholic Emancipation a year later. The 'Great Liberator' stands on an extremely high column, so far above the rest of us you would hardly know he was there. Eamon de Valera was *teachta Dála* (TD; member of the Irish Parliament) for Clare from 1917 to 1959. There's a **bronze statue** of him near Ennis courthouse.

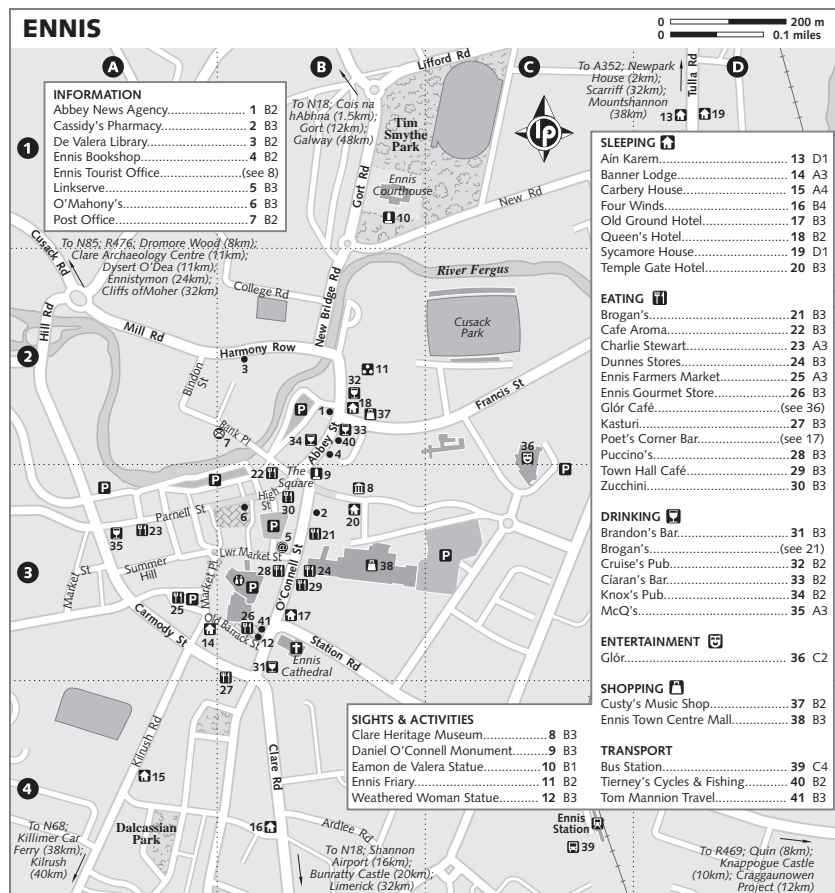
Numerous **modern sculptures** can be found scattered around the centre. Works such as the *Weathered Woman* on Old Barrack St are both interesting and provide a handy place to sit. Get the *Ennis Sculpture Trail* map from the tourist office.

ENNIS FRIARY

Just north of the Square is **Ennis Friary** (☎ 682 9100; Abbey St; adult/child €1.50/0.75; ☎ 10am-6pm

COUNTY CLARE





Jun–mid-Sep, to 5pm Apr, May & mid-Sep–Oct). It was founded by Donnchadh Cairbreach O'Brien, king of Thomond, sometime between 1240 and 1249, but a lot of what you see now was completed in the 14th century. Although it pales compared to ruins elsewhere in Clare, it does have a graceful five-section window dating from the late 13th century, and a McMahan tomb (1460) with alabaster panels depicting scenes from the Passion.

CLARE HERITAGE MUSEUM

Sharing the same building as the tourist office is this diverting little museum (☎ 682 3382; Arthur's Row; admission free; ☎ 9.30am–1pm, 2–5.30pm Tue–Sat). The 'Riches of Clare' exhibition tells the story of Clare from 8000 years ago to the present

day using original artefacts grouped into four themes: earth, power, faith and water. It also recounts the development of the submarine by Clare-born JP Holland, who's good for at least two of the themes.

Festivals & Events

Fleadh Nua (☎ 682 4276; www.fleadhnua.com) A lively traditional music festival held in late May, with singing, dancing and workshops.

Ennis Trad Festival (www.ennistradfestival.com)

Traditional music is performed in venues across town for one week in mid-November.

Sleeping

Ennis has a great variety of places to stay. There are modest B&Bs on most of the

main roads into town, some are an easy walk to the centre. Many people come here straight from Shannon Airport, less than 30 minutes south.

BUDGET

The long-running Abbey Tourist Hostel on Harmony Row closed in 2006 and there's no sign of a replacement.

Ain Karem (☎ 682 0024; 7 Tulla Rd; s/d €45/62; P) Northeast of the centre, this modern two-storey house is pleasantly furnished and rooms are standard size. This neighbourhood has several other B&Bs; it's a 10-minute walk to the centre.

Sycamore House (☎ 682 1343; smsfitz@gofree.indigo.ie; Tulla Rd; s/d from €45/62; P) Right across from Ain Karem, there are four modest rooms in this B&B that's in a unassuming modern, one-storey typical Irish house. It's clean and friendly – what more do you want?

MIDRANGE

Banner Lodge (☎ 682 4224; www.bannerlodge.com; Market St; s/d from €45/80) You can't really get more central than this – and what a price! Some of the eight rooms are pretty tight, but given the location it is a fair trade-off. The décor in the 2nd-storey inn is dominated by the bold blue carpet. Service is minimal.

Carbery House (☎ 682 4046; Kilrush Rd; s/d €50/90; P) About a 10-minute walk south from the centre, this orderly B&B has two fireplaces to provide atmosphere – for real warmth, however, crank up the electric blankets on the bed. Early arrivals from the airport are OK, space permitting and credit cards are accepted.

Four Winds (☎ 682 9831; Clare Rd; s/d €50/80; ☎ mid-Mar–mid-Oct; P) This is a pleasant two-storey house with decent rooms. There's a nice back garden. The friendly owners accept credit cards.

Queens Hotel (☎ 682 8963; www.irishcourthotels.com; Abbey St; s/d from €65/90; P) Discreetly aged outside, this corner hotel is perfect for those seeking an anonymous stay. The 48 rooms are standard motel in design, with a timeless red and yellow motif. The lobby has wi-fi and, like your internet connection, you can slip through unobserved.

Newpark House (☎ 682 1233; www.newparkhouse.com; s/d €65/100; ☎ Easter–Oct; P) A vine-covered country house dating from 1650, Newpark is 2km north of Ennis. The six rooms are a mix of furnishings old and new with many engrav-

ings on the walls. To get here go along Tulla Rd to Scarriff road (R352) and turn right at the Roselevan Arms.

TOP END

Our pick Old Ground Hotel (☎ 682 8127; www.flynnhotels.com; O'Connell St; s/d from €90/150; P) The lobby at this local institution is always a scene: old friends sprawl on the sofas, deals are cut at the tables and ladies from the neighbouring church's altar society exchange gossip over tea. Parts of this rambling landmark date back to the 1800s. The 83 rooms vary greatly; some are very nice and have wi-fi.

Temple Gate Hotel (☎ 682 3300; www.templegatehotel.com; the Square; s/d €120/170; P) Hidden off O'Connell St, you won't get a more central location than at this modest-looking up-market hotel. Inside, the 70 modern rooms have wi-fi. Service is good and should suit business travellers.

Eating

Ennis has a good mix of restaurants, cafés and bars that serve food. The enormous **Dunnes Stores** (☎ 684 0700; Ennis Town Centre Mall; ☎ 24hr) has everything from prepared foods to groceries. The **Ennis Farmers Market** (Upper Market St car park; ☎ 8am–2pm Fri) lures some of Clare's best producers.

BUDGET

Puccino's (☎ 689 1665; 41 O'Connell St; snacks €2–6; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Sat) This tiny nook on the main drag has a full coffee bar and blends up fresh fruit smoothies and juices. Jaws need a workout? There are sandwiches.

Glór Café (☎ 684 3103; Friar's Walk; mains €3.75–8.50; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat) The café at Glór, the local arts centre, is suitably artistic. Soups, salads, sandwiches, hot dishes and desserts are creative and enticing. Lots of veggie options.

Ennis Gourmet Store (☎ 684 3314; 1 Old Barrack St; snacks €4–10; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat, noon–6pm Sun) Enjoy a warm drink from the full coffee and tea bar at an outside table at this little gem. There's a range of soups, sandwiches and hot specials plus a deli-cade of Irish cheeses, preserves, good wines and more.

Cafe Aroma (☎ 684 2703; Bank Pl; meals €4–10; ☎ 8am–7pm) Spread over three levels, this popular spot always bustles with locals grabbing a freshly made sandwich (try the bacon, avocado and garlic spread wonder) or settling back for something more substantial.

MIDRANGE

Poet's Corner Bar (☎ 682 8127; Old Ground Hotel, O'Connell St; meals €6-12; ☎ 12.30-9pm) This famous old bar has a deserved reputation for its traditional dishes, from boiled bacon and cabbage with parsley sauce to a thick seafood chowder that transcends its local cliché. The dark surroundings are vintage Clàire.

Charlie Stewart (☎ 684 8477; 76 Parnell St; meals €7-18; ☎ noon-9pm) Burgers, nachos, pastas and other bar foods flesh out the long menu of popular choices at this big, open pub. The kitchen closes ahead of live rock some nights.

Brogan's (☎ 682 9859; 24 O'Connell St; meals €8-20; ☎ 10am-10pm) The peas at this popular old pub are always well cooked, the supply of spuds never-ending. Classics like bacon and cabbage get top billing although you can ferret out more modern fare.

Kasturi (☎ 684 8060; Carmody St; meals €10-20; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-4pm Sun) Indian cuisine is excellent at this most accommodating of restaurants. The staff are gracious, constantly serving the large, mannered dining room. Classics such as tandoori chicken are served with flair.

TOP END

Town Hall Café (☎ 682 8127; O'Connell St; lunches €6-14, dinners €20-35; ☎ 10am-4.45pm & 6-9.30pm) Adjacent to, and affiliated with, the Old Ground Hotel, this excellent bistro is in the stylishly resurrected old town hall. High ceilings allow large artwork while the spare settings don't compete with the food: casual and creative during the day, more formal and surprising at night. Seafood is excellent.

Zucchini (☎ 686 6566; 7 High St; mains €25-30; ☎ 5-9.30pm) The vivid-red front tells you that this place is a standout. The ever-changing menu is ambitious: look for interesting options such as local oysters baked with rocket and roasted halibut with saffron. Everything is sourced locally and you'll enjoy handmade breads and desserts plus seafood caught offshore.

Drinking & Entertainment

As the capital of a renowned music county, Ennis is not short of pubs with trad music as well as some contemporary clubs. Where's best changes often but one interesting source is the weekly *Claire People*, which has a colourful column on pubs by local raconteur Cormac MacConnell.

PUBS

Brogan's (☎ 682 9859; 24 O'Connell St) Brogan's sees a fine bunch of musicians ripping the roof off from about 9pm on Tuesday and Thursday plus more nights in summer. On the corner of Cooke's Lane, it's a big pub that stretches a long way back from the street.

Brandon's Bar (☎ 682 8133; O'Connell St) Still holds its own for trad sessions, on Monday nights especially (from about 9.30pm). Brandon's also stages live music, including blues, rock and disco (!).

Cruise's Pub (☎ 684 1800; Abbey St) Cruise's friendly bar has a long side courtyard that's perfect for enjoying a fresh-air pint in the shadow of the old friary. There are trad music sessions most nights from 9.30pm.

Ciaran's Bar (☎ 684 0180; Francis St) Slip into this small place by day and you can be just another geezer pondering a pint. At night there's trad music Wednesday to Sunday.

Knox's Pub (☎ 682 2871; Abbey St) Knox's gives it all its got if you're looking for chart sounds, DJs riffing, full-on football megascreen action and a raucous crowd. Mr Knox, the original coffee, wine and spirits merchant, is no doubt spinning in his grave to the beat of the music. It's open late past midnight.

McQ's (☎ 682 4608; 78 Parnell St) Aromatic peat fires warm this cosy pub that's a haven on a rainy day. There's good food and a few simple B&B rooms upstairs.

VENUES

Cois na hAbhna (☎ 682 0996; ceoltrad@eircom.net; Gort Rd) This pilgrimage point for traditional music and culture is housed in a custom-built pentagonal hall 1.5km north of town along the N18. It has performances and a full range of classes in dance and music. You can hear music on Wednesday nights and there's music and dancing some Saturdays. The archive is a resource centre and a library of Irish traditional music, song, dance and folklore relating mainly to County Clare; books and recordings are on sale.

Glór (☎ 684 3103; www.glor.ie; Friar's Walk) Clare's cultural centre is in a striking modern building. Art, traditional music, theatre, dance, photography and film are some of the programmes offered. There's a strong Irish bias but international influences are celebrated.

Shopping

Ennis has the best shopping in the county; stock up on essentials in the vast **Ennis Town Centre Mall** with its Dunnes Stores just behind O'Connell St. Look for a discreet passage in. On Saturday morning, there is a market at Market Pl. O'Connell St has the best selection of shops.

Custy's Music Shop (☎ 682 1727; www.custysmusic.com; Francis St) The top place for a terrific stock of Irish music, instruments, other musical items and general info about the scene. Has a shop on the web as well.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

The **bus station** (☎ 682 4177) is beside the train station. Buses run from Ennis to: Cork (€11.70, three hours, nine daily); Doolin (€8.80, 1½ hours, three daily) via Corofin, Ennistymon, Lahinch and Liscannor; Galway (€9, 1½ hours, hourly) via Gort; Limerick (€6.30, 40 minutes, hourly) via Bunratty; and to Shannon Airport (€5.40, 50 minutes, hourly). To reach Dublin, connect through Limerick.

TRAIN

From **Ennis station** (☎ 684 0444) there are nine trains daily to Limerick (€8.20, 40 minutes), where you can connect to trains to places further afield like Dublin. There are welcome plans afoot to restore service on the line from Ennis to Galway.

Getting Around

For a taxi call **Burren Taxis** (☎ 682 3456) or pick one up at the taxi stands at the train station and beside the Daniel O'Connell Monument.

Tierney's Cycles & Fishing (☎ 682 9433; 17 Abbey St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) has well-maintained mountain bikes costing €20/80 per day/week to hire, which includes a helmet, lock and repair kit. Staff will recommend routes where you're less likely to end up as road kill.

Tom Mannion Travel (☎ 682 4211; www.tmt-ireland.com; 71 O'Connell St) rents cars.

Parking is fairly good in Ennis. There's a big car park behind the tourist office in Friar's Walk and one alongside the river just off Abbey St. It's pay and display for about €1 per hour.

AROUND ENNIS

North of Ennis is the early Christian site of Dysert O'Dea; to the southeast are several

fine castles. Note that much of the county can be enjoyed as a day trip from Ennis.

Local and express buses cover most areas around Ennis, but their frequency varies; many buses run only May to September (some only July and August) and on certain days. Before making plans confirm times and destinations with **Ennis bus station** (☎ 065-682 4177; www.buseireann.ie).

Dysert O'Dea

You can feel the past as you navigate the narrow tracks with grass in the middle to **Dysert O'Dea** (Map p389), where St Tola founded a monastery in the 8th century. The church and high cross, the White Cross of St Tola, date from the 12th or 13th century. The cross depicts Daniel in the lion's den on one side and a crucified Christ above a bishop carved in relief on the other. Look for carvings of animal and human heads in a semicircle on the southern doorway of the Romanesque church. There are also the remains of a 12m-high round tower.

In 1318 the O'Briens, who were kings of Thomond, and the Norman de Clares of Bunratty fought a pitched battle nearby, which the O'Briens won, thus postponing the Anglo-Norman conquest of Clare for some two centuries. The 15th-century O'Dea Castle nearby houses the **Clare Archaeology Centre** (☎ 065-683 7401; adult/child €4/3.50; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep). A 3km history trail around the castle passes some two dozen ancient monuments – from ring forts and high crosses to an ancient cooking site. A further 5km walk along a medieval road takes you to another stone fort.

East of Dysert O'Dea is **Dromore Wood** (Map p389; ☎ 065-683 7166; www.heritageireland.ie; Ruan; admission free; ☎ visitor centre 10am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep). This Dúchas nature reserve encompasses some 400 hectares as well as the ruins of the 17th-century O'Brien Castle, two ring forts and the site of Kilakee church.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Dysert O'Dea is 1.7km off the Corofin road (R476), 11km north of Ennis. Dromore Wood is 8km east, off the N18.

Bus Éireann (☎ 065-682 4177) generally runs one bus daily from Ennis to Doolin, which will stop along the R476.

Quin

☎ 065 / pop 460

Quin (Chuinche), a tiny village 10km south-east of Ennis, was the site of the Great Clare Find of 1854 – the most important discovery of prehistoric gold in Ireland. Greed and need beat out any good deed and only a few of the several hundred torques, gorgets and other pieces, discovered by labourers working on the Limerick to Ennis railway, made it to the National Museum in Dublin; most were sold and melted down. The source of this and much of ancient Ireland's gold may have been the Wicklow Mountains on the east coast.

The Franciscan friary **Quin Abbey** (☎ 684 4084) was founded in 1433 using part of the walls of an older de Clare castle built in 1280. Despite many periods of persecution, Franciscan monks lived here until the 19th century. The last friar, Father Hogan, who died in 1820, is buried in one corner. The splendidly named Fireballs McNamara, a notorious duellist and member of the region's ruling family, is also buried here. An elegant belfry rises above the main body of the abbey, and you can climb the narrow spiral staircase to look down on the fine cloister and surrounding countryside. The site is always open and you can ponder the encroaching modern graves.

Beside the friary is the 13th-century Gothic **Church of St Finghin**.

Numerous cafés and pubs line the quiet streets near the ruins. On the Ennis side of the village, look for **Zion** (☎ 682 5417; Ennis Rd; meals €6-20; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Wed, to 10pm Thu-Sat). There are good alternative abbey views nearby and you can fortify with excellent coffees, teas and juices. During the day breakfast and fresh and creative lunches are available. Weekend dinners are also creative.

DETOUR: REAL BEER

A splendid antidote to Ireland's dismal beer scene (yeah, we know about Guinness but what about some variety, huh?) can be found right at the intersection of the Ennistymon (N85) and the Kilfenora (R481) roads in Inagh, 16km northeast of Ennis. **Biddy Early Brewery** (☎ 065-683 6742; www.beb.ie) is a rarity for the Emerald Isle: a great microbrewery serving its own range of beers. The Black Biddy Irish Stout recalls every bit of bold flavour that's been mass-marketed out of the corporate stouts. All beers are made with natural ingredients and there's often season specials. Enjoy a pint in the airy pub or outside at tables; there's food most months. Ask about the Biddy Early legend and you'll understand why this detour could be a one-way trip.

Knappogue Castle

About 3km southeast of Quin is **Knappogue Castle** (☎ 061-368 103; www.shannonheritage.com; adult/child €7/3.35; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Apr-Oct). It was built in 1467 by the McNamaras, who held sway over a large part of Clare from the 5th to the mid-15th century and built 42 castles in the region. Knappogue's walls are intact, and it has a fine collection of period furniture and fireplaces.

When Oliver Cromwell came to Ireland in 1649, he used Knappogue as a base, which is one of the reasons it was spared from destruction. The McNamara family regained the castle after the Restoration in 1660, since then windows and other features have been added to make it more 'liveable'.

There's the expected souvenir shop in the courtyard. Knappogue also hosts touristy **medieval banquets** (☎ 061-360 788; adult/child €52/26; ☎ 5.30pm & 8.45pm Apr-Oct). Unlike Bunnratty Castle (p377), Knappogue lays out knives and forks!

Craggaunowen

For more ancient Irish heritage spiffed up for the masses, visit **Craggaunowen** (☎ 061-367 178; www.shannonheritage.com; adult/child €8.50/5; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Aug). Around 6km southeast of Quin, the project includes re-created ancient farms, dwellings such as a *cranndóg* (artificial island) and a 5th-century ring fort, plus real artefacts including a 2000-year-old oak road. Craggaunowen Castle is a small, well-preserved McNamara fortified house. With lots of animals like snout-nosed boars, this is a good place for kids who like dirty critters.

Craggaunowen has a pleasant little café. Nearby Cullaun Lake is a popular boating and picnic spot, and there are forest trails nearby.

EASTERN & SOUTH-EASTERN CLARE

Away from the Atlantic coast and the rugged Burren uplands, Clare rolls gently eastward through low-lying green countryside that is given emphasis by the occasional range of smooth hills. The county's eastern boundary is the River Shannon and the long, wriggling inland waterway of Lough Derg, which stretches 48km from Portumna in County Galway, to just south of Killaloe. Lakeside villages such as Mountshannon seem in a different country from the rugged, evocative west of Clare, but this is a delightful, intimate countryside of water, woods and panoramic views. Southeastern Clare, where the Shannon swells into its broad estuary, is a plain landscape dotted with farms and small villages. Overhyped Bunnratty Castle is a major attraction and nearby Shannon Airport is an important entry point.

SHANNON AIRPORT

☎ 061

Shannon, Ireland's second-largest airport, used to be a vital fuelling stop on the transatlantic air route for piston-engine planes without enough range to make it across the Atlantic to the European mainland. Today Shannon (Sionainn) is a low-stress gateway to the region.

About 3km from the airport, **Shannon town**, built to serve airport workers, has the feel of one of those old planned Soviet industrial

cities – albeit with more reliable hot water. Don't linger.

Information

Shannon Town Centre (an enclosed shopping mall), off the N19, has banks, basic stores and fast food.

The **airport terminal** (☎ 742 6666; www.shannonairport.com) has many facilities, including a nice, free observation area for those stuck waiting. Almost everything is on one level. You can park close to the terminal (€1 per 15 minutes); more remote areas are much cheaper.

Aer Rianta (☎ 712 000) This desk provides airport and flight information.

Bank of Ireland (☎ 471 100) Open from the first flight (about 6.30am) to 5.30pm; there also currency exchanges and ATMs.

Internet access The terminal has free wi-fi throughout. Terminals are available outside the Hughes & Hughes Bookshop (per 15min €1.50).

Tourist office (☎ 471 664; www.shannonregiontourism.ie; ☎ 6.30am-6pm May-Sep, 7am-5.30pm Oct-Apr) Near the arrivals area, it has vast regional info and books rooms (€4 fee).

Sleeping & Eating

There's B&B accommodation 3km from the airport in Shannon town but Ennis, Limerick and much prettier towns – even Bunnratty – can be reached in 30 minutes. Chains and modern pubs can be found in Shannon town. The airport terminal has one big and often crowded buffet-style restaurant.

Moloney's B&B (☎ 364 185; 21 Coill Mhara St; s/d €38/65; ☎) The four rooms at this cheery B&B in Shannon town are spotless. Coming from the airport turn right off the N19 at the big

SHANNON'S SIREN SONG

Long after Shannon Airport was no longer a vital refuelling stop, it prospered thanks to Irish laws that required international flights to Dublin to also stop here. Crafty locals were ready to relieve travellers forced into a visit of any spare change and it's here that Duty Free shopping was invented. The airport also takes credit for Irish coffee – that whiskey-laced creamy brew popular with Americans (although in 2007 you couldn't actually get one at the airport due to labour disputes).

The lovely attributes of Western Ireland aside, forcing travellers to land in Shannon was always a scam. In recent years some North American flights have been allowed to serve Dublin non-stop, but the last vestige of the mandatory Shannon stopover was swept away in 2007 by the EU open-skies deal with the USA. A predictable chorus of local officials decried the deal and worried that tourists might no longer come to the region if their plane wasn't forced to land. This argument, of course, ignores the fact that Shannon Airport is a delightful and civilised facility and that western Ireland will still attract hordes of visitors.

roundabout by the town centre. Keep on past the centre and at a crossroads go left down a slip road. Continue left past a school and the Shannon Leisure Centre. At the next junction go right, and then take the first left.

Park Inn Shannon Airport (☎ 471 122; www.parkinns.com; €155;) In a parking lot in front of the terminal, this bog-standard motel has views of the bogs. The 115 rooms are business-friendly and have wi-fi. This is an option if you have an early flight and want to lose the rental car. Look for specials.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Time will tell how many flights to the US continue to serve Shannon Airport (SNN) once the Open Skies agreement comes into full effect in 2008. The airport is proving popular with low-cost carriers like Ryanair, which serves its usual mixed bag of European destinations like Hahn in Germany – which despite its 75km distance away the airline calls ‘Frankfurt’. Services to London’s Heathrow Airport are in flux.

Airlines with direct flights to Shannon:

Aer Lingus (☎ 0818 365 000; www.aerlingus.ie) Dublin, Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles.

American Airlines (☎ 01-602 0550; www.aa.com) Chicago.

Central Wings (www.centralwings.com) Warsaw.

Continental (☎ 1890 925 252; www.continental.com) Newark.

Delta Air Lines (☎ 1800 768 080; www.delta.com) Atlanta, New York.

Ryanair (☎ 0818 303 030; www.ryanair.com) London, Glasgow and numerous secondary European airports.

BUS

Bus Éireann (☎ 474 311; www.buseireann.ie) 8am–5pm May–Sep, Mon–Fri Oct–Apr) has a ticket office near the arrivals area in the terminal. If it’s closed you can buy tickets from the driver. Destinations served by direct buses include Cork (€11.70, 2½ hours, hourly), Ennis (€5.40, 50 minutes, hourly), Galway (€10.80, 1¾ hours, hourly) and Limerick (€5, 30 to 55 minutes, two per hour). Some frequencies are reduced on Sundays.

TAXI

A taxi to the centre of Limerick or Ennis costs about €32 if booked at the taxi desk inside the airport. You may pay more at the outside rank. The taxi desk opens with first flights.

BUNRATTY

061

Conveniently located beside the N18 motorway and with plenty of bus-sized parking, Bunratty – home to government schemes to promote (milk?) tourism – draws more tourists than any other place in the region. The namesake castle has stood over the area for centuries. In recent decades it’s been tarted up and surrounded by attractions. A theme park re-creates a clichéd Irish village of old (where’s the horseshit we ask?) and each year more and more shops crowd the access roads – many selling authentic Irish goods just off the boat from China. There are some rather pricey group-dining options that are big with the bus crowd.

Buses and groups lay siege to Bunratty April to October. With all the hoopla, it’s easy to overlook the actual village, which is at the back of the theme park. It is a pretty place and has numerous leafy places to stay and eat. It’s a good place if you want something close to Shannon Airport, only 5km west.

There’s a small **visitor information office** (☎ 364 321; 9am–5.30pm Mon–Fri all year, Sat & Sun mid-May–Sep) in Bunratty Village Mills, a strip mall near the castle. There are ATMs and exchange services.

Bunratty Castle & Folk Park

There’s a joint-entry-fee ticket to **Bunratty Folk Park** and **Bunratty Castle** (☎ 360 788; www.shannonheritage.com; adult/child €14/9). You can get separate entrance tickets to the park when the castle is closed; all the prices are slightly less off-season.

A gift shop guarding the entrance has an especially garish selection of green slock including a ‘Top of the Morning’ alarm clock. (A sign inside the park reads ‘Exit to Car Park through shop’.)

BUNRATTY CASTLE

Big, square and hulking, **Bunratty Castle** (9am–4pm) certainly is well suited for its role. The Vikings built a fortified settlement on this spot, a former island surrounded by a moat. Then came the Normans, and Thomas de Clare built the first stone structure on the site in the 1270s. The present castle is the fourth incarnation to occupy the location beside the River Ratty. It was built in the early 1400s by the energetic McNamara family, but fell shortly thereafter to the O’Briens, kings of

Thomond, in whose possession it remained until the 17th century. Admiral Penn, father of William Penn who was the Quaker founder of the US state of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia lived here for a short time.

A complete restoration was carried out more recently, and today the castle is full of fine 14th- to 17th-century furniture, paintings and wall hangings. Most aren’t original to the castle but are similar to objects you would have found in the day, with the exception of the odd pot of boiling oil.

BUNRATTY FOLK PARK

The **folk park** (adult/child €8.85/5.25; 9am–6pm Jun–Aug, 9am–5.30pm Sep–May, last admission 45min before closing) adjoins the castle. It is a reconstructed traditional Irish village with cottages, a forge and working blacksmith, weavers and pie-makers. There’s a complete village street with post office, pub and small café.

A few of the buildings were brought here from elsewhere, but most are re-creations of the real thing. In peak season, four or five employees in period garb can be found explaining the more family-friendly aspects of the late 19th century (there are no poor people, trigger-happy English etc). The entire place is attractive in the way that Disneyland has its own charm. But you’ll find far more surviving authenticity of rural village Ireland in a place like Ennistymon than you will here.

The **Traditional Irish Night** (☎ 360 788; adult/child €46/23; 7–9.30pm Apr–Oct) is held in a corn barn in the folk park. Lots of red-haired (real or fake, it’s clearly a big help in securing employment) servers dish up trad music, dancing, Irish stew, apple pie and soda bread. There’s nontraditional wine as well, which may put you in the mood for the sing-along.

MEDIAEVAL BANQUETS

If you skip the high-jinks in the corn barn, you may opt for a **medieval banquet** (☎ 360 788; adult/child €55/27.50; 5.30pm & 8.45pm), replete with harp-playing maidens, court jesters and food with a medieval motif (lots of meaty items, but somehow we think the real stuff would empty the place right out). It’s all washed down with mead, a kind of honey wine and you eat with your fingers. The banquets are very popular with coach parties so it’s advisable for independent travellers to book well ahead. Various actors interact with choral singers.

The banquets at Knappogue Castle (p374) and Dunguaire Castle (in Galway; p437) are similar but more sedate.

Sleeping

Bunratty has a few hotels and dozens of B&Bs. A big map by the park entrance shows locations; most are away from the castle, park and shop scrum.

Briar Lodge (☎ 363 388; www.briarlodge.com; Hill Rd; s/d from €50/65;) On a quiet cul-de-sac 1.6km from the castle, this traditionally styled house makes for a good refuge. All three rooms have little extras like curling irons (for that grand banquet entrance!).

Tudor Lodge (☎ 362 248; Hill Rd; s/d €50/75;) Just a few minutes’ stroll from the centre, this handsome house has a faux-Tudor motif. The five rooms are comfortable and good value.

Bunratty Castle Hotel (☎ 478 700; www.bunrattycastlehotel.com; s/d from €80/150;) Right at ground zero, every touristy place in Bunratty is but a short walk from this modern, boutique hotel. All 144 rooms have wi-fi and are luxuriously appointed. It’s an attractive place and there’s a spa.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the food choices – especially in the malls – are geared to the masses.

Durty Nelly’s (☎ 364 861; Bunratty House Mews; bar meals €5–12, restaurant mains from €20) Thronged with tourists all summer long, Nelly’s manages to provide some charm amidst the hubbub, right across from the castle. Meals are better than you’d expect, although the pub is more enjoyable than the restaurant upstairs. A few locals (unpaid volunteers?) can be found with pints in corners near the bar and there are trad sessions many nights.

Red Door (☎ 466 993; Bunratty House, Hill Rd; mains €10–25; noon–3pm & 6.45–9pm Tue–Sun) Near the real Bunratty village behind the folk park, this top-notch restaurant serves creative local fare on the grounds of an old estate. The menu has international influences but you’ll always go right with local meats or seafood.

Mac’s Bar (☎ 361 511; Bunratty Folk Park) This engaging place is actually part of the Folk Park village. It has traditional music many evenings June to September, and on week-ends the rest of the year. Ignore it during the day, but after the park closes (you can still get in) it starts to feel real.

Getting There & Away

Bunratty is on the busy Bus Éireann Limerick–Shannon Airport route. Service to both is at least hourly and trips take less than 30 minutes and cost under €5. There's at least five direct buses daily to Ennis (€6.20, 30 minutes). Buses stop outside the Fitzpatrick Bunratty Shamrock Hotel near the castle.

KILLALOE & BALLINA

☎ 061 / pop 1750

Facing each other across a narrow channel, Killaloe and Ballina are really one destination, even if they have very different personalities (and counties). A fine old 13-arch bridge spans the river, linking the pair. You can walk it in five minutes.

Killaloe (Cill Da Lúa) is picturesque Clare at its finest. It lies on the western banks of lower Loch Deirgeirt, the southern extension of Lough Derg, where the loch narrows at one of the principal crossings of the River Shannon. The village lies snugly against the Slieve Bernagh Hills that rise abruptly to the west. The Arra Mountains create a fine balance to the east and all of Lough Derg is at hand. The village is also on the 180km East Clare Way.

Not as quaint as Killaloe, Ballina is in County Tipperary and actually manages to have some of the better pubs and restaurants. It lies at the end of a scenic drive from Nenagh along Lough Derg on the R494, see p321.

From Killaloe and Ballina, the Shannon is navigable all the way north to Lough Key in County Sligo; in summer the towns are jammed with weekend sailors.

Orientation & Information

In Ballina, Main St is the focus; it's up the hill from the water. The busy narrow street running from the river on the Killaloe side is Bridge St, which turns right and becomes Main St.

The **tourist office** (☎ 376 866; Brian Boru Heritage Centre; ☹ 10am–6pm May–mid-Sep) is on a tiny island off the bridge on the Killaloe side and shares space with the heritage centre and the **library** (☎ 376 062; ☹ 10am–1.30pm & 2.30–5.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 10am–5.30pm & 6.30–8pm Wed & Fri, 10am–2pm Sat), which has free internet access.

The AIB bank at the bottom of Church St in Killaloe has an ATM.

Whelan's Foodstore (☎ 376 159; Church St, Killaloe) has a substantial selection of newspapers and magazines.

There's parking on both sides of the river and that's just what you'll want to do as soon as you arrive. Pretty as it is, the bridge is really a traffic nightmare; its one lane and the complex local traffic patterns mean that you can wait 10 minutes or more to drive across. Use your feet. There are toilets on the Killaloe side in the car park.

Sights & Activities

Killaloe Cathedral (St Flannan's Cathedral; ☎ 376 687; Limerick Rd) dates from the early 13th century and was built by the O'Brien family on top of a 6th-century church. Inside, magnificent carvings decorate the Romanesque southern doorway. Next to the doorway is the shaft of a stone cross, known as Thorgrim's Stone. It dates from the early Christian period and is unusual in that it bears both the old Scandinavian runic and Irish ogham scripts. In the cathedral grounds is St Flannan's Oratory, of 12th-century Romanesque design.

The **Brian Boru Heritage Centre** (☎ 376 866; www.shannonheritage.com; Lock House, Killaloe; adult/child €3.20/1.65; ☹ 10am–6pm May–Sep) is named for the local boy who made good as the king who is purported to not only have unified Ireland but freed it from the Viking scourge. (Recently such claims have been ascribed to political spinmeisters, the Karl Roves of their day.) The centre does much to celebrate the legends.

For all your fishing needs go to **TJ's Angling Centre** (☎ 376 009; Main St, Ballina). You can rent fishing tackle for €10 per day and catch your limit in free advice. It also organises fishing trips, although you can catch trout and pike right here.

Whelan's Boat Hire (☎ 086 391 9472; Whelan's Food Store, Church St, Killaloe) rents out 19ft lake boats for €15/50 per hour/day, including all equipment and fishing rods.

To cruise the waters, the **Spirit of Killaloe** (☎ 086 814 0559; Bridge St, Killaloe; tickets €10) does hour-long trips.

Sleeping

There are lots of B&Bs in the area, especially on the roads along the lough. Book ahead in summer.

Arkansas B&B (☎ 376 485; arkansas@eircom.net; Main St, Ballina; s/d €40/65; ☐) There are four basic rooms at this well-located simple B&B. And the name? The lovely owner says she once saw a fishing trawler named Arkansas and she liked the sound.

Kincora House (☎ 376 149; www.kincorahouse.com; Church St, Killaloe; s/d €40/70) This simple place in a centuries-old townhouse is right in the heart of Killaloe. The traditional-style rooms have a simple, older style and could belong to a favoured aunt.

Lakeside Hotel (☎ 376 122; www.lakeside-killaloe.com; Ballina; s/d from €70/130; ☐ ☹ ☎) In a great location on the Ballina side of the bridge, this gentrified waterfront hotel has several attractive public areas and the grounds good for strolling. The 46 rooms vary greatly, prices work in direct ratio to view.

Kincora Hall Hotel (☎ 061-376 000; www.kincorahall.com; Killaloe; r €80-200; ☐) This handsome hotel sits right on the water and has its own marina. There's a comfy away-from-it-all feel to everything; rooms are big and are stylishly done out and there's a plush library for relaxing. It's 1.3km north of the bridge.

Eating & Drinking

Molly's Bar & Restaurant (☎ 376 632; Ballina; meals €8-24; ☹ food served noon-10pm) Right at the base of the bridge, this riverside pub has a very nice rooftop deck which puts you high above the coagulated traffic. Molly's gets very busy and offers Irish standards such as bacon and cabbage plus pub classics such as pizzas and sandwiches. On weekend nights there's a disco, live music and DJs.

River Run (☎ 376 805; www.riverruncafe.com; Main St, Ballina; mains €10-16; ☹ noon-10pm) Small, smart and stylish, this bistro has food as creative as the art on the walls. The selections are kept short but always include good seafood, fish, various meats and veggie options. Desserts are tops, the wine list long.

Goosier's Bar & Eating House (☎ 376 791; Main St, Ballina; dinner mains €18-28; ☹ noon-10pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-9.30pm Sun) Only the masses of fun-seekers on busy weekends diminishes the Goosier's experience. This is a hugely popular place, noted for its big selection of fish. Sailors make mirth and plough into the hefty seafood platter. Want to avoid a wait? Dine at the bar (meals €9.50 to €24), and save a few euros.

Anchor Inn (☎ 376 108; Bridge St, Killaloe) The raucous Anchor Inn stages traditional music sessions on Wednesday night, and there's live music at weekends. It's right at the bridge and an easy hop from Molly's.

Liam O'Riains (☎ 376 722; Main St, Ballina) At the area's most atmospheric pub you're greeted

by a cow-eyed, 12kg pike mounted on a wall near the entrance. He's an ugly mother. Everything else here, however, is lovely. Candles glow softly and windows overlook the river below.

Getting There & Away

There are four **Bus Éireann** (☎ 313 333) services a day Monday to Saturday from Limerick to Killaloe (€5.40, 45 minutes). The bus stop is outside the cathedral.

KILLALOE TO MOUNTSHANNON

The journey north to Mountshannon along Lough Derg is scenic; there are good viewpoints and picnic spots. To get to Mountshannon from Killaloe take the R463 to Tuamgraney, then turn east on the R352.

About 2km north of Killaloe, **Beal Ború** is an earthen mound or fort said to have been Kincora, the fabled palace of the famous Irish king Brian Ború, who, besides lending his name to bad Irish bars the world over, took on the Vikings at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. Traces of Bronze Age settlement have been found. With its commanding view over Lough Derg, this was obviously a site of strategic importance.

About 3.5km north of Killaloe is the **University of Limerick Activity Centre** (☎ 061-376 622; www.ul.ie; Two Mile Gate). Here individuals and groups can learn water-based skills, such as canoeing, sailing and windsurfing. Land-based activities include archery, orienteering and forest games. There's a very impressive, high-rig frame on which to get to grips with rope work. A weekend water-based skills course costs from €200 per person.

About 4.5km north of Killaloe is Cragliath Hill, which has another fort, **Griananlaghna**, named after Brian Ború's great-grandfather, King Lachtna.

Tuamgraney, at the junction of the road to Mountshannon, has an interesting old church, St Cronan's, with a small museum, the **East Clare Heritage Centre** (☎ 921 351; www.eastclareheritage.com).

Sleeping & Eating

Lough Derg Holiday Centre (☎ 061-376 777; www.loughderg.net; Scarriiff Rd, Killaloe; cottages per week from €400; ☹ mid-May–mid-Sep) Six kilometres north of Killaloe, near the lake shore, the cottages at the Holiday Centre have three bedrooms. It's a fun place and you can do most things

aquatic such as rent a boat. The campground, however, is now closed.

Lantern House (☎ 061-923 034; www.lanternhouse.com; Scarriff Rd, Oggonelloe; s/d from €45/90; (P)) About 10km north of Killaloe, and in a lofty location overlooking much of Lough Derg, this modern six-room house is beautifully surrounded by gardens of heather. There's a restaurant (mains €12 to €24; open 6pm to 9pm March to October) attached that offers distinctive modern Irish cuisine. Booking ahead is advised.

MOUNTSHANNON & AROUND

☎ 061 / pop 330

Winner of many a 'Tidy Town' award, the village of Mountshannon (Baile Uí Bheoláin), on the southwestern shores of Lough Derg, was founded in 1742 by an enlightened landlord to house a largely Protestant community of flax workers.

The harbour is host to a fair number of fishing boats, and visiting yachts and cruisers in summer. It is the main centre for trips to Holy Island, one of Clare's finest early Christian settlements.

There's great fishing around Mountshannon, mainly for brown trout, pike, perch and bream. Ask at your lodging about boat hire and equipment.

There are toilets by the harbour.

Holy Island

Lying 2km offshore from Mountshannon, Holy Island (Inis Cealtra) is the site of a **monastic settlement** thought to have been founded by St Cáimín in the 7th century. On the island you will see a round tower that is more than 27m tall (though missing its top storey). You'll also find four old chapels, a hermit's cell and some early Christian gravestones dating from the 7th to 13th centuries. One of the chapels has an elegant Romanesque arch. Inside the chapel is an inscription in Old Irish, which translates as 'Pray for Tornog, who made this cross'.

The Vikings treated this monastery roughly in the 9th century, but under the crowd-pleasing protection of Brian Ború and others, it flourished.

From Mountshannon harbour you can take a cruise around the island with **Ireland Line Cruises** (☎ 375 011; adult/child €8/4; ☎ late Apr-Oct). Trips can also be arranged from Mount-

shannon through the East Clare Heritage Centre (see p379) in Tuamgraney.

Sleeping & Eating

Lakeside Holiday Park (☎ 927 225; www.lakesideireland.com; camp sites €15; ☎ May-Oct) This spacious park has a fine lakeside location with 35 camp sites and a few holiday trailers (€250 per week). It hires out boats and equipment for windsurfing, rowing and sailing. From Mountshannon, head north along the Portumna road (R352) for 2km and take the first turn-off on the right.

Derg Lodge (☎ 927 319, 927 180; bridgebarbb@mail.com; Whitegate Rd, Mountshannon; s/d €40/60; (P)) This pleasant four-room B&B is about 500m from the village. It hires boats for €35 per day, €65 with a *gillie* (boatperson).

Hawthorn Lodge (☎ 927 120; www.mountshannon-dare.com; s/d from €45/60; (P)) Just 1km from the village, this tidy cottage is everybody's idea of a low-key country retreat. Set your electric blanket on high and you may never emerge into the chilly albeit fresh morning air.

Mountshannon Hotel (☎ 927 162; www.mountshannon-hotel.ie; Main St; s/d €50/80; ☎ Mar-Oct; (P)) This little heritage hotel is as tidy as the town. The 14 rooms are good value for the money and there's a good bar with tables out front.

An Cupán Caifé (☎ 927 275; Main St; meals €8-18; ☎ noon-9pm May-Aug, 12.30-9pm Sep-Apr, closed Wed) This café-restaurant has a charmingly casual atmosphere. There's a varied menu of surf and turf, with a smattering of Irish-ised Italian choices. Daily specials usually involve local fish.

Harbour Restaurant (☎ 927 162; Mountshannon Hotel, Main St; mains €10-20) This hotel restaurant hotel is justifiably popular. People book well in advance to enjoy the creative seafood dishes available.

Getting There & Away

Swimming or driving are your best ways to reach Mountshannon. Bus Éireann runs one bus to here each Saturday from Limerick.

NORTH TO GALWAY

North of Mountshannon, the R352 follows Lough Derg to Portumna in Galway. Inland is an area known as the Clare Lakelands, based around Feakle, where numerous lakes offer good coarse fishing.

SOUTHWESTERN & WESTERN CLARE

One look at the map and you can see that Loop Head on Clare's southwestern tip is giving the finger to the Atlantic. OK, it's a stubby finger but still it's emblematic of the never-ceasing titanic struggle between land and sea along this stretch of Irish coast.

The soaring cliffs south of the beach resort of Kilkee to Loop Head are both striking and underappreciated by many visitors. Most save their energies for the iconic Cliffs of Moher. Marching in geologic lockstep, the formations are undeniably stunning, although in summer you may be marching in lockstep with hordes of other visitors.

South of the cliffs to Kilkee are the low-key beach towns of Lahinch, Miltown Malbay and Doonbeg. No part of this coast is remotely tropical, but there's a stark wind-blown beauty that stretches to the horizon. Many a hapless survivor of the Spanish Armada washed ashore here 400 years ago. Tales of their offspring still titillate locals.

Your best days here may be spent on the smallest roads you can find. Make your own discoveries, whether it's your own stretch of lonely beach or something more settled, like the charming heritage town of Ennistymon.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Shannon Ferry Limited (☎ 905 3124; www.shannonferries.com) runs a 20-minute car ferry from Killimer, across the Shannon Estuary, to Tarbert in County Kerry. You pay on board. See p284 for fares and times. It's a real time-saver over detouring through Limerick.

BUS

You can usually count on a Bus Éireann service or two linking all the main towns in the region each day. From Limerick routes run along the Shannon to Kilrush and Kilkee, as well as through Corofin, Ennistymon, Lahinch, Liscannor and on to the Cliffs of Moher and Doolin. Buses from Ennis follow the same pattern. On the coast between Kilkee and Lahinch services average twice daily in summer. There are a few other routes but they are not daily and are geared to school kids.

KILRUSH

☎ 065 / pop 2700

Kilrush (Cill Rois) is an interesting small town that overlooks the Shannon Estuary and the hills of Kerry to the south. The main street, Frances St, runs directly to the harbour. It is more than 30m wide, reflecting Kilrush's origins as a port and market town in the 19th century, when there was much coming and going between land and sea. It has the western coast's biggest **marina** (www.kilrushcreekmarina.ie) at Kilrush Creek.

Kilrush's tourist office (☎ 905 1577) moves from year to year but is usually on or near Frances St and is open roughly May to September.

In Market Sq there's an ACC bank with an ATM and on Frances St you'll find the post office and an AIB bank with an ATM. **KK Computing** (☎ 905 1806; Frances St; per hr €5; ☎ 10am-10pm, shorter hours in winter) has internet access.

Sights & Activities

St Senan's Catholic church (Toler St) contains eight detailed examples of stained glass by well-known early-20th-century artist Harry Clarke. East of town is **Kilrush Wood**, which has some fine old trees and a picnic area.

Vandeleur Walled Garden (☎ 905 1760; adult/child €5/2; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar) is a remarkable 'lost' garden. It was the private domain of the wealthy Vandeleur family, merchants and landowners who engaged in harsh evictions and forced emigration of local people in the 19th century. The gardens lie within a large walled area and have been redesigned and planted with colourful tropical and rare plants. There are woodland trails around the area and there's also a café.

Near the marina is **Kilrush Creek Adventure Centre** (☎ 905 2855; www.kilrushcreekadventure.com; Kilrush Creek). It offers a range of watery activities including windsurfing, kayaking, sailing and power boating. Call for rates and hours.

More than 100 dolphins live in Shannon Estuary. Weather permitting, you can do a two- to 2½-hour trip to see them with **Dolphin Discovery** (☎ 905 1327; www.discoverdolphins.ie; Kilrush; adult/child €19/10). Boats leave from Kilrush Creek Marina.

Sleeping & Eating

B&Bs are about as common as driftwood on a beach.

Katie O'Connor's Holiday Hostel (☎ 905 1133; katieconnors@eircom.net; Frances St; dm/d €17/36; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct) This fine old main-street house dates from the 18th century, and was one of the town houses of the Vandeleur family. These days Masie extends an amazing welcome. There are 16 beds in two rooms at this IHH-affiliated hostel.

our pick Crotty's (☎ 905 2470; www.crottypubkilrush.com; Market Sq; s/d from €45/70) Brimming with character, Crotty's has an old-fashioned high bar, tiled floors and a series of snugs decked out with traditional furnishings. You can enjoy music many nights in summer. Food is served daily (meals €6 to €16) and is a high-end version of pub fare. Daily specials are excellent value and reflect what's fresh. Upstairs are seven traditional rooms that are small and clean. Service is excellent and the owners are real pros.

Hillcrest View (☎ 905 1986; www.hillcrestview.com; Doonbeg Rd; s/d from €50/64; (P)) This large house, at the top of the hill where the Doonbeg road climbs out of Kilrush, is about 1km from the centre. The six rooms have lovely furnishings, and breakfast is served in a bright conservatory.

Harbour Restaurant (☎ 905 2836; Creek Marina; meals €8-25; ☎ noon-9pm) Right on the, er, harbour, this modern bistro has a long and appealing menu. There's everything from massive sandwiches to all manner of local seafood. Tables outside are popular in summer and you can also just relax with a suitable sunset beverage.

Getting There & Around

Bus Éireann has one or two buses daily to Limerick (1¼ hours), Ennis (one hour) and Kilkee (15 minutes). Fares average €6.

You can hire bikes at **Gleeson's Cycles** (☎ 905 1127; Henry St; per day/week €20/80, day deposit €40).

SCATTERY ISLAND

This uninhabited, windswept, treeless island, 3km southwest of Kilrush in the estuary is the site of a Christian settlement founded by St Senan in the 6th century. Its 36m-high **round tower** is one of the tallest and best preserved in Ireland, and the entrance is at ground level instead of the usual position high above the foundation. There are remains of five **medieval churches**, including a 9th-century cathedral. This is a great and evocative place to wander about.

An exhibition on the history and wildlife of the Heritage Service-administered island is housed in the **Scattery Island Visitor Centre** (www.heritageireland.ie; admission free).

Scattery Island Ferries (☎ 065-905 1327; Kilrush Creek Marina; adult/child €12/6; ☎ Jun-Sep) runs boats from Kilrush to the island. There's no strict timetable as the trips are subject to tidal and weather conditions. There's a stay of about 1hr on the island. You can buy tickets at the small kiosk at the marina.

KILKEE

☎ 065 / pop 1300

During the summer, Kilkee's wide beach is thronged with day-trippers and holiday-makers. Kilkee (Cill Chaioi) first became popular in Victorian times when rich Limerick families built seaside retreats here. Today, it is well supplied with guesthouses, amusement arcades and takeaways, although good taste – mostly – prevails and there are few real visual horrors.

The semicircular bay has high cliffs on the north end and tidal rocks to the south. The sea puts on a show anytime as waves pound the shore.

Information

Bank of Ireland (O'Curry St) Has an ATM.

Post office (O'Connell St) Across from the library.

Tourist office (☎ 905 6112; O'Connell St; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Jun-Aug) Near the seafront.

Sights & Activities

Many visitors come for the fine sheltered beach and the **Pollock Holes**, natural swimming pools in the Duggerna Rocks to the south of the beach. **St George's Head**, to the north, has good cliff walks and scenery, while south of the bay, the **Duggerna Rocks** form an unusual natural amphitheatre. Further south is a huge **sea cave**. These sights can be reached by driving to Kilkee's West End area and following the coastal path.

Kilkee is a well-known **diving** centre. There are shore dives from the Duggerna Rocks fringing the western side of the bay, and boat dives on the Black Rocks further out. Experience and local knowledge or guidance is strongly advised. Right at the tip of the Duggerna Rocks is the small inlet of Myles Creek, out from which there's excellent underwater scenery. **Oceanlife Ireland** (☎ 905 6707; www.diveireland.com; George's Head, Kilkee), by the harbour, has tanks and other equipment for hire and runs basic courses.

All that surf means that folks with boards (and extra thick wetsuits) will be very happy. **Kilkee Surf School** (☎ 087-995 6231; lessons per day from €30) is run by veteran local surfers and takes students to where the waves are best each day.

Sleeping

There are plenty of guesthouses and B&Bs in Kilkee, though during the high season rates can soar and you may have a problem finding a vacancy.

Green Acres Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 905 7011; Doonaha, Kilkee; camp sites €18; ☎ early Apr-Sep) Beside the Shannon, 6km south of Kilkee on the R487, this is a small peaceful park with 40 sites.

Bayview (☎ 905 6058; www.bayviewkilkee.com; O'Connell St; s/d from €45/64; (P)) A central guesthouse right on the main drag, Bayview has

good views over the bay from its front rooms. The eight guest rooms vary considerably in décor, although you won't be tempted to cart anything home. The breakfast room has a heritage feel.

Strand Guest House (☎ 905 6177; www.thestrandkilkee.com; The Strand; s/d from €45/74; (P)) Right across from the water, this six-room guesthouse is a veteran of many a summer. The rooms are simply decorated, but do have telephones. Some have great views as does the lounge, which has picnic tables outside for a little salt-spray in your stout.

Stella Maris Hotel (☎ 905 6455; www.stellamaris-hotel.com; O'Connell St; s/d from €55/120; (P) (P)) There are 20 modern rooms in the year-round choice for lodging in Kilkee. Some rooms on the top floor have views of the surf and some have high-speed internet. The hotel is right in the centre and has good food.

Halpin's Townhouse Hotel (☎ 905 6032; www.halpinsprivatehotels.com; Erin St; s/d from €80/100; ☎ mid-Mar–mid-Nov; (P)) A smart Georgian townhouse has been turned into a plush 12-room hotel. Close to the centre, it eschews the salt-stained furnishings of many a beach-town place for a stylish look. Residents enjoy the basement bar with its gracious airs and good wine list.

Eating

Kilkee has several markets; in summer the ranks of eateries swell.

Pantry (☎ 905 6576; O'Curry St; meals €6-12; ☎ 10am-10pm) This simple caff goes one better than the competition with its flawless preparations of classics like lasagne, burgers, and fish and chips.

Stella Maris (☎ 905 6455; O'Connell St; meals €10-25; ☎ noon-9pm) The popular hotel has a good menu of local foods on offer through the day. Enjoy great seafood or one of many daily specials in the bright and simple dining room or in the usually crowded pub.

Murphy Blacks (☎ 905 6854; The Square; mains €16-28; ☎ 5-9.30pm Wed-Sun Apr-Oct) How do you ensure that you're getting the best fish? Go to a place owned by an ex-fisherman. This deservedly popular dinner spot is booked up solid night after night for its amazing seafood dishes that are executed with colour and flair. Tables outside are a summer-night treat.

Entertainment

Myle's Creek (☎ 905 6771; O'Curry St) Music plays most nights from June to August in this

LAST CALL FOR THE WEST CLARE RAILWAY?

Running on a roundabout route from Ennis to Kilrush and Kilkee, the narrow-gauge West Clare Railway was sort of the line that barely could. It ran from 1892 until 1961 and during that time reached its greatest notoriety when popular early-20th-century musician Percy French mocked it in the song *Are Ye Right There Michael*. It seems the perennially late WCR caused French to miss a paying gig in Kilkee. After taking his revenge via song the railway management – so the oft-told tale goes – sued for libel. Percy triumphed because after he was late for a court appearance, the judge asked for an explanation. His reply: 'I took the West Clare Railway your honour.' The case was thrown out and he was awarded costs.

Today a 2km vestige of the **line** (☎ 905 1284; www.westclarerailway.ie; adult/child €6/3; ☎ 10am-6pm May-Sep) survives near Moyasta on the Kilkee Rd (N67) 6km northwest of Kilrush. Run by volunteers, the steam-powered trains shuttle back and forth over the open land. And if some local boosters get their way the line will be restored between Kilrush and Kilkee. However there's one obstacle: like seemingly everywhere else in Ireland, the route is under threat from new home construction.

DETOUR: CLIFFS OF AMAZEMENT

On the south side of Kilkee's bay, look for a sign that reads 'Scenic Loop'; it's an understatement. A narrow track curves around the coast for 10km south until it joins the R487, the Loop Head Rd. Along the way you will be struck by one stunning vista of soaring coastal cliffs after another. Some have holes blasted through by the surf, others have been separated from land and now stand out in the ocean as lonely sentinels. One even has an old house perched on top—how did that get there? Plan on pattering along, blasting through your camera's memory chip and pausing for passing cows.

simple place. very quiet in the off-season, it attracts a playful and gregarious crowd in summer. On some nights there's not a fiddle in sight and amped guitars rule.

Mary O'Mara's (☎ 905 6286; O'Curry St) A basic pub with popular trad music nights through the summer.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann has one to two buses daily to Kilkee from Limerick (€13.50, two hours) and Ennis (€10.50, 1¼ hours). Both routes pass through Kilrush.

KILKEE TO LOOP HEAD

The land from Kilkee south to Loop Head has subtle undulations that suddenly end in dramatic cliffs falling off into the Atlantic. It's a windswept place with timeless striations of old stone walls. You can literally see for miles and there is a rewarding sense of escape from the mainstream. It's good cycling country and there are coastal walks; which is just as well as there's no public transport.

Carrigaholt

☎ 065 / pop 100

On 15 September 1588, seven tattered ships of the Spanish Armada took shelter off Carrigaholt (Carraig an Chabaltaigh), a tiny village inside the mouth of the Shannon Estuary. One, probably the *Annunciada*, was torched and abandoned, sinking somewhere out in the estuary. Today Carrigaholt has one of the simplest and cutest main streets you'll find. The substantial remains of a 15th-century

McMahon castle with a square keep overlook the water.

To view resident bottlenose dolphins (there are more than 100 in the Shannon Estuary), head for **Dolphinwatch** (☎ 905 8156; www.dolphinwatch.ie; Carrigaholt; adult/child €22/11). Opposite the post office, Dolphinwatch runs two-hour trips in the estuary from April to October, weather permitting. Ask about Loop Head sunset cruises.

Long Dock (☎ 905 8106; West St; meals €6-24; ☎ food served 11am-9pm) is an atmospheric pub-restaurant combo. Stone walls and floors and a welcoming fire are only the start. Fresh fish is the thing here; you'll see the purveyors out working in the estuary or even drinking at the bar.

Like Carrigaholt, **Morrissey's Village Pub** (☎ 905 8041; West St) hasn't changed much in a long time and is all the better for it. Get your feet ready for music and dancing many nights through the year. Picnic tables take full advantage of the corner location.

Kilbaha

☎ 065 / pop 50

The land at this minute waterfront village is as barren as the soul of a 19th-century landlord who burned down the local church so his workers wouldn't waste productive hours praying. Even today the scars are felt. Gazing up at the ruins of his house far up the hillside, a local says: 'Yeah, we got rid of him', as if the events of 150 years ago were yesterday.

You can learn more about this story and other aspects of local life from a unique modern-day **scroll**, an open-air sculpture that relates local history.

The **Lighthouse Inn** (☎ 905 8358; www.thelighthouseinn.ie; s/d €30/60; ☎) is a stolid place right on the water. It has 11 basic and clean rooms. The pub serves sandwiches and the like through the year and more complex seafood dinners (from €12) in summer. There are live sessions many nights.

Loop Head

On a clear day, Loop Head (Ceann Léime), Clare's southernmost point, has magnificent views south to the Dingle Peninsula crowned by Mt Brandon (951m), and north to the Aran Islands and Galway Bay. There are bracing walks in the area and a long hiking trail runs along the cliffs to Kilkee. A working **lighthouse** (complete with Fresnel lens) is the punctuation on the point.

The often deserted wilds of Loop Head are perfect for a little DIY fun. **Loop Head Adventures** (☎ 905 8875; loopheadsports@eircom.net; ☎ May-Oct) rents gear and gives advice for cycling (bikes €15 per day), fishing (rods and gear €15 per day) and snorkelling (drysuits and gear €30 per day). It's located a short distance from the lighthouse.

KILKEE TO ENNISTYMON

North of Kilkee, the land flattens and you enjoy vistas that sweep across pastures and dunes. The N67 runs inland for some 32km until it reaches Quilty. Take the occasional lane to the west and search out infrequented places such as White Strand, north of Doonbeg. **Ballard Bay** is 8km west of Doonbeg, where an old telegraph tower looks over some fine cliffs. **Donegal Point** has the remains of a promontory fort. There's good fishing all along the coast, and safe beaches at Seafield, Lough Donnell and Quilty. Off the coast of the latter, look for **Mutton Island**, a barren expanse sporting an ancient tower.

Doonbeg

☎ 065 / pop 610

Doonbeg (An Dún Beag) is a tiny seaside village about halfway between Kilkee and Quilty. Another Armada ship, the *San Esteban*, was wrecked on 20 September 1588 near the mouth of the Doonbeg River. The survivors were later executed at Spanish Point. Note the surviving wee little 16th-century **castle tower** next to the graceful seven-arch stone bridge over the Doonbeg River.

White Strand (Trá Bán) is a quiet beach, 2km long and backed by dunes. It's north of town and hard to miss as it's now been surrounded by the snooty – and hulking – Doonbeg Golf Resort and Lodge. From the public car park (protected from the adjacent resort hotel by a stout fence, no doubt so the swells won't steal your iPod), you follow a break in the dunes to a perfect crescent of sand.

SLEEPING & EATING

For campers there are often spots on the side roads around Doonbeg that make a good pitch, with glorious sunsets as a bonus. The town has two popular rural pubs where locals celebrate anything they can think of.

Whitstrand B&B (☎ 905 5347; whitstrandbandb@eircom.net; Killard; s/d €30/60; ☎) Is this the deal of the coast? A large, modern house looks

over a perfect little cove of beach across to the sweep of the White Strand. The two rooms are comfortable and have views. Remote – at times you can hear cows mooing over the surf – the B&B is just south of town, then 2km to the water.

Morrissey's (☎ 905 5304; www.morrisseysdoonbeg.com; Main St; s/d €70/100; ☎ Mar-Oct; ☎) Under its fourth-generation owner, this old pub has been reborn as one of the hippest places on the coast. The seven rooms feature queen beds, flat-screen TVs and wi-fi. The pub-restaurant is renowned for its casual but enticing seafood, from fish and chips to barbecued salmon. Outside there's a terrace overlooking the river, inside colours reminiscent of a box of good bon-bons mingle with stark white walls. Meals range from €8 to €20.

Miltown Malbay

☎ 065 / pop 1600

Like Kilkee, Miltown Malbay was a resort favoured by well-to-do Victorians, though the town isn't actually on the sea: the beach is 2km south at Spanish Point. A classically friendly place in the chatty Irish way, Miltown Malbay has a thriving music scene. Every year it hosts a **Willie Clancy Irish Music Festival** (☎ 708 4148) as a tribute to a native son and one of Ireland's greatest pipers. The festival is usually the first or second week in July, when the town is overrun with wandering minstrels, the pubs are packed, and Guinness is consumed by the barrel. Workshops and classes underpin the event; don't be surprised to attend a recital with 40 noted fiddlers.

For local information, drop by **An Ghiolla Finn Gift Shop** (☎ 688 9239; Main St). The wonderful Maureen Kilduff knows everything and everybody.

Possibly the friendliest welcome in town is at **An Gleann B&B** (☎ 708 4281; angleann@oceanfree.net; Ennis Rd; s/d €40/70; ☎). Off the R474 a kilometre from the centre, the rooms here are basic and comfy and owner Mary Hughes is a delight. Cyclists are catered for.

You'll no longer be mystified about how the pros do it after a stay at the **Berry Lodge** (☎ 708 7022; www.berrylodge.com; Annagh; s/d €52/80; ☎), which runs a serious cooking school. Students get in-depth instruction – often over more than one day. Packages include lodging and meals, roughly €100 per person per day. Those with a scholarly bent can simply avail themselves of the five cheery

rooms and excellent meals. It's just south of Miltown Malbay.

Across the road from the gift shop, **Baker's Cafe** (☎ 708 4411; Main St; meals €4; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) has excellent baked goods and creates enormous sandwiches – perfect for seaside picnics.

Not far away, the **Old Bake House** (☎ 708 4350; Main St; meals €6-14; ☎ noon-9pm) wins awards for its simple yet exceptional cooking. There's a new menu every day. Highlights might include a hummus salad with garlic bread, seafood of many stripes or a surprising combination of sandwiches. It has a kids' menu.

O'Friel's Bar (☎ 708 4275; The Square) is one of a couple of genuine old-style places with occasional trad sessions.

Bus Éireann service is paltry. Expect one or two buses daily north and south along the coast and inland to Ennis.

Lahinch

☎ 065 / pop 625

Lahinch (Leacht Uí Chonchubhair) owes its living to beach-seeking tourists pure and simple. You might find a beady-eyed greed in the eyes of the locals you won't find at village just a mile or two inland. The town sits on protected Liscannor Bay and does have a fine beach. Free-spending mobs descend in summer, many wielding golf clubs for play at the famous Lahinch Golf Club.

The tourist office, **Lahinch Fáilte** (☎ 708 2082; www.lahinchfailte.com; The Dell; ☎ 9am-8pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Sep-May), is off the northern end of Main St and is part of a well-stocked gift shop. There's an ATM outside the tourist office and the office has a bureau de change. You can park at both ends of town near the water.

Like swells after a storm, the surfing scene keeps getting bigger, you can get lessons from about €30 an hour. **Lahinch Surf Shop** (☎ 708 1108; www.oceanscene.ie; Church St) runs regular classes for all levels and sells gear.

Lahinch Surf School (☎ 087-960 9667; www.lahinchsurfschool.com; Beach Hut, Lahinch Prom) offers lessons and various multiday packages.

SLEEPING & EATING

Lahinch Hostel (☎ 708 1040; www.visitlahinch.com; Church St; dm €17, r €20-45) This well-run hostel has clean, bright rooms with a total of 55 beds. It's close to the beachfront and has surfboard and bicycle storage.

Auburn House (☎ 708 2890; www.auburnhouse.ie; School Rd; s/d from €45/62; ☎ Feb-Oct) An absolute find – but you might miss it because you'll be enjoying the view and not looking for the house, this brilliantly run six-room gem is right at the south entrance to town, across from the cliffs. There are great views and the centre is a three-minute walk.

Atlantic Hotel (☎ 708 1049; www.atlantichotel.ie; s/d from €99/130; ☎ ☎) There's still a pleasant air of bygone times in the reception rooms and bars at this town-centre veteran. The 14 rooms are well-appointed. There's food in the bar and the restaurant offers of the expected fine seafood choices (mains from €29).

Barrtra Seafood Restaurant (☎ 708 1280; Miltown Malbay Rd; mains €16-28) The menu item 'Seafood Symphony' says it all at this rural repose 3.5km south of Lahinch. Enjoy views over pastures to the sea from the homey dining rooms. The cooking eschews flash and lets the inherent tastiness of the food shine.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus Éireann runs one or two buses daily through Lahinch on the Doolin-Ennis/Limerick routes and one or two daily south along the coast to Doonbeg in summer.

ENNISTYMON

☎ 065 / pop 880

Ennistymon (Inis Díomáin) is a timeless country village just 4km inland from Lahinch, but worlds away in terms of atmosphere. People go about their business (which involves a lot of cheerful chatting) barely noticing the characterful buildings lining Main St. And behind this façade there's a surprise: the roaring **Cascades**, the stepped falls of the River Inagh. After heavy rain the falls surge, beer-brown and foaming, and you risk getting drenched on windy days in the flying drizzle. You'll find them through an arch by Byrne's Hotel.

The **library** (☎ 707 1245; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 10am-5.30pm & 6.30-8pm Wed & Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), just down from the Square, offers free internet access. The Bank of Ireland, in Parliament St, has a bureau de change and an ATM.

Besides excellent pubs and good sleeping options, Ennistymon has a burgeoning arts scene. **Courthouse Studios & Gallery** (☎ 707 1630; Parliament St) is an impressive new facility with ever-changing exhibitions by local and international artists. It provides studio

space for several artists in residence such as film-maker Fergus Tighe. Just south of town on the N85, artists Eamon Doyle and Phillip Morrison have studios and a **gallery** (☎ 707 2787; ☎ 10am-6pm).

Sleeping & Eating

Byrne's (☎ 707 1080; Main St; r €80-120) The Cascades are just out back at this historic guesthouse and restaurant. When the air is not heavy with mist, you can have a drink at a back deck table. The menu is substantial and there's plenty of seafood specials (mains €15-25). There are six comfortable rooms up the creaky heritage stairs. The restaurant is open noon to 9pm Monday to Saturday May to October, and 6pm to 9pm, Wednesday to Saturday during the rest of the year.

Falls Hotel (☎ 707 1004; www.fallshotel.ie; s/d from €85/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) This handsome Georgian house, built on the ruins of an O'Brien castle, has 140 rooms that exude gracious charm. Fittings throughout are heavy and traditional. The view of the Cascades from the entrance steps is breath-taking, and there are walks around the 20 hectares of wooded gardens.

Café Eclipse (☎ 087-977 5226; Parliament St; lunch mains €8-10; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) This busy little place is the local choice for a full trad breakfast. The rest of the day there's a standard lineup of tasty sandwiches and hot specials.

Holywell Italian Restaurant (☎ 707 2464; Church St; mains €10-12; ☎ noon-11pm) At the north end of the centre, this dark and casual restaurant is the place to spool pasta or knock back a pizza over romantic whispers.

Entertainment

Eugene's (☎ 707 1777; Main St) Not to be missed, Eugene's is a classic pub that defines craic. It's intimate, cosy and has a trademark collection of visiting cards covering its walls, alongside photographs of famous writers and musicians. There is an inspiring collection of whiskey (Irish) and whisky (Scottish) over which you can smoothly debate their competing qualities.

Cooley's House (☎ 707 1712; Main St) Another great old pub, but with music most nights in summer and on Wednesday (trad night) in winter.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs one or two buses daily through Ennistymon on the Doolin-Ennis/

THE POET & THE PRIESTS

Ennistymon has more than its fair share of cultural associations. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas lived at what is now the Falls Hotel when the house was the family home of his wife Caitlín McNamara. There's plenty of Thomas memorabilia, and a Dylan Thomas Bar, at the hotel. At the other end of the scale is *Father Ted*, the enduring British TV comedy set around the highjinks of three Irish priests living on the fictional Craggy Island. Most of the locations used in the show are around Ennistymon (Eugene's pub was used as a location and the cast drank here) and Kilfenora. The lonely Father Ted house is near Kilnaboy.

Limerick routes and one or two daily south along the coast to via Lahinch to Doonbeg in summer. Buses stop in front of Aherne's on Church St.

LISCANNOR & AROUND

☎ 065 / pop 380

This small, seaside village overlooks Liscannor Bay where the road (R478) heads north to the Cliffs of Moher and Doolin. Liscannor (Lios Ceannúir) has given its name to a type of local stone, slatelike and with a rippled surface, that is used for floors, walls and even roofs.

John Phillip Holland (1840-1914), the inventor of the submarine, was born in Liscannor. He emigrated to the USA in 1873, and dreamed that his invention would be used to sink British warships. There's a rather silly statue of the man (or is it a walrus?) in front of the Cliffs of Moher Hotel.

Sleeping & Eating

Moher Lodge Farmhouse (☎ 708 1269; www.cliffs of moher-ireland.com; s/d €45/70; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) This big bungalow is in a great position overlooking the owner's open farmlands and the sea. The four rooms are welcoming after a day rambling. It's 3km northwest of Liscannor, 1km from the Cliffs of Moher.

Cliffs of Moher Hotel (☎ 708 6770; www.cliffs of moher.ie; Main St; s/d from €50/80; ☎ ☎) A modest yet modern inn right in the centre, this hotel has 23 nicely furnished and comfortable rooms. Local icons above and below the sea are recalled in the Puffin Bar and Submarine Restaurant.

Vaughan's Anchor Inn (☎ 708 1548; Main St; mains €12-25; ☎ noon-9.30pm) Noted for its excellent seafood, Vaughan's is a popular place. When it rains, you can settle in by a peat fire, when it shines (sometimes 15 minutes later) you can take in the air at a picnic table. The pub stays open past the kitchen.

Joseph McHugh's Bar (☎ 708 1163; Main St) Lots of courtyard tables and regular trad sessions make this old pub a winner.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily through Liscannor on the Doolin-Ennis/Limerick routes.

HAG'S HEAD

Forming the southern end of the Cliffs of Moher, Hag's Head is a dramatic place from which to view the cliffs.

There's a huge sea arch at the tip of Hag's Head and another arch visible to the north. The signal tower on the Head was erected in case Napoleon tried to attack on the western coast of Ireland. The tower is built on the site of an ancient promontory fort called Mothair, which has given its name to the famous cliffs to the north. A walking trail links the head with the cliffs and Liscannor.

CLIFFS OF MOHER

Star of a million tourist brochures, the Cliffs of Moher (Aillte an Mothair, or Ailltreacha Mothair) are one of the most popular sights in Ireland. But like many an ageing star, you have to look beyond the glitz to appreciate the inherent attributes behind the cliché.

The cliffs rise to a height of 203m. They are entirely vertical and the cliff edge abruptly falls away into the constantly churning sea. A series of heads, the dark limestone seems to march in a rigid formation that amazes, no matter how many times you look.

Such appeal comes at a price, however: mobs. This is check-off tourism big time and busloads come and go constantly in summer. To handle the crowds, a vast new visitor centre opened in 2007. Set back into the side of a hill, it's impressively unimpressive – it blends right in. However, as part of the development, the main walkways and viewing areas along the cliffs have been surrounded by a 1.5m-high wall. It's lovely stone but it's also way too high and set too far back from the edge. The entire reason for coming

here (the view – unless you're a bus-spotter) is obscured.

However, like so many oversubscribed natural wonders, there's relief and joy if you're willing to walk 10 minutes away. Past the end of the 'Moher Wall' south, there's still a trail along the cliffs to Hag's Head – few venture this far. There's also a path heading north but you're discouraged from it, so use your common sense. With binoculars you can spot the more than 30 species of birds, including puffins, that make their homes among the craggy cliff-faces. On a clear day you'll channel Barbra Streisand as you can see forever; the Aran Islands stand etched on the waters of Galway Bay, and beyond lie the hills of Connemara in western Galway.

For uncommon views of the cliffs and wild-life you might consider a cruise. Most of the boat operators in Doolin (p394) offer tours of the cliffs. **Cliffs of Moher Cruises** (☎ 065-707 5949; www.mohercruises.com; Doolin Pier; adult/child €20/10; ☎ Apr-Oct) is a popular choice.

Information

The new **visitor centre** (☎ 065-708 6141; www.cliffs of moher.ie; ☎ 8.30am-9pm Jun-Aug, 8.30am-7pm May & Sep, 9am-6pm Mar, Apr & Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov-Feb) – actually, in a sign of the times, it's called the 'Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience' – has exhibitions about the cliffs and the environment called the 'Atlantic Edge' (adult/child €4/2.50). Staff lead tours outside and they answer questions but tend to freeze up when you get beyond the top five things someone on a bus tour might ask (such as where you can hike).

The car park costs €8 – be sure to pay for your ticket before you leave. Vendors of 'authentic' sweaters and other tat have stalls near the cars and buses. The café is not impressive.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily past the cliffs on the Doolin-Ennis/Limerick routes. Waits between buses may exceed your ability to enjoy the spectacle so you might combine a bus with a walk.

THE BURREN

The Burren region is rocky and windswept, an apt metaphor for the hardscrabble lives of those who've eked out an existence here. It stretches across northern Clare, from

the Atlantic coast to Kinvara in County Galway, a unique limestone landscape that was shaped beneath ancient seas, and then forced high and dry during some great geological cataclysm. The sea is not muted here by offshore islands or muffled promontories, as it sometimes is on the coasts of Kerry and Galway. In the Burren, land and sea seem to merge into one vast, exhilarating space beneath huge skies.

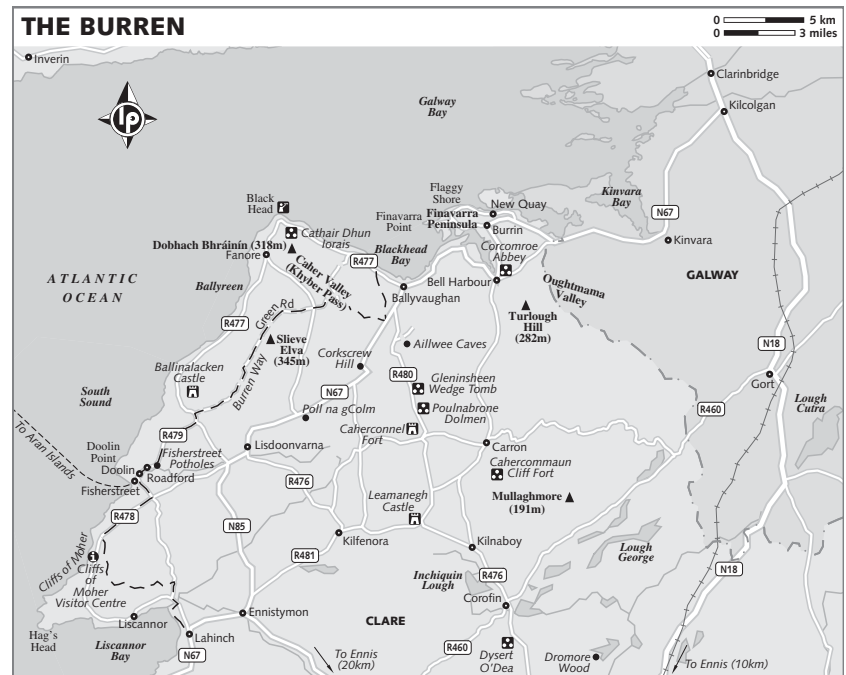
Boireann is the Irish term for 'rocky country', a plain but graphic description of the Burren's acres of silvery limestone karst pavements. The pavements, known as 'clints', lie like huge, scattered bones across the swooping hills. Between the seams of rock lie narrow fissures, known as 'grykes'. Their humid, sheltered conditions support exquisite wild flowers in spring, lending the Burren its other great charm: brilliant, if ephemeral, colour amid so much arid beauty. There are also intriguing villages to enjoy, especially along the coast and in the south Burren. These include Doolin on the west coast, Kilfenora inland and Ballyvaughan in the north, on the shores of

Galway Bay. The Burren's coastline is made up of rocky foreshores, occasional beaches and bare limestone cliffs, while inland lies a haunting landscape of rocky hills peppered with ancient burial chambers and medieval ruins. If driving, take any road – the smaller the better – and see what you discover: you'll never be lost for long.

Large areas of the Burren, about 40,000 hectares in all, have been designated as Special Areas of Conservation. Apart from being against the law, it makes ecological sense not to remove plants or to damage walls, ancient monuments or the landscape itself. Visitors are also asked to resist the temptation to erect 'sham' replicas of dolmens and other monuments, however small, including *Spinal Tap* size.

Information

Generally there is a wealth of literature about the Burren and it's best to trawl the bookshops of Ennis and any local heritage centres for long-standing, but still relevant, publications such as Charles Nelson's *Wild Plants of The Burren and the Aran Islands*. The *Tír Eolas*



series of foldout maps, *A Rambler's Guide & Map*, shows antiquities and other points of interest. The *Burren Journey* books by George Cunningham are excellent for local lore, but you may have to search for them. The visitor centre in Ennis is another good source; the booklet *The Burren Way* has good walking routes. Look for wonderfully detailed maps by Tim Robinson.

Archaeology

The Burren's bare limestone hills were once lightly wooded and covered in soil. Towards the end of the Stone Age, about 6000 years ago, nomadic hunter-gatherers began to develop a settled lifestyle of farming and hunting. They cleared the woodlands and used the hills for grazing. Over the centuries, much soil was eroded and the limestone bones of the country became increasingly exposed.

Despite its apparent harshness, the Burren supported quite large numbers of people in ancient times, and has more than 2500 historic sites. Chief among them is the 5000-year-old Poul nabrone Dolmen, the framework of a Neolithic/Bronze Age chamber tomb, and one of Ireland's iconic ancient monuments.

There are around 70 such tombs erected by the Burren's early settlers. Many of these tombs are wedge-shaped graves, stone boxes tapering both in height and width, and about the size of a large double bed. The dead were placed inside, and the whole structure was covered in earth and stones. Gleninsheen, south of Aillwee Caves, is a good example.

Ring forts dot the Burren in prodigious numbers. There are almost 500, including Iron Age stone forts such as Cahercommaun near Carron.

In later times, many castles in the area were built by the region's ruling families, and these include Leamanegh Castle near Killenora, Ballinalacken Castle near Doolin and Gleninagh Castle on the Black Head road.

Many ring forts and stone walls have been bulldozed out of existence.

Flora & Fauna

Soil may be scarce on the Burren, but the small amount that gathers in the cracks is well drained and rich in nutrients. This, together with the mild Atlantic climate, supports an extraordinary mix of Mediterranean,

Arctic and Alpine plants. Of Ireland's native wild flowers, 75% are found here, including a number of beautiful orchids, the creamy-white burnet rose, the little starry flowers of mossy saxifrage and the magenta-coloured bloody cranesbill.

The Burren is a stronghold of Ireland's most elusive mammal, the weasel-like pine marten. It's rarely seen, although there are certainly some living in the Caher Valley. Badgers, foxes and even stoats are common throughout the region. Otters and seals haunt the shores around Bell Harbour, New Quay and Finavarra Point.

The estuaries along this northern coast are rich in birdlife and frequently attract Brent geese during the winter. More than 28 of Ireland's 33 species of butterfly are found here, including one endemic species, the Burren green.

As always, modern farming and 'land-improvement' grants have had their effect on the Burren. Weedkillers, insecticides and fertilisers favour grass and little else, often fatally undermining fragile ecological systems.

Walking

'Green roads' are the old highways of the Burren, crossing hills and valleys to some of the remotest corners of the region. Many of these unpaved roads were built during the Famine as part of relief work, while some date back possibly thousands of years. They're now used mostly by hikers and the occasional farmer. Some are signposted, but there is an element of footpath blockage and neglect these days, in spite of much publicity being given to walking and to 'official' walking routes.

The Burren Way (see p698) runs down through the Burren from Ballyvaughan to Doolin and then inland along mainly paved lanes, since cliff access around the Cliffs of Moher has been discouraged.

Guided nature, history, archaeology and wilderness walks are great ways to appreciate the Burren. Typically the cost of the walks starts at €15 and there are many options, including individual trips. Recommended guides:

Burren Hill Walks (☎ 065-707 7168, 088-265 4810; burrenhillwalks@eircom.net; Ballyvaughan) Run by local guide Shane Connolly, who has a deep background in the region.

Burren Wild (☎ 087 877 9565; www.burrenwalks.com; Bell Harbour) John Connolly offers a broad range of walks and packages.

Getting There & Away

Various buses pass through the Burren. The main routes include one from Limerick and Ennis to Corofin, Ennistymon, Lahinch, Liscannor, the Cliffs of Moher, Doolin and Lisdoonvarna; another connects Galway with Ballyvaughan, Lisdoonvarna and Doolin. Usually there are one to three buses daily, with the most in summer.

Getting Around

By car you can cover a fair amount of the Burren in a day and have a chance to explore some of the many unnamed back roads. Mountain bikes are an excellent means of getting off the main roads; ask about rentals at your accommodation. Finally, walking is a superb way to appreciate the subtle beauty and dramatic landscapes.

DOOLIN

☎ 065 / pop 250

Doolin gets plenty of press and chatter as a centre of Irish traditional music, owing to a couple of pubs that have sessions through the year. It's also known for its setting – 6km north of the Cliffs of Moher, the land is windblown, with huge rocks exposed by the long-vanished top soil. It's a place to get boats to the Aran Islands offshore.

Given all its attributes, you might be surprised when you realise that Doolin as it's known barely exists. Rather, when you arrive you might be forgiven for exclaiming 'there's no there here!' For what's called Doolin is really three infinitesimally small neighbouring villages. **Fisherstreet** is right on the water, Doolin itself is about 1km east on the little Aille River and **Roadford** is another 1km east. None has more than a couple of buildings, which gives the place known as Doolin a scattered appearance, without a centre.

Still, the area is hugely popular with backpackers and more affluent travellers (ex-backpackers with jobs). There are scores of hostels and B&Bs widely spread about the rough landscape and a pretty good scene – usually with music – develops in the local pubs, at night.

Orientation & Information

Doolin's three parts are easily reached. From the north and Black Head the R479 first hits Roadford, with its hostels and two pubs. From the east, the R479 heads down into Doolin village

from a junction with the R478, where there's a market. Doolin village has a couple of new hotels and developments. From the south, take a small road off the R478 north of the cliffs of Moher and follow it down to Fisherstreet, with its postcard-perfect row of shops and pub. From here the harbour and ferries are 1.5km.

There is no post office or bank in Doolin. Many places will change money and offer internet access. Try **Doolin Internet Cafe** (per 30min \$3; ☎ 8am-10pm) in the Doolin Activity Lodge (p393). For tourist info, there's a self-service area in the Hotel Doolin (p393).

Activities

One of the most enjoyable ways to pass your time in Doolin is by walking the windswept country. Tracks and paths radiate in all directions; the Cliffs of Moher are 6km south.

The Doolin area is popular with cavers. The **Fisherstreet Potholes** are nearby, and **Poll na gColm**, 5km northeast of Lisdoonvarna, is Ireland's longest cave, with more than 12km of mapped passageways; see www.cavingireland.org for more details. A little over 1km north of Roadford you'll find **Doolin Cave** (☎ 707 5761; www.doolincave.ie; adult/child €15/8), which boasts an enormous stalactite that looks like a giant squid. The main entrance is at the Fisherstreet Potholes; tour times vary by season.

The rocks to the north of Doolin Harbour are honeycombed with an unusual system of undersea caves called the **Green Holes of Doolin**. They're the longest known undersea caves in temperate waters. Nondivers can look, with care, into Hell, a large gash in the rocks, north of the harbour and about 50m from the sea. The gash is about 6m wide, and the heaving water at the bottom leads to a maze of submarine passages.

The unguided caves mentioned here require experience and full equipment.

Sleeping

A new place to stay seems to open in Doolin about as often as some drunken tourist requests 'Danny Boy' at a trad music session. Despite this you should book ahead in summer.

BUDGET

Doolin has an excellent range of hostels.

Nagles Doolin Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 707 4458; www.doolincamping.com; camp sites from €15;

VOICES: JAMES CULLINAN, DOOLIN MUSICIAN

James Cullinan has been playing the fiddle for 35 years. He's a noted musician in County Clare and can often be heard playing in Doolin's pubs. 'It's bit impromptu', he says, 'I'll be out with friends, have two or three pints, hear some music and the next thing you know I've run home, got the fiddle and I'm back playing music.' Unplanned, pint-fuelled sessions aside, his playing is kept in check by his work as chef and owner of the well-regarded guesthouse and restaurant that bears his name. Outside of summer, however, he's a regular at area music festivals. He took a few moments to answer our questions about music.

How did Doolin become known for music? In the 1970s Michael Russell and his brothers really began reviving the old songs. They had a farm here but weren't very good farmers – if they heard of a session, they'd go play and leave the hay in the field. Pretty soon they had a reputation and people started coming here to hear them. Over time people began to expect music here, so publicans would pay a few guys each night just to get something going. It was a good way to get free pints.

How did you start playing? I had a great music teacher. It was the early 1970s and Irish music was becoming cool again. He gave everybody a tin whistle and if you showed any talent you got a fiddle.

Why did you stick with the fiddle? It has endless possibilities for how you play it. I can play the same song at every session here but each time will be different. It can depend on where you sit, who else is playing, what the crowd's like and more.

What kind of crowd is best? Loud. You just want to feel like you're playing amongst people.

Does Doolin or Clare have a unique style? Yes, we do a lot of jigs and reels here. In other counties you'll hear more polkas or other influences but Clare musicians are pretty conservative. Older people come here and know everything we play. We play around with the old stuff and have fun with that.

What's the worst thing that can happen in a pub session? Somebody starts to sing. We keep the jigs and reels going because otherwise after a few pints everybody thinks they can sing and they take over. We're there playing for ourselves, not to back-up drunks.

The second worst thing? Some guy always comes up and asks for 'Devil Came Down to Georgia'. They must play it a lot in bad Irish bars in America.

☞ (Apr-Sep) With full-on views of the Cliffs of Moher, and Doolin only a short distance away, this is an appealing site. The 60 sites are open to the elements, so pin those pegs down.

Aille River Hostel (☎ 707 4260; aillriver@esatclear.ie; Roadford; dm/d €14/33; ☞ mid-Mar–Dec; (P) ☑) In a picturesque spot by the river in the upper village, this converted 17th-century farmhouse is a great choice. There are turf fires, hot showers and free laundry. This IHH hostel has 30 beds and camp sites (from €14).

Rainbow Hostel (☎ 707 4415; Roadford; dm/d from €14/34; (P)) Many a friendship has started in the cosy lounge here. IHH-affiliated, this

hostel has 30 beds and is in an old farmhouse by the road.

Paddy's Doolin Hostel (☎ 707 4421; www.doolinhostel.com; Fisherstreet, Doolin; dm/r €15/40; (P)) This place, also known as Paddy Moloney's, is a modern, IHH-affiliated hostel. There are 90 beds in four- and eight-bed rooms. Private rooms with bathrooms are also available.

Doolin Cottage (☎ 707 4762; caroldoolin@hotmail.com; Roadford; s/d from €34/56; ☞ Mar–Nov; (P)) This charming little old house has a peaceful and friendly atmosphere and is good value. The three rooms vary greatly in size.

MIDRANGE

Most places to stay in this price range are in houses on large plots of land. There are many choices.

Doolin Activity Lodge (☎ 707 4888; www.doolinlodge.com; Fisherstreet; s/d from €40/60; (P) ☑) This impressive purpose-built guesthouse occupies a large compound; the solid stone buildings are quite attractive. There are 14 newly furnished rooms, some with skylights for watching the rain blow past, as well as self-catering apartments.

Dubhlinn House (☎ 707 4770; www.dubhlinnhouse.com; Doolin; s/d from €45/64; (P)) This bright and airy B&B is as cheery as it looks, and has good views down towards the water. The three rooms are simply decorated while the breakfasts are lavish; choose from a variety of meals including a puffed savoury omelette.

O'Connors Guesthouse (☎ 707 4498; www.oconnorsdoolin.com; Doolin; s/d from €45/68; (P)) On a bend in the Aille, this working farm has 10 rooms of varying sizes in a rather plush farmhouse. Fresh baked breads in the morning may put you in the mood for chores, but you're on holiday, so don't. Stretch your legs in the large gardens and say 'hi' to a cow.

Doonmacelin House (☎ 707 4503; www.doonmacelin.com; Roadford; s/d from €55/70; (P)) Decorated as you'd expect from a favourite aunt, the rooms are comfortable. There's a bit of history as well: prehistoric artefacts including a stone axe on display were found during construction of this red stucco house.

Cullinan's Guest House (☎ 707 4183; www.cullinansdoolin.com; Doolin; s/d from €60/80; (P)) The eight B&B rooms here are all to a high standard, with power showers and various extras. Right on the Aille (two rooms have balconies), it has a lovely back terrace for enjoying the views. The restaurant is one of the best. The owner is a well-known local musician (see the boxed text, opposite).

Sea View House (☎ 707 4826; www.ireland-doolin.com; Fisherstreet; s/d from €60/80; (P)) On high ground right above Fisherstreet village, this big house has sweeping ocean views. The common lounge has a telescope for enjoying the vantage point. The four rooms make the same bold use of colours that gives the public areas a sense of style.

TOP END

Hotel Doolin (☎ 707 4111; www.hoteldoolin.ie; Doolin; Coast Rd, Doolin; s/d €80/130; (P)) Part of a new

development that may put a little 'there' in Doolin village, this upmarket boutique hotel has 17 well-appointed rooms. Creams and coffee tones are accented by rich colours. Service is good and there's a modern bar for those who want sport instead of music.

Eating

For self-catering, the well-stocked Doolin Deli is just down from O'Connor's pub in Fisherstreet on the road to the pier.

McGann's (☎ 707 4133; Roadford; meals €6-15) McGann's does a good job with cheap and cheerful pub grub. You can order through a window and dine at a picnic table.

O'Connor's (☎ 707 4168; Fisherstreet; meals €8-18) The town's most popular pub makes a fine job of Irish standards. The seafood chowder, bacon and cabbage and fish and chips are all excellent. Beware, however, of bus crowds.

Cullinan's (☎ 707 4183; 1-12-13-courses €25/32/40; Doolin; ☞ 6-9pm Thu-Tue) Attached to the guesthouse of the same name, this excellent restaurant offers delicious seafood as well as meat and poultry dishes. The short menu changes depending on what's fresh, but is always creative. Bold combinations are favoured and there's a long wine list.

Drinking & Entertainment

Doolin's rep is largely based on music. There are a lot of musicians who live in the area and they have a symbiotic relationship with the tourists: each desires the other and each year things grow a little larger. But given the heavy concentration of visitors it's inevitable that standards don't always hold up to those in some of the less trampled villages in Clare (see the boxed text, p394). Still, in the off-season, this is where you'll always be able to hear a trad session.

Doolin's three pubs are listed below in order of their importance to the music scene.

O'Connor's (☎ 707 4168; Fisherstreet) This sprawling favourite packs them in and has rollicking atmosphere when the traditional music, singing and drinking are all in full swing. The food is good; it's right on the water.

McGann's (☎ 707 4133; Roadford) McGann's has all the classic touches of a full-on Irish music pub with the action often spilling out onto the street. Food is also served here and it has a small outside covered area.

MacDiarmada's (☎ 707 4700; Roadford) Also known as MacDermott's, this simple red

WHEN SESSIONS GO BAD

It was an off-season night in Doolin's popular O'Connor's pub. There was a good crowd listening to three old-timers work their way through old classics. Mid-song they were joined by an American tourist who pulled a guitar out of an expensive custom case still wearing fresh bag tags from the flight over. Like any good session, the three incumbents made room for the newcomer. They soon regretted this. During the next pause, the guitar-wielding bloke said, 'Follow me!' and proceeded into an earnest and somewhat off-key version of 'Eight Days a Week', a song seldom heard at trad sessions. The three locals exchanged glances that said they'd smelled something out of the wrong end of a cow. Eventually they regained some control and as the American tried gamely to follow their songs, he said repeatedly to his camera-flashing partner: 'Look, I'm playing with real Irish musicians!'

At this point an Italian tourist wandered over and said loudly 'I shall join you in song.' Grabbing a mike while the old guys exchanged more dubious glances, he leaned back to belt out a croon but slipped, hitting the table and spilling all the beer. Amid the chaos, the American looked at his spilled pint and said over and over: 'That was going to be my first Guinness ever!'

and white old pub can be the rowdy favourite of locals. The music sessions are up to Doolin standards.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Doolin is the ferry departure point to the Aran Islands from April to October. There are three ferry companies offering numerous departures in season. It takes around 20 minutes to cover the 8km to Inisheer (€30 return), the smallest and closest of the three Aran Islands. A boat to Inishmór takes 90 minutes with an Inisheer stop (€40 return). Ferries to Inishmaan are infrequent. Note that sailings are often cancelled due to high seas. Call and confirm times and book in advance.

Doolin Ferries (☎ 707 4455, 707 4466; www.doolinferries.com; Doolin Pier)

Doolin Ferry (☎ 707 5555, 707 1710; www.doolinferry.com; Doolin Pier)

Jack B (☎ 707 5949; www.mohercruises.com; Doolin Pier; ☽ Apr-Oct) Offers combined Aran Islands trips with Cliffs of Moher cruises.

BUS

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily to Doolin from Ennis (€8.80, 1½ hours) and Limerick (€13, 2½ hours) via Corofin, Lahinch and the Cliffs of Moher. Buses also go to Galway (€12, 1½ hours, one or two daily) via Ballyvaughan.

In the summer, various backpackers shuttles often serve Doolin from Galway

and other points in Clare. These are amply marketed in hostels.

Getting Around

Several hostels and B&Bs rent bikes; ask around.

LISDOONVARNA

☎ 065 / pop 950

Lisdoonvarna (Lios Dún Bhearna), often just called 'Lisdoon', is well known for its mineral springs. For centuries people have been visiting the local spa to swallow its waters. Posh in the Victorian era, the town is now a much more plebeian and friendly place. It's a very good base for exploring the Burren.

The town was once a centre for *basadóiri* (matchmakers) who, for a fee, would fix up a person with a mate. Most of the mainly male hopefuls would hit town in September, feet shuffling, cap in hand, after the hay was in. Today, true matchmaking is unlikely, but the **Lisdoonvarna Matchmaking Festival** (www.matchmakerireland.com), held throughout September and early October, is a great excuse for daftness, drinking, merrymaking, music and, of course, moneymaking.

Orientation & Information

Lisdoonvarna is essentially a one-street town with a square in the centre from where you turn west for Doolin and the coast. The town has plenty of shops, pubs, B&Bs and hotels with some fine restaurants. You can

change money at the post office on Main St to the north.

There's internet access at the **Internet Shop** (☎ 707 5005; Main St; per 20min €2; ☽ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep).

Sights & Activities

At the southern end of town is a spa, with a sulphur spring, a Victorian pumphouse and an agreeable, wooded setting. The iron, sulphur, magnesium and iodine in the water are supposed to be good for rheumatic and glandular complaints. There's just one hitch: in 2007 the spa centre was closed as various renovation schemes (most involving the word 'upscale') were debated. But you can still drink the water, even if it's not exactly a vintage wine-tasting experience. Look for a trail beside the Roadside Tavern that runs 400m down to **two wells** by the river. One is high in sulphur, the other iron. Mix and match for a cocktail of minerals.

You can learn about the ancient Irish art of oak-smoking salmon from a video (six languages) at the **Burren Smokehouse visitor centre** (☎ 707 4432; www.burrensmokehouse.ie; Kincora Rd; admission free; ☽ 10am-5pm Apr-May, 9am-6pm Jun-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar). Tasty smoked salmon and other fishies in a myriad of forms are offered for free tasting – perhaps you'll even buy some? Good coffee and tea are for sale along with other deli-type foods and local arts and crafts. Tourist information is available. The centre is on the edge of Lisdoonvarna on the Kincora road (N67).

Sleeping & Eating

Book during September's Matchmaking Festival; B&Bs are like mushrooms after the rain.

Sleepzone (☎ 707 7168; www.sleepzone.ie; Doolin Rd; dm/s/d €15/35/50; ☐ ☑) What a hostel! This former posh hotel is now a 124-bed hostel. The grounds reflect its past and there are all the usual facilities – except these are very nice indeed – as well as wi-fi and free continental breakfasts. There's a shuttle bus between here and a sister hostel in Galway (March to October).

Kincora House and Art Gallery (☎ 707 4300; www.kincorahouse.ie; s/d from €45/70; ☽ Mar-Oct; ☐) On the west side of town, this country charmer is covered in flowering vines. The 1860 building underneath attests to the spa-driven affluence of the era. The 14 rooms are cute

as you'd expect, local art abounds and the pub and restaurant are appealing.

Sheedy's Country House Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 707 4026; www.sheedys.com; Sulphur Hill, Lisdoonvarna; s/d from €90/140; ☽ Mar-Oct; ☐) Sheedy's stands in a splendid location amid flower, vegetable and herb plots. The 11 rooms are individually and stylishly designed and the public areas are full of character. The restaurant (dinner mains €20 to €28) offers modern Irish cuisine at its best.

ourpick Roadside Tavern (☎ 707 4084; meals €6-12) Down by the river, this place is pure craic. Third-generation owner Peter Curtin knows every story worth telling. There are trad sessions daily in summer and during the weekends in winter. Imbibing musicians can be found here anytime. A sample of pub conversation we overheard – man to publican: 'I'll have half a sandwich.' Man's wife to publican: 'Oh give him a whole one so I won't have to cook tonight.'

Getting There & Around

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily to Doolin via Lisdoonvarna from Ennis, and to Limerick via Corofin, Lahinch and the Cliffs of Moher. Buses also go to Galway via Ballyvaughan and Black Head.

FANORE

☎ 065 / pop 150

Fanore (Fan Óir), 5km south of Black Head, is less a village and more a stretch of coast with a shop, a pub and a few houses scattered along the main road (R477). It has a fine sandy beach with an extensive backdrop of dunes. Surfers flock here through the year; there's extensive parking and there are toilets open in summer. An incursion of holiday homes could mean that even this sleepy corner of Clare is in for changes.

There's a well-stocked shop, **Siopa Fan Óir** (☎ 707 6131; ☽ 9am-9pm summer, to 7pm winter), just across from O'Donohue's pub, where you can buy fishing tackle, walking maps, boogie boards, cheap sand buckets etc.

There are few accommodation options and eateries in the Fanore area. One, **Rocky View Farmhouse** (☎ 707 6103; www.rockyviewfarmhouse.com; s/d €38/64; ☐), is a charming house at the heart of the coastal Burren. Its six open and airy rooms are suited to this especially barren end of the burren. Organic food is grown and used in the breakfasts.

In many ways, the community centre, **O'Donohue's** (☎ 707 6119; meals €6-12; ☹ Apr-Oct), 4km south of the beach, offers no-nonsense soup, hot dishes and sandwiches along with its genuine local character. Done up in blue and white, it looks out over the grey sea.

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily from Galway via Black Head and through Fanore to Lisdoonvarna.

BLACK HEAD

Atlantic storms have stripped the land around the unfortunately named Black Head down to bare rock. Grass and the occasional shrub cling to crevices. Standing like sentinels, boulders and the odd cow dot the landscape here, Clare's northwesternmost point.

The main road (R477) curves around the head just above the sea. There's good shore **angling** for pollock, wrasse, mackerel – and sea bass if you're lucky – from the rocky platforms near sea level. These can be fatally dangerous waters, even for those with long-standing local knowledge. Even in apparently calm conditions, watch for sudden surges.

BALLYVAUGHAN & AROUND

☎ 065 / pop 200

All the charm of the Burren is distilled into its favoured location, Ballyvaughan (Baile Uí Bheacháin), where the hard land of the hills gives way to a quiet leafy corner of Galway Bay. It makes an excellent base for visiting the northern part of the Burren. You'll be reluctant to leave.

CLIMBING THE AGES

An exhilarating outing is the climb up Black Head to the Iron Age **ring fort of Cathair Dhún Iorais**. There's no path, so it's essential to take a map (*Ordnance Survey Discovery Series No 51*) and compass. The ground is very rocky in places, so strong footwear is essential. Be prepared for wet, windy and potentially cold conditions, even in summer. It's a steep 1.5km to the fort.

Start from just above the lighthouse on the northern tip of Black Head. There's limited parking on the inland side of the road. Head due south up the rocky hillside from the road, negotiating between rock shelves, to reach an old green track. Cross the track and continue directly to where things level off and Cathair Dhún Iorais stands amid a sea of limestone pavements. It's not the most dramatic of ring forts, but the setting is magnificent. The views to Galway and Connemara are breathtaking in clear weather.

From the fort you can bear southeast to skirt the limestone cliffs that run in an unbroken wall to the west. This takes you onto the broad shoulder that leads south, in 1.3km, to the summit of **Dobhach Bhráinín**, one of the highest points in the Burren at 318m. Again, skilled use of map and compass is essential in case of sudden mist, when careless descent from Dobhach Bhráinín may land you above the cliffs. It's best to return to the fort and descend the way you came.

The centre of the village is located at the junction of the N67 and the coastal R477. Going south and inland on the N67 brings you to the centre of the Burren. Turning west leads you to the magnificent coast road (R477) around Black Head and south towards Doolin.

Just west of the junction, on the R477, is the quay, built in 1829 at a time when boats traded with the Aran Islands and Galway, exporting grain and bacon and bringing in turf – a scarce commodity in the Burren.

A few metres past the harbour, a signposted track leads to a seashore bird shelter from where there is a good view of tidal shallows.

Information

The new **visitor centre** (☎ 707 7464; www.ballyvaughtourism.com; ☹ 9am-9pm Mar-Oct, 9am-5pm Thu-Mon Nov-Feb) is in a vast gift shop. **Brendan's Boat** (☎ 707 7337; www.brendansboat.ie; ☹ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Dec) is a renowned local leather-maker. On the south side of the centre, it offers internet access and shares the building with a laundry and bike rental place.

Sights & Activities

About 6km south of Ballyvaughan on the Lisdoonvarna road (N67) is a series of severe bends up **Corkscrew Hill** (180m). The road was built as part of a Great Famine relief scheme in the 1840s. From the top there are spectacular views of the northern Burren and Galway Bay, with Aillwee Mountain and the caves on the right, and Capanawalla Hill on

the left, and with the partially restored 16th-century Newtown Castle, erstwhile residence of the O'Lochlainns, at its base.

There's a lot to see in the frigid waters off the Clare coast, including some very large crabs – the kind that have been gracing your plate. **Burren Adventure Dive Centre** (☎ 707 7921; www.burren-adventures.com; Main St) offers lessons and a full range of gear. Discovery dives for novices cost €95.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several simple B&Bs close to the centre. Ballyvaughan's **farmers market** (☹ 10am-2pm Sat) celebrates the huge range of quality produce and products from local producers.

Ballyvaughan Lodge (☎ 707 7292; www.ballyvaughanlodge.com; s/d from €45/70; (P)) Set in nice gardens, this B&B has a fine patio for sniffing the floral fragrances. The 11 rooms are comfortable.

Hyland's Burren Hotel (☎ 707 7037; www.hylandsburren.com; Main St; s/d €65/80; (P)) An appealing place, this central hotel has 30 large rooms and manages to retain a local feel alongside its corporate motif. There's a bar and a restaurant. Ask for the hotel's *Walks* leaflet.

Rusheen Lodge (☎ 707 7092; www.rusheenlodge.com; Lisdoonvarna Rd; s/d €70/100; ☹ Feb-Nov; (P)) Stylish, imaginative furnishings make this nine-room guesthouse a winner. There's wi-fi inside and colourful gardens outside. It's about 750m south of the village on the N67.

Monk's Bar & Restaurant (☎ 707 7059; Old Pier; mains €10-20; ☹ kitchen noon-8pm) Famed for its excellent seafood, Monk's is a cheerful, spacious and comfortable place. Peat fires warm in winter while sea breezes cool you at the outdoor tables in summer. The pub is open late and there are trad sessions some nights in high season.

Ólólainn (Main St) A tiny place on the left as you head out to the pier, Ólólainn (*o-loch-lain*) is the place for a timeless moment or two in old-fashioned snugs. Look for the old Bushmill's sign out front.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs one to three buses daily from Galway through Ballyvaughan and around Black Head to Lisdoonvarna and Doolin.

CENTRAL BURREN

The road through the heart of the Burren, the R480, travels through harsh but inspiring scenery. This is the barren Burren at its best. Amazing prehistoric stone structures can be found throughout the region.

South from Ballyvaughan the R480 branches off the N67 at the sign for Aillwee Caves. The R480 goes past Gleninsheen Wedge Tomb and Poulabrone Dolmen before reaching Leamanagh Castle, where it joins the R476, which runs southeast to Corofin. At any point along here, try a small road – especially those to the east – for an escape into otherworldly solitude.

Aillwee Caves

Popular with kids, **Aillwee Caves** (☎ 065-707 7036; www.aillweecave.ie; Ballyvaughan; adult/child €12/5.50; ☹ from 10am) is a large tourist attraction. The main cave penetrates for 600m into the mountain, widening into larger caverns, one with its own waterfall. The caves were carved out by water some two million years ago. Near the entrance are the remains of a brown bear, extinct in Ireland for more than 10,000 years. You can only go into the cave as part of a guided tour (phone for exact times). Often crowded in summer, there's a café and other time-killers on site.

Gleninsheen Wedge Tomb

One of Ireland's most famous prehistoric grave sites, Gleninsheen lies beside the R480 just south of Aillwee Caves. It's thought to date from 4000 to 5000 years ago. A magnificent gold torque (a crescent of beaten gold that hung round the neck) was found nearby in 1930 by a young boy called Paddy Dolan, who was hunting rabbits. Dating from around 700 BC, the torque is reckoned to be one of the finest pieces of prehistoric Irish craftwork and is now on display at the National Museum in Dublin (p96). Note: the gate giving access to the Gleninsheen tomb may be locked.

Poulabrone Dolmen

Also known as the Portal Tomb, Poulabrone Dolmen is one of Ireland's most photographed ancient monuments – a classic tourist icon. The dolmen (a large slab perched on stone uprights) stands amid a swathe of rocky pavements, for all the world like some surreal bird of prey about to take off. The capstone weighs five tonnes. The

site is 8km south of Aillwee and is visible from the R480. A path leads to it from the roadside.

Poulnabrone was built more than 5000 years ago. It was excavated in 1986, and the remains of 16 people were found, as well as pieces of pottery and jewellery. Radiocarbon dating suggests that they were buried between 3800 and 3200 BC. When the dead were originally entombed here, the whole structure was partially covered in a mound of earth, which has since worn away. It's your guess as to how they built it.

Caherconnell Fort

For a look at a well-preserved *caher* (walled homestead) of the late Iron Age–Early Christian period, stop at **Caherconnell Fort** (☎ 708 9999; adult/child/family €5/3/12; 🕒 9.30am–6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am–5pm Mar–Jun, Sep & Oct; 📍), a privately run heritage attraction. Exhibits show how the evolution of these defensive settlements may have reflected territorialism and competition for land among a growing, settling population. The drystone walling of the fort is in excellent condition. There is a visitor centre with information on the many other monuments in the area. It's about 1km south of Poulnabrone on the R480.

Carron & Around

The tiny village of Carron ('Carran' on some maps; 'An Carn' in Gaelic), a few kilometres east of the R480, is a wonderfully remote

spot. Vistas of the rocky Burren stretch in all directions from its elevated position.

A must-see stop, the **Burren Perfumery & Floral Centre** (☎ 065-708 9102; Carron; 🕒 9am–7pm Jun–Sep, to 5pm Oct–May) is the real deal. It uses wild flowers of the Burren to produce its scents, and it's the only handicraft perfumery in Ireland. There's a free audiovisual presentation on the flora of the Burren, which have a diversity that may surprise. One example: the fragrant orchid that grows amongst the rocks. The centre has an organic-tea café and native gardens. Look for perfumery signs at the T-junction near Carron church, which note that tour buses *aren't* welcome.

Below Carron lies one of the finest turloughs in Ireland. It's known as the **Carron Polje**. Polje is a Yugoslav term used universally for these shallow depressions that flood in winter and dry out in summer, when the lush grass that flourishes on the surface is used for grazing.

Stretching south from Carron almost to Kilnaboy is land best suited for growing rocks. Take any narrow track you find, and every so often you'll see an ancient **dolmen**.

About 3km south of Carron and perched on the edge of an inland cliff is the great stone fort of **Cahercommaun**. It was inhabited in the 8th and 9th centuries by people who hunted deer and grew a small amount of grain. The remains of a souterrain (underground passage) lead from the fort to the outer cliff face. To get there, go south from Carron and take a left turn for Kilnaboy. After 1.5km a path on

the left leads up to the fort. Look for a good info board at the start of the path.

Clare's Rock Hostel (☎ 065-708 9129; www.claresrock.com; Carron; dm/d €14/38; 🕒 May–Sep; 📍) is an imposing building in grey exposed stone. It has 30 beds, big spacious rooms and excellent facilities. Guests can hire bikes or cavort with the trolls on the outdoor garden gnome chessboard.

Cassidy's (☎ 065-708 9109; Carron; bar mains €4.50–9.50; 🕒 daily May–Sep, weekends Oct–Apr) serves up a good range of pub dishes, several with witty names reflecting the pub's previous incarnation as a British RIC station, and then as a Garda barracks. Enjoy trad music and dancing some weekends.

KILFENORA

☎ 065 / pop 360

Kilfenora (Cill Fhionnúrach) lies on the southern fringes of the Burren, 8km south-east of Lisdoonvarna. It's a small place, like its diminutive 12th-century cathedral. There are several high crosses in its churchyard. Low polychromatic buildings surround its compact centre.

The town has a strong music tradition that rivals that of Doolin, but without the crowds. The **Kilfenora Céili Band** (☎ 684 2228; www.kilfenoraceiliband.com) is a celebrated community that's been playing for 100 years. Its traditional music features fiddles, banjos, squeezeboxes and more. It often plays Wednesday nights at Linnane's (see right).

Sights

The Burren Centre (☎ 708 8030; www.theburrencentre.ie; Main St; adult/child €7/4; 🕒 9.30am–6pm Jun–Aug, 10am–5pm mid–Mar–May, Sep & Oct) has a series of entertaining and informative displays on every aspect of the Burren past and present. There's a tea room and a shop that sells local products.

In the past the ruined 12th-century **cathedral** at Kilfenora was an important place of pilgrimage. St Fachan (or Fachtna) founded the monastery here in the 6th century, and it later became the seat of Kilfenora diocese, the smallest in the country. The cathedral is the smallest you're ever likely to see. Only the ruined structure and nave of the more recent Protestant church are actually part of the cathedral. The chancel has two primitive carved figures on top of two tombs.

Kilfenora is best known for its **high crosses**, three in the churchyard and a large 12th-

century example in the field about 100m to the west. The most interesting one is the 800-year-old **Doorty Cross**, standing prominently to the west of the church's front door. It was lying broken in two until the 1950s, when it was re-erected. A panel in the churchyard does an excellent job of explaining the carvings that adorn the crosses.

Sleeping & Eating

Kilfenora has two fabulous pubs.

Kilfenora Hostel (☎ 708 8908; www.kilfenorahostel.com; Main St; dm/s/d €20/25/50; 📍) Affiliated with Vaughan's Pub next door, rates here include a pint of Guinness. This new hostel has 46 beds in nine rooms. Extras include wi-fi, laundry and a big kitchen. Weary travellers in the lounge may feel they've fallen into the hand of god.

Murphy's B&B (☎ 708 8040; lika@eircom.net; Main St; s/d from €40/60; 🕒 mid-Feb–Nov) Right on the main street, Mrs Mary Murphy runs a fine little B&B with the kind of simple rooms you could call your own. She has two more houses nearby.

Linnane's (☎ 708 8157; Main St; meals €5–12; 🕒 kitchen: noon–8pm) Irish standards like bacon and cabbage, stew, smoked salmon and more are fully honoured here. Peat fires warm the almost bare interior, with not a frill in sight. There's trad music many nights in summer.

Ourpick Vaughan's Pub (☎ 708 8004; Main St; meals €9–12; 🕒 kitchen: 10am–9pm) What a place! Seafood, traditional foods and local produce feature on the appealing menu. The pub has a big reputation in Irish music circles. There's music in the bar every night during the summer and on many nights the rest of the year. The adjacent barn is the scene of terrific set-dancing sessions on Thursday and Sunday nights. Enjoy the beer garden under the big tree out front.

Getting There & Away

Kilfenora does not have a useful bus service.

COROFIN & AROUND

☎ 065 / pop 420

Corofin (Cora Finne), also spelled Corrofin, is a quiet village on the southern fringes of the Burren. It's low-key but it's also a classic place to sample the rhythms of Clare life. The surrounding area features a number of turloughs. There are several O'Brien castles in the area, two on the shores of nearby Inchiquin Lough.

ROCK LEGENDS

The geology of the Burren may seem like a load of old rocks, but there is immense drama and excitement in the primeval adventures that produced the exquisite landscape that we see today. The Burren is the most extensive limestone region, or karst (after the original Karst in Slovenia), in Ireland or Britain. It consists almost entirely of limestone, except for a cap of mud and shale that sits on the higher regions.

During the Carboniferous period 350 million years ago, this whole area was the bottom of a warm and shallow sea. The remains of coral and shells fell to the sea bed, and coastal rivers dumped sand and silt on top of these lime deposits. Time and pressure turned the layers to stone, with limestone below and shale and sandstone above.

Massive shifts in the earth's crust some 270 million years ago buckled the edges of Europe and forced the sea bed above sea level. At the same time the stone sheets were bent and fractured to form the long, deep cracks so characteristic of the Burren today, each one a stone trench crammed full of wild flowers, and nurtured on tenuous soil and a microclimate of sweet, damp air.

During numerous Ice Ages, glaciers scoured the hills, rounding the edges and sometimes polishing the rock to a shiny finish. The glaciers also dumped a thin layer of rock and soil over the region. Huge boulders were carried by the ice, incongruous aliens on a sea of flat rock. Seen all over the Burren, these 'glacial erratics' are often a visibly different type of rock.

Corofin is home to the interesting **Clare Heritage Centre** (☎ 683 7955; www.clareroots.com; Church St; adult/concession €4/2; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct). Housed in an old church, it has a display covering the horrors of the Potato Famine. More than 250,000 people lived in Clare before the Famine; today the county's population stands at about 95,000 – a drop of some 62%. In a separate building nearby, the **Clare Genealogical Centre** (☎ 683 7955; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) has facilities for people researching their Clare ancestry.

About 4km northwest of Corofin, on the road to Leamanagh Castle and Kilfenora (R476), look for the small town of **Kilnaboy**. The ruined church here is well worth seeking out for the sheila-na-gig (explicit carved female figure) over the doorway.

Sleeping & Eating

Corofin Village Hostel (☎ 683 7683; www.corofin camping.com; Main St; camp sites, dm/d €14/€16/22; 📍) Camp sites out back have nice open spaces, and inside there are 30 beds. The large common room at this IHH-affiliated hostel has a pool table. Hot showers are free for all.

Lakefield Lodge (☎ 683 7675; www.lakefieldlodge bandb.com; Ennis Rd; s/d from €46/64; 🕒 Mar-Oct) A well-run place near the southern edge of the village. There are four comfy rooms and a cheery welcome at this pleasant bungalow that's surrounded by gardens.

Fergus View (☎ 683 7606; www.fergusview.com; s/d €52/74; 📍) Got the black pudding blues? Here there's a huge choice for breakfast. This lovely home has views over the surrounding farms to the rocky hills beyond. All six rooms have wi-fi. Test your knowledge against the vintage lesson plans left by a previous school-teacher owner. It's 3km north of Corofin on the R476.

Inchiquin Inn (☎ 683 7713; Main St; lunch €6-10; 🕒 kitchen 9am-6pm) Locals follow the horses at this oh-so-local pub with a great kitchen. The seafood chowder and bacon and cabbage are some of the best you'll find. The former is thick, tangy and redolent with smoked fish. There's trad music some summer nights.

Corofin Arms Restaurant (☎ 683 7373; Main St; meals €8-20; 🕒 5.30-9pm Wed-Mon, noon-9pm Sun) Locally sourced foods are the speciality at this sprightly little bistro that's very popular. Look for dishes made with tangy Kilnaboy cheese that's made just up the road. Seafood

is the star, anything with the housemade garlic sauce a celebrity.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann has an infrequent service some weekdays between Corofin and Ennis.

NORTHERN BURREN

Low farmland stretches south from County Galway until it meets the bluff limestone hills of the Burren, which begin west of Kinvarra and Doorus in County Galway.

From Oranmore in County Galway to Ballyvaughan, the coastline wriggles along small inlets and peninsulas; some, such as Finavarra Point and New Quay, are worth a detour. Here, narrow roads traverse the low rocky windswept hills that are dotted with old stone ruins that have yielded to nature.

Inland near Bell Harbour is the largely intact Corcomroe Abbey, while the three ancient churches of Oughtmama lie up a quiet side valley. Galway Bay forms the backdrop to some outstanding scenery: bare stone hills shining in the sun, with small hamlets and rich patches of green wherever there's soil.

Bus routes don't reach these Clare recesses. It's a car, bike or foot country.

New Quay & the Flaggy Shore

New Quay (Ceibh Nua), on the **Finavarra Peninsula**, is about 1km off the main Kinvarra-Ballyvaughan road (N67) and is reached by turning off at Ballyvelaghan Lough 3km north of Bell Harbour.

Smack on the water, **Linnane's Bar** (☎ 065-707 8120; New Quay; meals €9-20; 🕒 noon-8pm), not surprisingly, is known for seafood. For centuries this area was famous for its oysters; shellfish are still processed here and you can sometimes buy them from the little processing works behind the pub.

The **Flaggy Shore**, west of New Quay, is a particularly fine stretch of coastline where limestone terraces step down to the sea. About 500m west of Linnane's, at a crossroads, the **Russell Gallery** (☎ 065-707 8185; New Quay) specialises in *raku* (Japanese lead-glazed earthenware) work. The airy gallery has a range of other works by Irish artists for sale along with books on the region.

Nearby, just off the N67, **Wilde & Wooley** (☎ 707 8042; Burren) is the name for Antoinette Hensey's shop where she makes custom knitwear from beautifully dyed wool. The designs

are complex and beautiful; a sweater costs between €150 to €200.

Turn north off the N67 for the Flaggy Shore. The road hugs the shoreline going west, then curves south past **Lough Muiri**, where you're likely to see a number of wading birds, as well as swans. There are said to be otters in the area. At a T-junction just past the lough, a right turn leads to a rather dingy-looking **Martello tower** on Finavarra Point, a relic of the paranoia over the Napoleonic threat.

Bell Harbour

No more than a crossroads with a growing crop of holiday cottages and a pub, Bell Harbour (Beulaclugga) is about 8km east of Ballyvaughan. There's a pleasant walk along an old green road that begins behind the modern Church of St Patrick, 1km north up the hill from the Y-junction at Bell Harbour, and threads north along Abbey Hill.

Inland from here are the ruins of Corcomroe Abbey, the valley and churches of Oughtmama, and the interior road that takes you through the heart of the Burren.

Corcomroe Abbey

The beautiful and atmospheric Corcomroe, a former Cistercian abbey 1.5km inland from Bell Harbour, lies in a small, tranquil valley surrounded by low hills. It is a marvelous place, one of the finest buildings of its

kind. It was founded in 1194 by Donal Mór O'Brien. His grandson, Conor na Siudaine O'Brien (died 1267), king of Thomond, is said to occupy the tomb in the northern wall, and there's a crude carving of him below an effigy of a bishop armed with a crosier, the pastoral staff that was carried by a bishop or abbot. The surviving vaulting in the presbytery and transepts is very fine and there are some striking Romanesque carvings scattered throughout the abbey. The abbey began a long decline in the 15th century. Often-touching modern graves crowd the ruins.

Oughtmama Valley

Small ancient churches lie hidden in this lonely, deserted valley. To get there turn inland at Bell Harbour, then go left at the Y-junction. In just under 1km you reach a house amid trees, on the right at Shanvally. A rough track leads inland from just beyond the house for about 1.5km to the churches. Roadside parking is very limited, but there is a large roadside area about 400m before Shanvally, back towards the Y-junction, with views of Corcomroe. The churches at **Oughtmama** were built in the 12th century by monks in search of solitude. Look for the Romanesque arch in the westernmost – and largest – church. It's a hardy walk up **Turlough Hill** behind the chapels, but the views are tremendous. Near the summit are the remains of a **hill fort**.

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