

County Galway



Western Ireland's heartland, County Galway has a spellbinding beauty.

The beating heart of the county itself is Galway city. Lined by colourful narrow shop fronts and pubs, this vibrant tangle of cobbled lanes has an intimate, villagelike atmosphere and an absolutely phenomenal live-music scene that attracts traditional and contemporary musicians – along with artists, writers, poets and assorted wayfarers – from all over the country and beyond.

Radiating from Galway city are the main arterial links to some of Ireland's most heart-stopping scenery. Northwest of Galway city, the fabled Connemara region harbours one of the country's largest and most important Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas. Woven with hiking and biking trails, the region's weathered mountains, sheep-grazing pastures, bogs, and remote villages are raggedly stitched together by stone walls, while along Connemara's coastline white-sand beaches offer invigorating swimming in summer and windswept walks in winter. South of Galway city there are medieval churches and castles, Norman towers and oyster beds in abundance, and eastwards of the city farming fields roll seamlessly to the country's bucolic midlands.

Offshore, lashed by the unforgiving Atlantic, the rocky Aran Islands and Inishbofin are anchored by enduring traditions: pony traps, hand-knitted fishermen's sweaters, and age-old legends and lore. Scrubbed clean by the elements, relics on the islands include ancient cliff-top ringforts and rusted shipwrecks that serve as a reminder of the perilous seas.

The county's wild landscapes and thriving traditions invariably claim visitors' hearts, and chances are your first visit won't be your last.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Getting Hooked...** Sip Galway city's local ale, Galway Hooker (p413)
- **...And Hooked Again** Sail around the picturesque coastline near Roundstone on a traditional Galway Hooker fishing boat (p429)
- **Jammin'** Catch live-music sessions at the legendary Tigh Hughes (p426) in Spiddal
- **Island Dreaming** Escape contemporary life on Inishmaan (p421), the island time forgot
- **Sky Walking** Stroll (or cycle) above the thundering Atlantic along Sky Rd (p431), near Clifden



■ POPULATION: 208,800

■ AREA: 3760 SQ KM

GALWAY CITY

☎ 091 / pop 65,800

Arty and bohemian, Galway (Gaillimh) is legendary around the world for its entertainment scene. Brightly painted pubs heave with live music on any given night. Cafés spill out onto winding cobblestone streets filled with a frenzy of fiddles, banjos, bagpipes, harps, tin whistles, guitars and *bodhráns* (hand-held goatskin drums), and jugglers, painters, poets, puppeteers and magicians in outlandish masks enchant passers-by. Actors in traditional Irish theatre tread also the boards around town.

Galway's streets are steeped in history, yet have a contemporary vibe. Students make up a quarter of the city's population, while the remains of the medieval town walls lie between shops selling Aran sweaters, handcrafted Claddagh rings, and stacks of secondhand and new books. Bridges arc over the salmon-filled River Corrib, and a long promenade leads to the seaside suburb of Salthill, where at night the moon's glow illuminates Galway Bay, where the area's famous oysters are produced.

The city's smorgasbord of eating and drinking options ranges from the market – where farmers in Wellington boots unload soil-covered vegetables – to adventurous new restaurants redefining Irish cuisine. Sprawling superpubs with wooden staircases serve frothy Guinness, Galway Hooker ale and Irish coffees.

Even by Irish standards, Galway is renowned for its rainfall. This is a city where locals don't say 'It's forecast to rain tomorrow,' but rather more dubiously, 'It's not forecast to rain *until* tomorrow.' To be fair, you can be lucky with the weather, and on a sunny day the city is positively hopping. But the rain scarcely dampens Galway's atmosphere, which is exuberant at any time of year – and especially during its myriad festivals.

Galway is often referred to as the most 'Irish' of Ireland's cities (and it's the only one where you're likely to hear Irish spoken in the streets, shops and pubs), but some locals lament that these may be the last days of 'old' Galway before it absorbs the effects of the country's globalised economy. But for now at least, Galway remains true to its spirited roots.

HISTORY

Galway's Irish name, Gaillimh, originates from the Irish word *gaill*, meaning 'outsiders' or 'foreigners', and the term resonates throughout the city's history.

From humble beginnings as a tiny fishing village at the mouth of the River Corrib, it grew into an important town when the Anglo-Normans, under Richard de Burgo (also spelled de Burgh or Burke), captured territory from the local O'Flahertys in 1232. Its fortified walls were built from around 1270.

In 1396, Richard II granted a charter transferring power from the de Burgos to 14 merchant families or 'tribes' – hence its enduring nickname of the City of the Tribes. (Each of the city's roundabouts is named for the one of the tribes.) These powerful, mostly English or Norman families clashed frequently with the leading Irish families of Connemara.

A massive fire in 1473 destroyed much of the town but created space for a new street layout, and many solid stone buildings were erected in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Galway maintained its independent status under the ruling merchant families, who were mostly loyal to the English Crown. Its coastal location encouraged a huge trade in wine, spices, fish and salt with Portugal and Spain, rivalling London in the volume of goods passing through its docks. Its support of the Crown, however, led to its downfall; the city was besieged by Cromwell in 1651 and fell the following year. In 1691 William of Orange's militia added to the destruction. Trade with Spain declined and, with Dublin and Waterford taking most sea traffic, Galway stagnated for centuries.

The early 1900s saw Galway's revival as tourists returned to the city and student numbers grew. In 1934, the cobbled streets and thatched cabins of Claddagh were tarred and flattened to make way for modern, hygienic buildings, and construction has boomed since.

Just three hours from Dublin, Galway's population today continues to swell with an influx of new residents, making it the fastest-growing city in Europe.

ORIENTATION

Galway's compact town centre straddles Europe's shortest river, the Corrib, which connects Lough Corrib with the sea. Most shops and services congregate on the river's eastern

bank, while some of the city's best music pubs and restaurants are huddled to its west. From this area, known locally as the West Side, a 10-minute walk leads you out to the beginning of the seaside suburb of Salthill.

Running west from the grassy Eyre Sq, the city's pedestrianised primary shopping street starts as Williamsgate St, becomes William St and then Shop St, before forking into Mainguard St and High St. Just east of Eyre Sq is the combined bus and train station, half a block northeast of which is the main tourist office.

INFORMATION

A plethora of internet cafés around town charge around €5 per hour. Places open up

and close down quickly, but you'll have no problems finding somewhere to log on.

Irish banks have branches with ATMs in the city centre.

Allied Irish Bank (Lynch's Castle, cnr Shop & Upper Abbeygate Sts)

Bank of Ireland (Eyre Sq) Two branches on the square.

Charlie Byrne's (☎ 561 766; Cornstore, Middle St)

Huge collection of secondhand and discounted books in a succession of rambling rooms.

Eason's (☎ 562 284; Shop St) Superstore with a large selection of travel guides, and Galway's biggest periodicals rack.

Ireland West Tourism (☎ 537 700; www.irelandwest.ie; Forster St; ☎ 9am-5.45pm Easter-Sep, 9am-5.45pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat Oct-Easter) Large, efficient information centre that can help arrange local accommodation, and regional bus tours and ferry trips. It also changes

money. A row of telephones is available for free calls to local car rental agencies.

Laundrette (☎ 584 524; 4 Sea Rd; per load €8)

Post office (☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Also changes money.

Prospect Hill Laundrette (☎ 568 343; Prospect Hill; per load €8).

Tourist Information Booth (Eyre Sq; ☎ 1.30-5.30pm Oct-Easter, 9am-5.30pm Easter-Sep) Operated by the main tourist office; dispenses free city maps and local info.

USIT (☎ 565 177; www.usit.ie; 16 Mary St) Organises travel throughout Ireland and abroad.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Collegiate Church of St Nicholas of Myra

Crowned by a pyramidal spire, the **Collegiate Church of St Nicholas of Myra** (☎ 564 648; Market St;

admission by donation; ☎ 9am-5.45pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Oct-Mar) is Ireland's largest medieval parish church still in use. Dating from 1320, the church has been rebuilt and enlarged over the centuries, though much of the original form has been retained.

Christopher Columbus reputedly worshipped in the church in 1477. One theory suggests that the story of Columbus' visit to Galway arose from tales of St Brendan's 6th-century voyage to America (see p439). Seafaring has long been associated with the church – St Nicholas, for whom it's named, is the patron saint of sailors.

After Cromwell's victory, the church was used as a stable, and damaged stonework is still visible today. But St Nicholas was relatively fortunate: 14 other Galway churches were razed to the ground.

Parts of the church's floor are paved with gravestones from the 16th to 18th centuries, and the Lynch Aisle holds the tombs of the powerful Lynch family. A large block tomb in one corner is said to be the grave of James Lynch, a mayor of Galway in the late 15th century who condemned his son Walter to death for killing a young Spanish visitor. So the tale goes, none of the townsfolk would act as executioner and the mayor personally acted as hangman, after which he went into seclusion. Outside on Market St is a stone plaque on the **Lynch Memorial Window**, which relates this legend and claims to be the spot where the gallows stood.

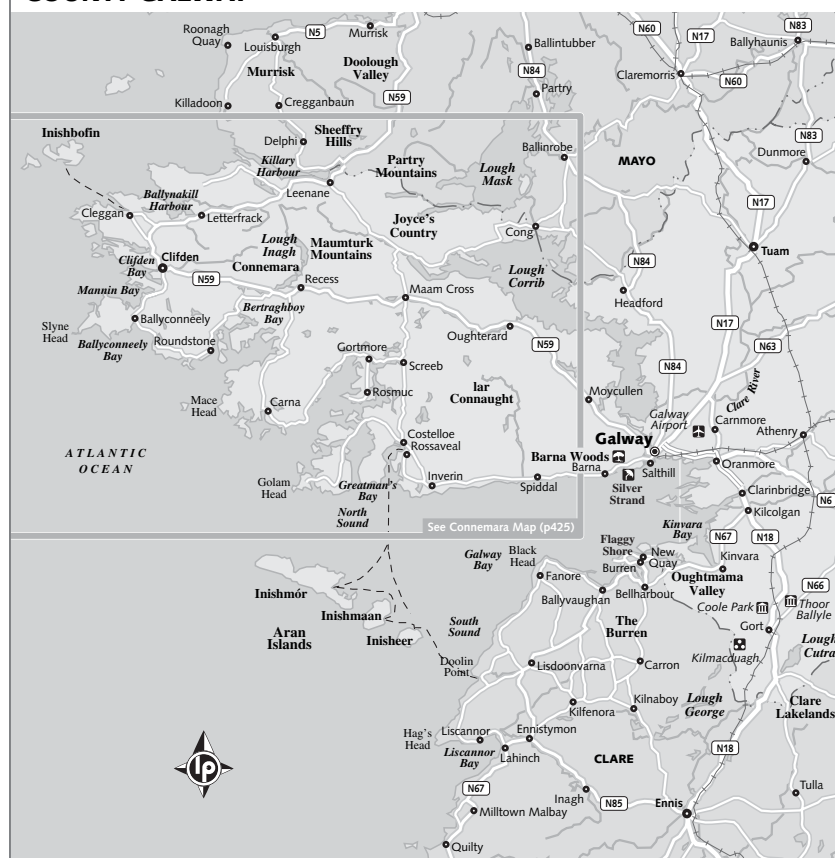
The two church bells date from 1590 and 1630.

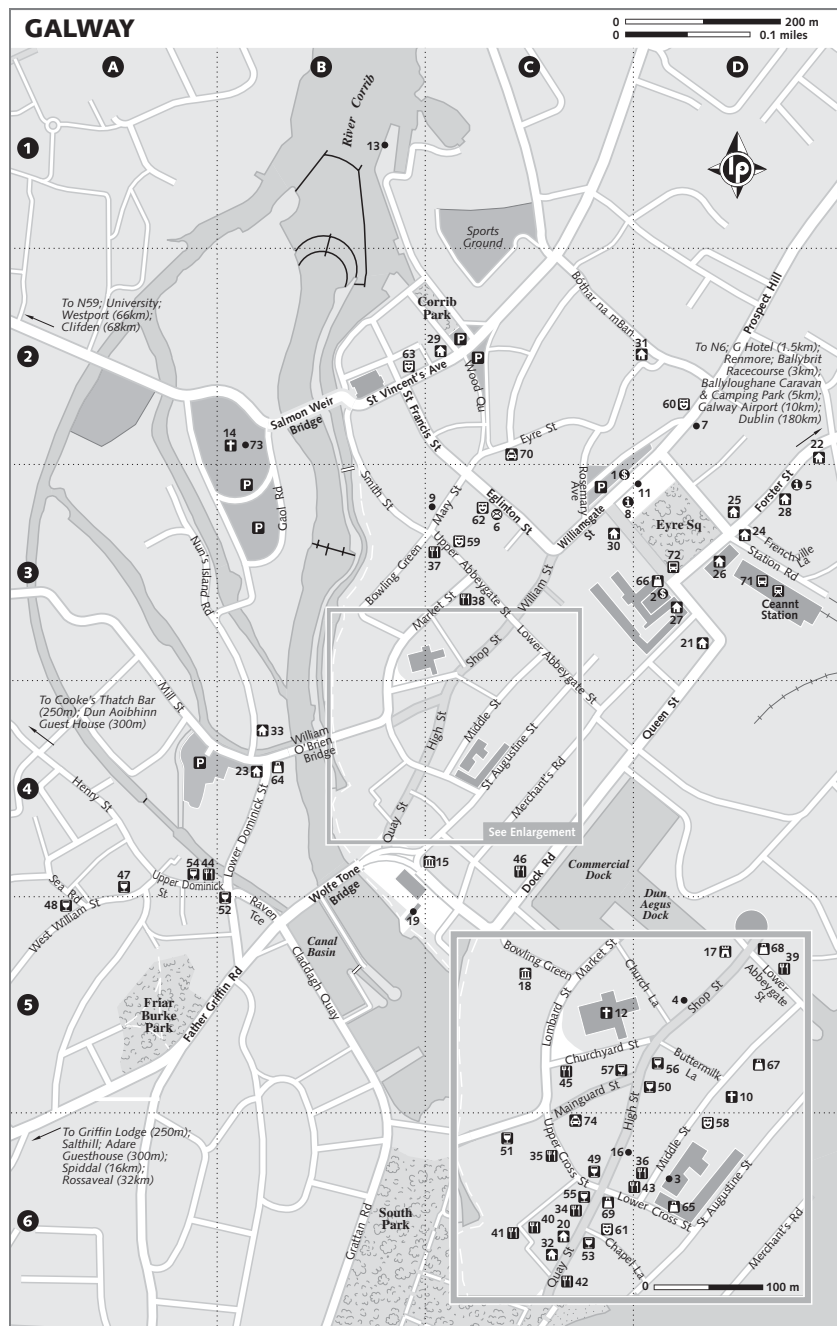
Lynch's Castle

Considered the finest town castle in Ireland, the old stone town house **Lynch's Castle** (cnr Shop & Upper Abbeygate Sts; admission free) was built in the 14th century, though much of what you see today dates from around 1600. The Lynch family was the most powerful of the 14 ruling Galway 'tribes', and members of the family held the position of mayor no fewer than 80 times between 1480 and 1650.

Stonework on the castle's façade include ghoulish gargoyles, and the coats of arms of Henry VII, the Lynches and the Fitzgeralds of Kildare. The castle is now a branch of the Allied Irish Bank, and you can peer into its old fireplace while withdrawing money from the foyer's ATMs.

COUNTY GALWAY





Spanish Arch & Medieval Walls

Framing the river east of Wolfe Tone Bridge, the Spanish Arch (1584) is thought to be an extension of Galway's medieval walls. The arch appears to have been designed as a passageway through which ships entered the city to unload goods such as wine and brandy from Spain.

During the drawn-out renovations of Eyre Sq, the arch and its lawns became the main open-air communal space. Its ongoing popularity sees locals gather on summer evenings for impromptu events such as screenings of films, which are projected onto the arch's façade.

Although a 1651 drawing of Galway clearly shows its extensive fortifications, the visits of Cromwell and William of Orange and subsequent centuries of neglect saw the walls almost completely disappear. Another surviving portion has been artfully incorporated into the modern shopping mall, Eyre Square Centre, complete with a tarot-card reader (☎ 556 826, 087 902 4776; ☎ by appointment Mon & Thu-Sat) installed in the basement in a former turret.

Galway City Museum

Adjacent to the Spanish Arch, the **Galway City Museum** (☎ 567 641; Spanish Pde; adult/child €5/2.50;

☎ 11am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun; ♿) permanently opened in its new location in mid-2007. It houses an array of artefacts interpreting the city's history, including some military items from the War of Independence, as well as research facilities, a coffee shop and superb vantage points looking out over the city and bay.

Galway Cathedral

Lording over the River Corrib, the imposing **Galway Cathedral** (☎ 563 577; www.galwaycathedral.org; Gaol Rd; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-6pm) was dedicated by the late Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston in 1965. The cathedral's full name is the unwieldy Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas, but its high, curved arches and central dome have a simple, solid elegance, as well as superb acoustics that are best appreciated during an **organ recital**. Programme dates are posted on the website.

From the Spanish Arch, a riverside path runs upriver and across the Salmon Weir Bridge to the cathedral.

Eyre Square

For years the restoration of Galway's central public square turned the city's showpiece

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Bank of Ireland.....1 C3	Kinlay House.....27 D3
Bank of Ireland.....2 D3	Park House Hotel.....28 D3
Charlie Byrne's.....3 D6	Salmon Weir Hostel.....29 C2
Eason's.....4 D5	Skeffington Arms Hotel.....30 C3
Ireland West Tourism.....5 D3	Sleepzone.....31 D2
Laundrette.....(see 48)	Spanish Arch Hotel.....32 C6
Post Office.....6 C3	St Martin's B&B.....33 B4
Prospect Hill Laundrette.....7 D2	
Tourist Information Booth.....8 C3	
USIT.....9 C3	

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Augustinian Church.....10 D5	Druid Lane Restaurant.....(see 61)
Browne's Doorway.....11 D3	Finnegan's.....38 C3
Collegiate Church of St Nicholas of Myra.....12 C5	Food 4 Thought.....39 D5
Corrib Princess.....13 B1	Goya's.....40 C6
Eyre Square Centre.....(see 66)	Kirwan's Lane Creative Cuisine.....41 C6
Galway Cathedral.....14 B2	Le Journal.....42 C6
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Kenny Gallery.....16 C6	Mustard.....43 D6
Lynch's Castle.....17 D5	Oscar's Restaurant.....44 A4
Nora Barnacle House.....18 C5	Richard McCabe's Bakery.....(see 65)
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	Sheridans on the Docks.....46 C4

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Barnacle's Quay Street House.....20 C6	Blue Note.....47 A4
Claddagh Hostel.....21 D3	Crane Bar.....48 A5
Forster Court Hotel.....22 D2	Front Door.....49 C6
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ENTERTAINMENT

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P Powell & Sons.....68 D5
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DRINKING

Blue Note.....47 A4
Crane Bar.....48 A5
Front Door.....49 C6
King's Head.....50 D5
Living Room.....51 C6
Monroe's Tavern.....52 B4

into a construction site and created traffic chaos. But the end result – an open green space with sculptures and pathways – is worth it. Its lawns are formally named Kennedy Park in commemoration of President John F Kennedy's 1963 visit to Galway, though you'll rarely, if ever, hear locals refer to it as anything but Eyre Sq.

The street running along the southwestern side of the square has now been pedestrianised, while the eastern side is taken up almost entirely by the Hotel Meyrick (formerly the Great Southern Hotel), an elegant grey limestone pile restored to its Victorian glory. Guarding the upper side of the square, **Browne's Doorway** (1627), a fragment from the home of one of the city's merchant rulers, looks like the remains from a carpet-bombing raid but is a classy touch nevertheless.

Salmon Weir

Upstream from the Salmon Weir Bridge, which crosses the River Corrib just east of the cathedral, the waters of the Corrib cascade down the great weir, one of their final descents before reaching Galway Bay. The weir controls the water levels above it, and when the salmon are running you can often see shoals of them waiting in the clear waters before rushing upriver to spawn.

The salmon and sea-trout seasons usually span February to September, but most fish pass through the weir during May and June. To obtain fishing permits and book a time, contact the manager at **Galway Fisheries** (☎ 562 388; Nun's Island) by post or phone several months ahead of your visit.

Kenny Gallery

Established in 1968, West Ireland's first gallery (Kenny's; ☎ 562 739; www.kennys.ie; High St; ⌚ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Sat) displays an exceptional collection of Irish art in a higgledy-piggledy terrace house. Look out for work by up-and-coming Galway artists, including Charlotte Kelly's abstract landscapes, Kieran Tuohy's bog-oak sculptures (crafted from bog-oak roots preserved in the oxygen-resistant turf for thousands of years), Jennifer Cunningham's prints and Liam Butler's welded copper.

All works are for sale, but even if you're not here to buy, Kenny's offers a glimpse into the future of Galweigan art. Proprietor Tom Kenny is a fount of information on the local scene.

Kenny's also trades antiquarian books online, including many Irish-language titles.

Nora Barnacle House

James Joyce courted his future wife Nora Barnacle (1884–1951) at this little house (☎ 564 743; 8 Bowling Green), beginning in 1909. It's now a privately owned museum displaying the couple's letters and photographs among evocatively arranged furniture. Hours are erratic; call ahead or check with the tourist office. Expect to pay around €3 admission.

Salthill

A favourite pastime for Galweigans and visitors alike is walking along the **Prom**, the seaside promenade running from the edge of the city along Salthill. Local tradition dictates 'kicking the wall' across from the diving boards (a 30- to 45-minute stroll from town) before turning around. At the time of writing, plans were underway to extend the Prom all the way from Salthill to Silver Strand – about 7.5km all up.

In and around Salthill are plenty of cosy pubs from where you can watch storms roll over the bay. Between May and September, you can also catch the traditional Irish dance and music spectacular, **Trad on the Prom** (☎ 087 238 8489; www.tradontheprom.com). The website posts show times and ticket information including various dinner-and-show packages.

TOURS

If you're short on time, bus tours departing from Galway are a good way to see Connemara, the Burren or the Cliffs of Moher, while boat tours take you to the heart of Lough Corrib. Tours can be booked direct or at the tourist office, and bus tours leave from outside Kinlay House Hostel on Merchants Rd.

Burren Wild Tours (☎ 087 877 9565 or 086 060 7858; www.burrenwildtours.com; adult/student €22/18) Seasonal bus tours to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher incorporating an easy 90-minute guided mountain walk.

Corrib Princess (☎ 592 447; www.corribprincess.ie; Woodquay; adult/family €14/35; ⌚ May–Sep) Two to three 1½-hour cruises on the River Corrib and Lough Corrib per day, departing from Woodquay, just beyond Salmon Weir Bridge.

Lally Coaches (☎ 562 905; www.lallytours.com; adult/child/student €22/13.50/16) Entertaining, informative bus tours of Connemara, or the Burren and Cliffs of Moher with local guides.

O'Neachtain Tours (☎ 553 188; www.galway.net/pages/oneachtain-tours; adult/student €22/16) Runs coach tours of Connemara, or the Burren and Cliffs of Moher. Family rates available on request.

SLEEPING

You'll find B&Bs lining the major approach roads, including many in Salthill, but to take full advantage of Galway's tightly packed attractions try for a room in the city centre. If you're planning to stay in Galway for an extended period, Wednesday's edition of the free *Galway Advertiser* (www.galwayadvertiser.ie) lists rental properties.

Galway's festivals (below) and easy striking distance from Dublin make it *hugely* popular year-round, especially on weekends. Accommodation often fills months in advance – book ahead!

Most of our accommodation recommendations have private parking or offer discounted parking at nearby car parks. Enquire when you book.

Budget

Ballyloughane Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 755 338; galwcamp@iol.ie; Ballyloughane Beach, Renmore; camp sites €7–10; ⌚ Apr–Sep) This family-run camping ground is clean, peaceful and secure, and its beachside lo-

cation gives it sweeping views across the bay. It's off the Dublin road (N6), 5km from Galway.

Salmon Weir Hostel (☎ 561 133; www.salmonweirhostel.com; 3 St Vincent's Ave; dm €10–18, d €36–40) Galway's hippie vibe finds its spiritual home in the Salmon Weir's guitar-strewn lounge room, where informal jam sessions take place most nights. The hostel has a share-house feel, including shared bathrooms for all rooms. There's no breakfast, although coffee and tea are free; watch out the 3am curfew doesn't leave you sleeping in the rain.

Barnacle's Quay Street House (☎ 568 644; www.barnacles.ie; 10 Quay St; dm €12.50–23, d €52–56; ☎ ☎) Surrounded by the pubs, restaurants and cafés you came to Galway for, this well-run hostel is housed in a medieval building with a 1990s extension. Barnacle's horseshoe-shaped kitchen has toasted-sandwich makers and a dishwasher, and there's a warm common room with a big gas fireplace. Breakfast includes scones and soda bread.

Kinlay House (☎ 565 244; www.kinlayhouse.ie; Merchant's Rd; dm €14–23, d €50–62; ☎ ☎) Easy-going staff, a full range of facilities and an ultra-central location just off Eyre Sq make this Galway's all-round best hostel. Spanning two huge brightly lit floors, Kinlay House

PARTY ON...AND ON

Galway's packed calendar of festivals turns the city and surrounding communities into what feels like one nonstop party – streets overflow with revellers, and pubs and restaurants often extend their opening hours.

Highlights include the following:

- **Cúirt Poetry & Literature Festival** (☎ 565 886; www.galwayartscentre.ie/cuirt) Top-name authors converge on Galway in April for Ireland's premier literary festival, featuring poetry slams, theatrical performances and readings.
- **Galway Arts Festival** (☎ 566 577; www.galwayartsfestival.ie) A two-week extravaganza of theatre, music, art and comedy in mid-July.
- **Galway Film Fleadh** (☎ 751 655; www.galwayfilmfleadh.com) One of Ireland's biggest film festivals, held in July around the same time as the arts festival.
- **Galway Race Week** (☎ 753 870) Horse races in Ballybrit, 3km east of the city, are the centrepiece of Galway's biggest, most boisterous festival of all. The week occurs in late July or early August.
- **Galway International Oyster Festival** (☎ 527 282; oysters@iol.ie) Oysters are washed down with plenty of pints in the last week in September.

Also see p437 for information on Galway Hooker boat races, p437) for more oyster-related events, p422 for *bodhrán* (hand-held goatskin drum) workshops and p419 for the Aran Islands' rollicking *Father Ted* festival.

still manages to feel personal thanks to social common areas (with free wi-fi), two self-catering kitchens and two cosy TV lounges. You can book regional day trips here, which depart right outside the building.

Other recommendations:

Sleepzone (☎ 566 999; www.sleepzone.ie; Bóthar na mBan; dm €13-28, d €52-76; 📶) Big, busy backpacker base with free internet and wi-fi, a bureau de change, pool table and BBQ terrace. Party-goers beware: no alcohol is allowed on the premises.

Galway City Hostel (☎ 566 959; www.galwaycityhostel.com; Eyre Sq; dm €13.50-23, d €44-60; 📶) Friendly spot next door to the bus-train station, with all-new bunks, renovated bathrooms and a breezy balcony.

Claddagh Hostel (☎ 533 555; www.claddaghhostelgalway.com; Queen St; dm from €15, tw from €50; 📶) Small, central multilevel terrace house with glassed-in lounge-cum-TV-room and spotless kitchen/dining room. Free internet terminals and wi-fi.

Midrange

St Martin's B&B (☎ 568 286; www.stmartins.ie; 2 Nun's Island Rd; s €35-45, d €40-70; 📶) A welcoming cup of tea is the start of a memorable stay at this central, beautifully kept house, which has a flower-filled garden overlooking floodlit waterfalls cascading into the Corrib. Kindly hosts Mary and Donie Sexton serve freshly squeezed orange juice and home-baked brown bread, and in winter Mary wraps up hot-water bottles to tuck into your bed.

Griffin Lodge (☎ 589 440; griffinlodge@eircom.net; 3 Father Griffin Pl; s €35-50, d €55-70; 📶) You'll be welcomed like a long-lost friend at this completely renovated B&B, which has eight immaculate rooms in soothing shades of spearmint and moss green. Frills are kept to a minimum, with just a few elegant framed prints and crocheted cotton bedspreads.

Dun Aoibhinn Guest House (☎ 583 129; www.dunaoibhinhouse.com; 12 St Mary's Rd; s/d from €39/58; 📶) Pronounced doon-ay-ven, this restored town house with original lead-light windows and floorboards is less than five minutes' stroll from the West Side's music pubs. Antique-filled rooms come with flat-screen satellite TVs, free wi-fi, laptop safes and fridges. Tea, coffee and biscuits are included; otherwise breakfast means nipping over the road to buy fresh croissants.

Galway Arms Inn (☎ 565 444; http://galwayarmsinn.ie; 65 Lower Dominick St; s/d from €40/80) Rooms on the upper floors of this down-to-earth pub on the corner of Mill St have balconies, and some

have river views. A hearty Irish breakfast is served between 9am and 10.30am, giving you a chance for a lie-in after a night downstairs in the bar. Wi-fi's free.

Adare Guesthouse (☎ 582 638; adare@iol.ie; 9 Father Griffin Pl; s €50-90, d €80-120; 📶) Overlooking a football pitch and children's playground, this barn-style place has 10 generously sized rooms and service that runs like clockwork. Sift through a dozen menu choices at breakfast including French toast, pancakes, smoked salmon and steaming bowls of porridge.

Spanish Arch Hotel (☎ 569 600; www.spanisharchhotel.ie; Quay St; s €75-85, d €99-145) In a sensational spot on the main drag, this 20-room boutique hotel is housed in a 16th-century former Carmelite convent. The hotel's solid-timber bar has a great line-up of live music, so rooms at the back, while smaller, are best for a quiet night's sleep. There's also an excellent on-site restaurant, which provides room service.

Skeffington Arms Hotel (☎ 563 173; www.skeffington.ie; Eyre Sq; d from €99; 📶) Rooms at the Skeff, overlooking Eyre Sq, recently underwent extensive renovations, lifting them to an even higher standard. But the main reason to stay here is still the time-honoured pub below, which also has a lunchtime carvery, an evening restaurant (serving stand-out seafood chowder with a shot of Guinness) and a classy nightclub, Karma.

Garvey's Inn (☎ 562 224; www.garveysinn.com; Eyre Sq; d €110-120; 📶) Set over an authentic timber pub dating from 1861, this comfortable family-owned hotel has a bird's-eye view over Galway's oasislike square, and snug rooms stocked with everything you're likely to need, including irons, ironing boards and trouser presses.

Top End

Hotel Meyrick (☎ 564 041; www.greatsouthernhotelgalway.com; Eyre Sq; s/d/st from €120/135/150; 📶) Known as the Railway Hotel when it opened in 1852, and later as the Great Southern Hotel, this stately showpiece drips with chandeliers, tasselled velvet curtains, bevelled mirrors, and luxuries such as a rooftop hot tub; all 99 guest rooms include bathtubs. Its corridors were built to accommodate women's hooped ball gowns.

Forster Court Hotel (☎ 564 111; www.forstercourt.com; Eyre Sq; d €145; 📶) What sets this sleek, modern hotel apart is a host of thoughtful little details such as bottle openers attached

to the walls of its spiffy navy-and-gold rooms, free broadband and wi-fi, and a decadently late checkout of 2pm on Sundays. All but two rooms have bathtubs, and 20 have balconies. Room rates drop by up to 50% on weekdays during winter.

Park House Hotel (☎ 564 924; www.parkhousehotel.ie; Park Lane, Fair Green Rd; d from €198; 📶) Housed in an old farm-while-wholesale warehouse, this privately owned hotel boasts regal guest rooms and a sumptuous lobby stuffed with embroidered armchairs. Luxurious touches include a turndown service, Molton Brown bath products, free broadband, morning and evening newspapers, and air conditioning (not that Galway needs it, but hey, just in case).

our pick G Hotel (☎ 865 200; www.theghotel.ie; Wellpark; d/st from €200/340; 📶) Galway didn't know what hit it when this ubercontemporary hotel opened inside a nondescript business complex. Avant-garde interiors designed by Galweigan milliner-to-the-stars Philip Treacy include a grand salon with 350 suspended silver balls, a Schiaparelli-pink cocktail lounge, and a restaurant with purple banquettes styled like oversize seashells. The G's on-site spa looks out on a bamboo-planted forest, and you can watch flat-screen TVs from the bathtub of most suites. Valet parking and wi-fi are free.

EATING

Seafood is Galway's specialty, whether fish and chips, ocean-fresh chowder or sea bass cooked to perfection. Galway Bay oysters can also be found locally and at nearby Clarinbridge. The city's bohemian bent means vegetarians are spoilt for choice from cafés through to high-end restaurants.

Restaurants

our pick Ard Bia (☎ 539 897; www.ardbia.com; 2 Quay St; café dishes €6-12, lunch mains €10-14, dinner mains €16-26; 📶) café 10am-5pm, lunch served noon-3pm, restaurant 6.30-10.30pm Tue-Sat) In Irish, Ard Bia means 'High Food', which sums up both the 1st-floor location and the cuisine of this café-restaurant. Ard Bia's owner also runs a gallery in town, and this funky dining space showcases contemporary art and local pottery. Blackboard lunch specials are complemented by staples as such beef-and-rosemary burgers; dinner choices run from smoked-paprika lamb to tabouli-and-tofu cake.

McDonagh's (☎ 565 001; 22 Quay St; fish & chips from €7.50, restaurant mains €15-23; 📶) café & takeaway counter

noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 5-11pm Sun, restaurant 5-10pm Mon-Sat) A trip to Galway isn't complete without stopping at McDonagh's. Divided into two parts, with a takeaway counter and a café with long communal wooden tables (great for meeting locals) on one side, and a more upmarket restaurant on the other, Galway's best chipper churns out battered cod, plaice, haddock, whiting and salmon nonstop, all accompanied by homemade tartare sauce.

Mustard (☎ 566 400; Middle St; mains €8-13; 📶) noon-10pm) This exciting new spot serves select wines and inventive dishes such as crispy aromatic duck pizzas with plum sauce, and lentil kofta burgers.

Druid Lane Restaurant (☎ 563 015; 9 Quay St; lunch mains €8-13, dinner mains €15-27; 📶) 5pm-late Mon-Fri, 1-4pm & 5pm-late Sat & Sun) Signature main courses at this intimate restaurant include saddle of rabbit, and roasted duck breast. And while starters such as Thai fish cakes with lemongrass dip have an international flavour, homemade desserts such as Baileys bread-and-butter pudding are as Irish as it gets.

Finnegan's (☎ 564 764; 2 Market St; mains €10; 📶) 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 11am-10pm Sun) Authentic, utterly unpretentious Irish cooking and an equally authentic clientele make this a wonderful spot for comfort food. Finnegan's homemade shepherd's pie comes piping hot from the oven, its traditional Irish stew will stick to your ribs, and desserts include Baileys cheesecake. Full Irish breakfasts are served all day.

Kirwan's Lane Creative Cuisine (☎ 568 266; Kirwan's Lane; lunch mains €10-16, dinner mains €18-28; 📶) noon-2pm & 6-10pm Mon-Sat) Kirwan's Lane isn't complacent about its reputation as one of the city's best and most inventive restaurants. The menu combines Irish produce with Asian spices, service is attentive without being intrusive, and the two-storey space is minimalist and elegant. Definitely book ahead.

Da Tang Noodle House (☎ 561 443; Middle St; mains €11.50-18.50; 📶) noon-3pm & 5.30-10pm Mon-Sat, 5.30-10.30pm Sun) This place on Middle St does light, healthy Chinese stir-fries and satays in a stylish paper-lantern-lit interior.

Oscar's Restaurant (☎ 582 180; Upper Dominick St; dish of the day €17, mains €25-29.50; 📶) from 7pm Mon-Fri, from 6pm Sat) Opening hours can be erratic, but no matter – the flamboyant and fun atmosphere at Oscar's is consistently matched by adventurous cooking, such as

seared king scallops with pistachios, and roast rabbit with apricot. Meals are presented with an eye for aesthetics and served with theatrical flair.

Cafés

Food 4 Thought (☎ 565 854; Lower Abbeygate St; mains €4-7; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat, 11.30am-4pm Sun) In addition to providing organic and vegetarian sandwiches, savoury scones, and wholesome dishes such as cashew-nut roast and moussaka made with textured vegetable protein, this New Age-y place is great for finding out about energy workshops and yoga classes around town.

Le Journal (☎ 568 426; Quay St; lunch mains €4-9, dinner mains €10-22; ☎ 9am-6pm Oct-Apr, 9am-10pm May-Sep) Lined with leather-bound books and decorated with painted quotations of the opening phrases of classic novels, this chef-run place is an inexpensive café by day and a *très* elegant bistro on summer nights.

Goya's (☎ 567 010; 2 Kirwan's Lane; dishes €4.50-9.50; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) As evidenced by the confections on display, the cakes are supreme at Goya's, a Galway treasure hidden on a narrow walkway. Its cool pale blue décor, Segafredo coffee and sweet treats including a towering lemon meringue pie make it a perfect spot to take some time out. Goya's also serves one lunchtime special (€8).

Delight (☎ 567 823; 29 Upper Abbeygate St; dishes €5-10; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, closed Christmas period & Race Week) The name's an understatement: this hole-in-the-wall gourmet food bar is sheer heaven for sandwiches and wraps bursting with sprouts, as well as wheat-grass shots, juices and baked goods including a gooey chocolate pudding to die for. Everything, including the breakfast muesli, is made on the premises. The shop has a roaring takeaway trade, but there's also a clutch of tables.

Sheridans on the Docks (☎ 564 905; 3 New Docks; dishes from €6; ☎ 4.30-11.30pm Mon-Thu, 12.30pm-12.30am Fri, 10am-12.30am Sat) This waterfront bar is a chic yet relaxed spot for cheese platters from the family's cheese shop, Sheridans Cheesemongers, as well as wines by the glass and boutique beers.

Busker Brownes (☎ 563 377; Upper Cross St; dishes around €10; ☎ 10.30am-11.30pm Mon-Thu, 10.30-12.30am Fri & Sat, 12.30-11.30pm Sun) Smartly done out in brown-on-brown tones, this suave café-bar does fine pub fare and hangover breakfasts. It's also a prime spot to catch live ragtime jazz.

Self-Catering

Richard McCabe's Bakery (☎ 865 641; www.mccabes.cakes.net; Cornstore, Cross St; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Sat) To pack a beach picnic, head to the bakery of five-time world-champion pastry chef Richard McCabe for crusty fresh bread and sausage rolls.

Sheridan's Cheesemongers (☎ 564 829; 14 Churchyard St; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) Sheridan's Cheesemongers has local and international cheeses, and top drops in its upstairs wine-bar-cum-shop (open 2pm to 9pm Tuesday to Friday, noon to 8pm Saturday).

DRINKING

Galway's nickname of the City of Tribes sums up its drinking and entertainment scene. For its size the city has surprisingly distinct areas where you'll encounter different crowds: Eyre Sq and its surrounds tends to be the domain of retail and office workers and tourists; the main shopping strip draws hip young professionals; the Woodquay area, near Salmon Weir bridge, is where rural salt-of-the-earth folk congregate when in town; and the West Side attracts boho artists and musicians. Wherever you go, you won't be bored (or thirsty).

Most of Galway's pubs see musicians performing at least a couple of nights a week, whether in an informal session or as a headline act, and many swing to live music every night.

Séhan Ua Neachtain (☎ 568 820; 17 Upper Cross St) Painted a bright cornflower blue, this 19th-century pub, known simply as Neachtain's (*nock-tans*), has Galway Hooker on tap and a truly fabulous atmosphere.

Crane Bar (☎ 587 419; 2 Sea Rd) An atmospheric old pub west of the Corrib, the Crane is the best spot in Galway to catch an informal céilidh (session of traditional music and dancing) most nights. It also hosts a structured line-up of talented bands in its rowdy, good-natured upstairs bar.

Róisín Dubh (☎ 586 540; Upper Dominick St) Despite being schmicked up in recent years and becoming somewhat more like a superpub (complete with a vast rooftop terrace), Róisín Dubh is still *the* place to see emerging alternative and rock acts before they hit the big time.

Blue Note (☎ 589 116; 3 West William St) This jazzy pub-cum-dance-bar has a great summer beer garden and usually no cover charge.

HOOKED

Launched in 2006, Galway's local beer might have been called Cuckoo if founders Ronan Brennan and Aidan Murphy had their way – given that this is what their friends and family called them when they announced they were starting up their own brewery. (Creating a new beer in Guinness-drinking Ireland is like selling ice to Eskimos, surely.)

Instead, the two cousins (their mums are identical twins), who come from hospitality and brewing backgrounds respectively, threw the name open via a website competition. Galway Hooker (after the bay's iconic fishing boats) was the hands-down consensus.

Choosing a name was one thing, but starting a brewing company wasn't straightforward. As Ronan says, 'Eventually we found an existing brewery which had been dormant for five years and needed to be completely recommissioned including new machinery, which meant a lot of begging, borrowing and stealing.'

The pale ale is chemical free, since, according to Ronan, 'We couldn't afford chemicals.' On a serious note, Aidan adds, 'We're putting the flavour in the way it's meant to be. There's a love of good beer in this country, but a lack of variety. People are slow to change their drinking habits. We were careful which pubs we put it into – places where people are open-minded and it didn't outlast its keg life (about a month). The integrity of the beer is everything – we wanted to create the best beer possible for the people of Galway.'

And they have.

Galway Hooker is on tap around town including most West Side pubs. Should you get hooked, international exports are in the works.

Tig Cóilí (Mainguard St) Two live céilidhs a day draw the crowds to this authentic fire-engineered pub, just off High St. Inside, black-and-white photos take you back into Galway's past.

Cooke's Thatch Bar (☎ 521749; 2 Newcastle Rd) Warm, welcoming and not even remotely touristy, this 18th-century thatched-roofed local has fantastic Guinness, a heated internal courtyard and live music at least once a week.

Living Room (www.thelivingroom.ie; 5 Bridge St; admission free; ☎ 10.30am-11.30pm Mon-Wed, 10.30am-2am Thu-Sun) With glam red-and-orange décor, original '50s and '60s retro furniture, DJs, and modish bar food until 6pm, the Living Room is home away from home for Galway's hipsters.

Monroe's Tavern (☎ 583 397; Upper Dominick St) A reliable spot for traditional music and ballads, Monroe's remains the only pub in the city for regular Irish dancing (on Tuesday). You can take pizzas through to the bar from Galway's best pizza joint, the attached Monroe's Pizza Cabin (☎ 582 887; small/medium/large pizzas from €6/12.50/15; open from 4pm to midnight Monday to Wednesday, 4pm to 1am Thursday to Sunday).

Other recommendations:

Quays (☎ 568 347; Quay St) Enormous tavern with endless timber-panelled rooms and passageways, and great vantage points from which to watch live music (ranging from traditional to pop) most nights.

Front Door (☎ 563 757; High St) Heated balconies and cosy timber booths make this a popular spot for a pint.

King's Head (☎ 566 630; 15 High St) Mainstream, commercial superpub within a 17th-century stone house, hosting rock bands most nights and a popular jazz session on Sunday 'morning' (usually noon to 4pm).

Taaffe's Bar (☎ 564 066; 19 Shop St) Stripped of some of its original period detail but still well loved for its nightly Irish music sessions beginning at 5pm.

ENTERTAINMENT

Most pubs in Galway have live music at least a couple of nights a week. Thursday's edition of the free *Galway Advertiser* (www.galwayadvertiser.ie) lists what's on in the city.

Nightclubs

Clubs generally get cranking around 11pm and wind down around 2am. Admission prices vary according to the nightly programme.

Central Park (☎ 565 976; www.centralparkclub.com; 36 Upper Abbeygate St; ☎ 11pm-2am) With seven bars and a capacity of 1000 people, CPs is a Galway institution, especially among the professional crowd.

cuba (☎ 565 991; www.cuba.ie; Eyre Sq; admission €5-15; ☎ 8pm-late) Chances are you'll spot this place by the crowds milling out front. House-spinning DJs and live acts fill the dance floor.

GPO (☎ 563 073; www.gpo.ie; 21 Eglinton St; admission €6-10) GPO cranks out '80s and '90s tunes

CLADDAGH RINGS

The fishing village of Claddagh once had its own king as well as its own customs and traditions. Now subsumed into the Galway city centre, virtually all remnants of the original village are gone, but Claddagh rings survive as a timeless reminder.

Popular as an engagement or wedding ring (or just as a memento of your visit), these rings depict a heart (symbolising love) between two outstretched hands (friendship), topped by a crown (loyalty). Rings are handcrafted at jewellers around town, and start from about €15 for a silver band to well over €1000 for a diamond-set platinum version.

Jewellers include Ireland's oldest jewellery shop, **Thomas Dillon's Claddagh Gold** (☎ 566 365; www.claddaghring.ie; 1 Quay St), which was established in 1750. It has some vintage examples in its small back-room 'museum'.

on Wednesday, and house, R&B, indie and hip-hop the rest of the week. It's a favourite with students, who get free admission most nights.

Karma (☎ 563 173; www.karma.ie; Eyre Sq; admission €6-10; ☎ 11pm-late Thu-Sun) Part of the Skeffington Arms Hotel, Karama draws a sophisticated crowd who dress to impress.

Theatre

Druid Theatre (☎ 568 617; www.druidtheatre.com; Chapel Lane) This long-established theatre is famed for showing experimental works by young Irish playwrights.

Town Hall Theatre (☎ 569 777; Courthouse Sq) The Town Hall Theatre features Broadway and West End shows, and visiting singers.

An Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe (☎ 562 024; Middle St) Stages plays in Irish.

SHOPPING

Galway has an enticing array of specialty shops dotting its narrow streets, stocking cutting-edge fashion, Irish woollens (including Aran sweaters), outdoor clothing and equipment, local jewellery, art and, of course, music.

Galway market (Churchyard St; ☎ 7.30am-3pm Sat & Sun) Galway's festive market is filled with buskers and stalls selling farm-fresh produce, crafts, jewellery and hot food. At the time of writing, plans were underway for the markets to operate from Thursday to Sunday – check with the tourist office for updates. Saturday usually offers the widest choice of stalls and liveliest crowds.

PPowell & Sons (☎ 562 295; powellsmusicshop@eircom.net; William St) You can pick up tin whistles, *bodhráns* and other instruments here, as well as sheet music.

Mulligan Records (☎ 564 961; 5 Middle St) Drop into Mulligan Records for recorded Irish

music and folk music from around the world.

General purpose shopping centres include the Eyre Square Centre, with a large Dunne's supermarket; Bridge Mills, in an old mill building by the river at the western end of William O'Brien Bridge; and the Cornstore on Middle St.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

British Airways (www.britishairways.com) has limited services to **Galway airport** (GWY; ☎ 800 491 492; www.galwayairport.com; Carrmore) from London, Manchester and Glasgow. **Aer Arran** (www.aerarran.com) offers cheap flights between Galway and London Luton, Edinburgh, Manchester and Birmingham, as well as Lorient in France.

The closest major airport is **Shannon airport** (SNN; ☎ 061-712 000; www.shannonairport.com), served by domestic and international carriers including Ryanair. **Knock airport** (NOC; ☎ 094-67222; www.knockairport.com) is also within easy reach of Galway.

Bus

From the **bus station** (☎ 562 000), just off Eyre Sq, there are frequent **Bus Éireann** (www.buseireann.ie) services to all major cities in the Republic and the North. The one-way fare to Dublin (3¾ hours) is €13.

A lot of private companies are also represented. **Bus Nestor** (☎ 797 484; busnestor@eircom.net) runs five to eight daily services to Dublin (€10) via Dublin airport (€10). Buses leave from outside the tourist office every couple of hours or so between 6.30am and 5.25pm. Hourly buses to Dublin (€12) and Dublin airport (€17), run by **City Link** (☎ 564 163; www.citylink.ie), depart from the tourist office daily. **Michael Nee**

Coaches (☎ 095-51082) runs two or three daily services to towns throughout Connemara. Buses depart from the tourist office.

Train

From the **train station** (☎ 564 222), just off Eyre Sq, there are up to five trains daily to/from Dublin's Heuston Station (one way from €29, three hours). Connections with other train routes can be made at Athlone (one hour).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airports

Just one bus per day runs between Galway airport and Galway from Monday to Saturday (none on Sunday). It leaves the airport at 1.25pm, and leaves Galway bus station at 12.50pm. A taxi to/from the airport costs about €18, which can be ordered from a bank of free phones at the airport. Some B&Bs and hotels can arrange pick-up.

Bus Éireann (www.buseireann.ie) operates 11 daily services from Shannon airport to Galway (€14.50) bus stop (via Ennis, €5.70) from 7.55am to 8.55pm (from 7.05am to 8.05pm from Galway to Shannon airport). **Citylink** (www.citylink.ie) also runs five services a day between Galway tourist office and Shannon airport (€15). The journey takes just under two hours.

Knock airport is linked by a shuttle bus with Charlestown, from where there are direct Bus Éireann services to/from Charlestown and Galway (1¾ hours).

There are also frequent daily Citylink services between Dublin airport and Galway (€17). Direct journeys take 3¼ hours; some make a stop in central Dublin and take 3¾ hours.

Bicycle

Europa Bicycles (☎ 563 355; Hunter's Bldg; ☎ Mon-Sat), on Earl's Island, opposite Galway Cathedral, hires bikes for €10 for 24 hours.

Bus

You can walk to almost everything in Galway, including out to Salthill, but you'll also find regular buses departing from Eyre Sq. For Salthill, take bus 1 (€1.20).

Car

Parking throughout Galway's streets is metered and costs €1 for the first 30 minutes and €0.80 for every hour thereafter. There

are several multistorey and pay-and-display car parks around town.

Galway's unprecedented growth and the resulting lack of infrastructure serving its urban sprawl means that traffic in and out of the city centre can bank up alarmingly. For a stress-free holiday, try to leave the roads to commuters at peak hours if possible.

Taxi

Taxi ranks are located on Eyre Sq, on Bridge St, and next to the bus-train station. You can also catch a cab by dropping by a taxi office. Try **Abbey Cabs** (☎ 569 469; Eyre St) or **Galway Taxis** (☎ 561 111; Dominick St).

ARAN ISLANDS

☎ 091

Just a 40 minute boat ride from the mainland, the desolate beauty of the Aran Islands feels far removed from contemporary life.

An extension of the limestone escarpment that forms the Burren, the island has shallow topsoil scattered with yellow buttercups, white-petalled daisies and spring gentian, and jagged cliffs that are pounded by surf. On the cliff tops, ancient forts such as Dún Aengus on Inishmór and Dún Chonchúir on Inishmaan are some of the oldest archaeological remains in Ireland.

A web of ancient stone walls (1600km in all) ensnares all three islands like a stone fishing net. These walls serve the dual purpose of keeping sheep and ponies in, and providing a repository for stone dug from the ground to make way for grazing and harvests. The islands also have a smattering of early *clocháns* (dry-stone beehive huts from the early-Christian period), resembling igloos made from stone.

Inishmór (Araínn in Irish, meaning 'Big Island') is the largest and most easily accessible from Galway. The island is home to one of Ireland's most important and impressive archaeological sites, as well as some lively pubs and restaurants, particularly in its little township Kilronan. The smallest island, Inisheer (Inis Oíir; 'Eastern Island'), with an impressive arts centre, is also easily reached from Galway year-round and from Doolin in the summer months. Hence Inishmaan (Inis Meáin; 'Middle Island'), in the centre, tends to be bypassed by the majority of tourist

traffic, preserving its age-old traditions and evoking a sense of timelessness.

Although high summer brings a mad-dening number of tourists, services on the islands are few. Only Inishmór has an ATM (with limited hours and a propensity to run out of cash), and the majority of places don't accept credit cards (always check ahead). Restaurants, including pubs that serve food, often reduce their opening hours or shut completely during winter. However, winter lets you experience the islands at their wild, windswept best.

History

Almost nothing is known about the people who built the massive Iron Age stone structures on Inishmór and Inishmaan. These sites are commonly referred to as 'forts', but are actually believed to have served as pagan religious centres. In folklore, the forts are said to have been built by the Firbolgs, a Celtic tribe who invaded Ireland from Europe in prehistoric times.

It is believed that people came to the islands to farm, which was a major challenge given the rocky terrain. Early islanders augmented their soil by hauling seaweed and sand up from the shore. People also fished the surrounding waters on long *currachs* (rowing boats made of a framework of laths covered with tarred canvas), which remain a symbol of the Aran Islands.

Christianity reached the islands remarkably quickly, and some of the earliest monastic settlements were founded by St Enda (Éanna) in the 5th century. Enda appears to have been an Irish chief who converted to Christianity and spent some time studying in Rome before seeking out a suitably remote spot for his monastery. Any remains you see today are from the 8th century onwards.

From the 14th century, control of the islands was disputed by two Gaelic families, the O'Briens and the O'Flahertys. The English took over during the reign of Elizabeth I, and in Cromwell's times a garrison was stationed here.

As Galway's importance waned, so did that of the islands, and their isolation meant islanders maintained a traditional lifestyle well into the 20th century. Up to the 1930s, people wore traditional Aran dress: bright red skirts and black shawls for women, baggy woollen trousers and waistcoats with *crios* (colour-

ful belts) for men. The classic heavy cream-coloured Aran sweater knitted in complex patterns originated here, and it is still hand-knitted on the islands.

Until the last few decades the islands were, if not centuries from civilisation, then at least a perilous all-day journey in unpredictable seas. Fast ferries have now made for a quick (albeit sometimes still rough) crossing. But island life changed forever with the commencement of air services on 15 August 1970. It's a day that sticks in the minds of locals, who recall that a hurricane blew up and they were called down from their houses to sit in the plane to prevent it from being blown away. For many years afterwards, when the power went out, locals were again called down to the airstrips to line up their car headlights either side of the runway so pilots could land.

There are now secondary schools on all three islands, but as recently as a decade ago, students on the two smaller islands had to move to boarding school in Galway to complete their education, which involved an abrupt switch from speaking Irish to English. Farming has all but died out on the islands and tourism is now the primary source of income; while Irish remains the local tongue, most locals speak English with visitors and converse with each other in Irish.

Getting There & Away

AIR

All three islands have landing strips. The mainland departure point is Connemara regional airport at Minna, near Inverin (Indreabhán), about 35km west of Galway. **Aer Arann** (☎ 593 034; www.aerarannislands.ie) offers return flights to any of the islands five times daily (hourly in summer) for €45/25/37 per adult/child/student; the flights take just seven minutes, and groups of four or more can ask about group rates. You may find yourself sitting in the cockpit next to the pilot of the tiny planes (scary at first, but the views are stunning). A bus from outside Galway's Kinlay House Hostel to the airport costs €6 return.

BOAT

Weather permitting, there's at least one boat a day heading out to the Aran Islands. Around Galway's Eyre Sq are several ferry offices that can set you up with a boat ride

as well as accommodation. Galway's tourist office will do the same.

Island Ferries (☎ 568 903, 572 273; www.aranislandferries.com; adult/child/concession €25/13/20) and **Aran Direct** (☎ 566 535; www.arandirect.com; return adult/child/concession €25/15/20) have quick 40-minute crossings from Rossaveal, about 40km west of Galway. The Galway-Rossaveal bus trip costs €6/2.50 per adult/child return and leaves Galway's Kinlay House Hostel 1½ hours before the ferry's scheduled departure. If you're driving to Rossaveal, you can park in the car park near the ferry offices. Transporting a car costs upwards of €160 and is only available on some crossings, but in any case you won't need one on the islands.

Ferries to Inisheer also operate from Doolin (p394).

Getting Around

The ferry companies run interisland services in high season only; from October to April connections require a trip back to Rossaveal.

INISHMÓR

☎ 099 / pop 1300

Most visitors who venture out to the islands don't make it beyond Inishmór (Árainn) and its main attraction, Dún Aengus, the stone fort perilously perched on the island's towering cliffs. Tourism turns the wheels

of the island's economy: an armada of tour vans greet each ferry at the wharf, offering a ride round the sights (not a bad idea if you're doing a quick day trip). The arid landscape west of Kilonran (Cill Rónáin), the island's main settlement, is dominated by stone walls, boulders, scattered buildings and the odd patch of deep-green grass and potato plants.

Orientation

Inishmór is 14.5km long and 4km at its widest stretch. All boats arrive and depart from Kilonran, on the southeastern side of the island. The airstrip is 2km further southeast of town; a shuttle to Kilonran costs €5 return. One principal road runs the length of the island, intersected by small lanes and paths of packed dirt and stone.

Information

Staffed by lifelong islanders, the **tourist office** (Map p418; ☎ 61263; Kilonran; ☎ 11am-7pm Jun-Sep, 11am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-May), on the waterfront west of the ferry pier in Kilonran, also changes money. The **Bank of Ireland** (Map p418; Kilonran; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-3pm Wed), north of the village centre, doesn't have an ATM, but you'll find one in Kilonran's small **Spar supermarket** (Map p418; Kilonran; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Wed, 9am-7pm Thu-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Jun-Aug).

LITERARY ARAN

The Aran Islands have sustained a strong creative streak, partly as a means for entertainment during long periods of isolation and partly, in the words of one local composer, to 'Make sure the rest of the country doesn't forget we're here'. Artists and writers from the mainland have similarly long been drawn to the elemental nature of island life.

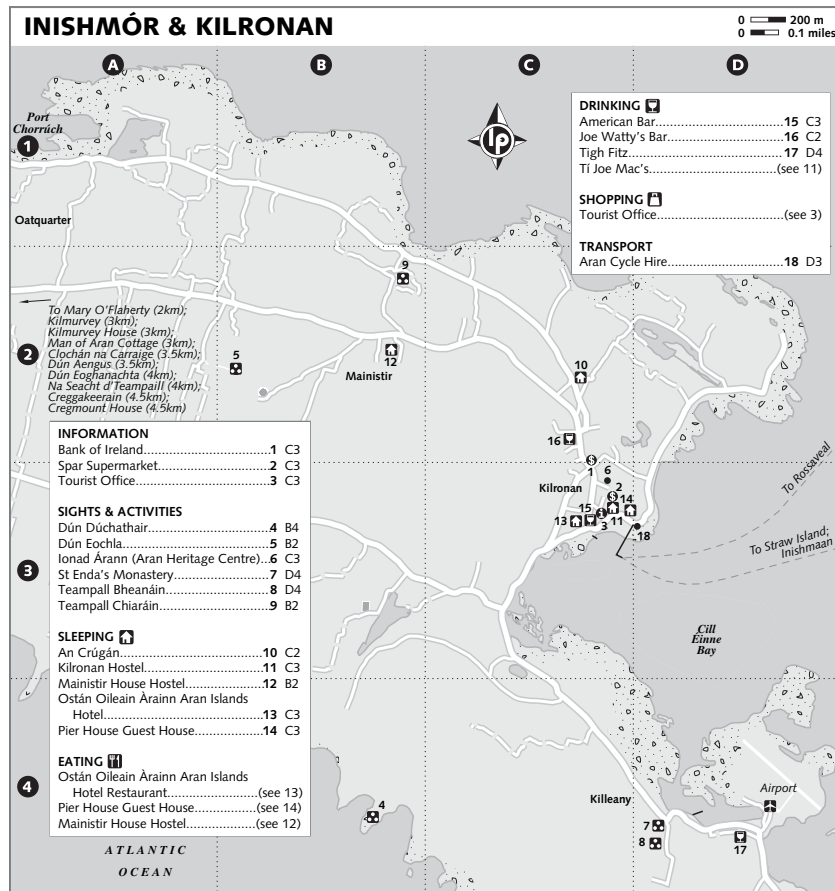
Dramatist JM Synge (1871-1909) spent a lot of time on the islands (listening to the local dialect through the floorboards of his room), and his play *Riders to the Sea* (1905) is set on Inishmaan. His book *The Aran Islands* (1907) is the classic account of life here and remains in print.

American Robert Flaherty came to the islands in 1934 to film *Man of Aran*, a dramatic account of daily life. It became a classic and is regularly screened in Kilonran on Inishmór.

The mapmaker Tim Robinson has written a wonderful two-volume account of his explorations on Aran called *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. His book *The Aran Islands: A Map and Guide* is superb.

Two other excellent publications are *The Book of Aran*, edited by Anne Korf, consisting of articles by 17 specialists covering diverse aspects of the islands' culture, and *Aran Reader*, edited by Breandán and Ruairí O hEithir, with essays by various scholars on the islands' history, geography and culture.

Local literary talent includes the writer Liam O'Flaherty (1896-1984) from Inishmór. O'Flaherty, who wandered around North and South America before returning to Ireland in 1921 and fighting in the Civil War, is the author of several harrowing novels, including *Famine*.



Sights

Three spectacular forts stand guard over Inishmór, each believed to be around 2000 years old. Chief among them is **Dún Aengus** (Dún Aonghasa; ☎ 61008; adult/child/family €2.10/1.10/6; ☎ 10am-6pm), with a remarkable *chevaux de frise*, a dense series of defensive stone spikes that surely helped deter ancient armies considering invading the site. The powerful swells pounding the sheer cliff face are awe-inspiring, particularly if you're here at a quiet time, such as the evening. Any time of day, take care: there are no guard rails and the winds can be strong; visitors have been blown off and killed on the rock shelf below.

Along the road between Kilronan and Dún Aengus is the smaller, perfectly circular fort,

Dún Eochla. Dramatically perched on a cliff-top promontory directly south of Kilronan is **Dún Dúchathair**.

The ruins of numerous stone churches trace the island's monastic history. The small **Teampall Chiaráin** (Church of St Kieran), with a high cross in the churchyard, is near Kilronan. To the southeast, near Cill Éinne Bay, is the early-Christian **Teampall Bheanáin** (Church of St Benen). Near the airstrip are the sunken remains of a church; the spot where it's located is said to have been the site of **St Enda's Monastery** in the 5th century. Past Kilmurvey is the perfect **Clochán na Carraige**, an early-Christian stone hut that stands 2.5m tall, and various small early-Christian ruins known rather inaccurately as the **Na Seacht**

O FATHER WHERE ART THOU?

Devotees of the late 1990s cult TV series *Father Ted* might recognise 'Craggy Island' – the show's fictional island setting off Ireland's west coast – from its opening sequence showing the *Plassy* shipwreck (p422) on Inisheer. However, apart from this single shot, the sitcom was mostly filmed in London studios, with additional location shots in Counties Clare, Wicklow and Dublin. Alas, the Parochial House and Vaughan's pub are nowhere to be found here (instead you'll find them around Lisdoonvarna in County Clare).

This hasn't stopped the Aran Islands from embracing the show as their own – although which of the islands has the rightful claim to the 'Craggy Island' title is hotly disputed. Things heated up even more when Inishmór recently hosted its first *Father Ted* festival, **Ted Fest** (www.friendsofted.org), with madcap festivities including breakfast-time charades, sketches performed in Irish by local schoolchildren, a Father Jack cocktail night (in honour of the show's cantankerous alcoholic elderly priest), fancy-dress guided walks around the island, and a Ted trivia night.

Besides being an excuse to party island style, the festival was organised to commemorate actor Dermot Morgan (Ted), who died in 1998 from a heart attack aged 45. Proceeds are donated to Croi, the West of Ireland Cardiology Foundation.

The inaugural event was a sell-out and Ted Fest is set to become an annual pilgrimage for fans. Future festivals may be held on more than one island to cope with demand – and to appease the long-running 'Craggy Island' debate. Check the website for dates and bookings.

dTeampaill (Seven Churches), comprising a couple of ruined churches, monastic houses and some fragments of a high cross from the 8th or 9th century. To the south of the ruins is **Dún Eoghanachta**, another circular fort.

There's a Blue Flag beach (a clean, safe beach given the EU Blue Flag award) at **Kilmurvey**, peacefully situated west of bustling Kilronan. In the sheltered little bay of **Port Chorrúch**, up to 50 grey seals sun themselves and feed in the shallows.

For an informed appreciation of all three islands' history, geology and wildlife, stop in at the **Aran Heritage Centre** (Ionad Árann; Map p418; ☎ 61355, 61354; www.visitaranislands.com; Kilronan; adult/child €5.50/4; ☎ 11am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun), just off the main road leading out of Kilronan. The admission fee covers regular screenings of Robert Flaherty's 1934 film *Man of Aran*. The centre also has a coffee shop.

Sleeping

The tourist office can book rooms for a €4 fee. Advance bookings are advised, particularly in high summer.

Kilronan Hostel (Map p418; ☎ 61255; www.kilronanhostel.com; Kilronan; dm/tw from €15/40) You'll see the pistachio green Kilronan Hostel perched above Ti Joe Mac's pub even before your ferry docks at the pier, a two-minute walk away. Fortunately the floors have been insulated, so there's very little pub noise. The

hostel lends out fishing rods for free and can teach you to play hurling on the beach out front.

Mainistir House Hostel (☎ 61169; www.mainistirhousearan.com; Mainistir; dm/s/d €16/40/50) Quirky and colourful, this 60-bed hostel on the main road north of Kilronan is a fun place both for young travellers and for families. Fresh morning pastries and free pick-up are included in the rates, and you only have to head as far as the dining room for renowned home cooking.

Kilmurvey House (☎ 61218; www.kilmurveyhouse.com; Kilmurvey; s €55-60, d €90-100; ☎ Apr-Sep) On the path leading to Dún Aengus is this grand 18th-century stone mansion. It's a beautiful setting, and the rooms are well maintained. Hearty meals (dinner €25) incorporate home-grown vegetables, and fresh fish and meats. You can swim at a pretty beach that's a short walk from the house.

Man of Aran Cottage (☎ 61301; www.manofarancottage.com; Kilmurvey; s/d €55/80; ☎ Mar-Oct) Built for the 1930s film of the same name, this thatched B&B doesn't trade on past glories – its authentic stone-and-wood interiors are well maintained, and are decorated with soft, printed cotton fabrics. It has a genuinely homey feel.

Cregmount House (☎ 61139; Cregakeeran; d €64-70; ☎ May-Oct) Situated refreshingly far from the tourist crowds at the northwestern end of the island, Cregmount House is a pleasant

three-room B&B with quality cooking (dinner €26) and views across Galway Bay.

An Crúgán (☎ 61150; www.ancrugan.com; Kilronan; d €70, cottages per week €450-550; ☞ Apr-Oct) Located off the main road north of Kilronan, An Crúgán has six well-appointed rooms. If you're after more privacy, a two-bedroom self-catering cottage is available to rent year-round.

Pier House Guest House (Map p418; ☎ 61416; www.pierhousearan.com; Kilronan; s €90-100, d €110-120; ☞ Mar-Oct; 🍷) Captivating views and light-filled interiors splashed with colour make this double-decker guesthouse a seaside haven.

Ostán Oileain Árainn Aran Islands Hotel (Map p418; ☎ 61104; www.aranislandshotel.com; Kilronan; d from €118; ☞ closed early Jan–mid-Feb; 🍷) Inishmór's only hotel has generously appointed guest rooms in warm russet and navy tones; with plush carpets, gleaming timber furniture, and all the mod cons of a mainland hotel. The owner, PJ O'Flaherty, is also the creative force behind the traditional Irish dancing spectacular *Ragús*, and the show is regularly performed on the island when not touring abroad. Contact the hotel for performance dates.

Eating

Mainistir House Hostel (☎ 61169; www.mainistirhousearan.com; Mainistir; buffet €16; ☞ from 8pm summer, from 7pm winter) Mainistir House Hostel cooks up fab organic, largely vegetarian fare such as pea-and-leek tart, and pear cheesecake made with crushed Amaretti biscuits. Nonguests are welcome, but be sure to book ahead.

Man of Aran Cottage (☎ 61301; www.manofarancotage.com; Kilmurvey; sandwiches from €3, set dinner €35; ☞ lunch & dinner Jun-Sep, dinner only Mar-May & Oct) This historic whitewashed cottage is an idyllic setting in which to savour freshly caught fish, and flavourful organic vegetables and herbs grown in the cottage's garden. Reservations are essential.

Ostán Oileain Árainn Aran Islands Hotel Restaurant (Map p418; ☎ 61104; www.aranislandshotel.com; Kilronan; mains €15.50-34.50; ☞ 12.30-4pm & 5-9pm) The superb seafood at this smart restaurant includes cracked-crab salad, whole rainbow trout and lobster. Afterwards, unwind over an Irish coffee in the timber bar, which has traditional live music most nights. Check ahead for low-season opening hours.

Pier House Guest House (Map p418; ☎ 61416; www.pierhousearan.com; Kilronan; mains €22-28; ☞ lunch & dinner May-Oct) Has a well-regarded restaurant.

Drinking

Tigh Fitz (☎ 61213; Killeaney) Near the airport, this jovial pub has traditional sessions every weekend and does excellent bar food (noon to 5pm) from June to August. It's 1.6km from Kilronan (about a 25-minute walk).

Joe Watty's Bar (Map p418; ☎ 61155; Kilronan) The best pub in Kilronan is Joe Watty's, with traditional sessions most nights and pub food (noon to 8pm) from June to August.

Ti Joe Mac's (Map p418; ☎ 61248; Kilronan) Informal music sessions and pub food served all year make Ti Joe Mac's a dependable favourite.

American Bar (Map p418; ☎ 61130; Kilronan) No one knows how it got its New World name, but this locally run island stalwart hosts great live music at least a couple of nights a week, and serves lunch and dinner daily in summer.

Shopping

Shops around Kilronan mostly sell machine-knitted Aran sweaters. For a much heavier, hand-knitted version, visit **Mary O'Flaherty** (☎ 61117; Oat Quarter). Chances are you'll see Mary knitting when you call in. Expect to pay around €100 for a genuine hand-knitted sweater.

The **tourist office** (Map p418; ☎ 61263; Kilronan; ☞ 11am-7pm Jun-Sep, 11am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-May) sells greeting cards featuring evocative impressionist paintings by local artist Michael Ó Ceallaigh, and can give you details about buying original works.

Getting Around

Aran Cycle Hire (Map p418; ☎ 61132; per day €10), near the pier, hires out sturdy bikes, which it'll deliver to your accommodation anywhere on the island. You can also bring your own bicycle on the ferry for free.

Year-round, numerous **minibuses** (tours €10) greet each ferry arrival and offer a 2½-hour island tour that provides a good overview of the main sights.

To see the island at a gentler pace, **pony traps** (☞ Mar-Nov) with a driver are available for trips between Kilronan and Dún Aengus; the return journey costs between €60 and €100 for up to four people. If the pony traps are not waiting by the pier, walk to the tourist office to ask where they're stationed.

INISHMAAN

☎ 099 / pop 200

The least-visited of the islands, with the smallest population, Inishmaan (Inis Meáin) is, perhaps not surprisingly, the most tranquil. Early Christian monks seeking solitude were drawn to Inishmaan, as was the author JM Synge, who spent five summers here over a century ago. The island they knew largely survives today: docile farm animals, impressive old forts, and warm-hearted locals who may tell you with a glint in their eye that they had a hard night on the whiskey the previous evening (there are no *garda* on the island to enforce closing times). Inishmaan's scenery is breathtaking, with a jagged coastline of startling cliffs and empty beaches.

To their credit, Inishmaan's down-to-earth islanders are largely unconcerned with the prospect of attracting tourist euros, so facilities are few and far between.

Orientation & Information

Inishmaan is roughly 5km long by 3km wide. Most of its buildings are spread out along the road that runs east–west across the centre of the island. The principal boat landing is on the eastern side of the island, while the airstrip is in the northeastern corner. In An Córa, the helpful **Inishmaan Island Co-operative** (☎ 73010; ☞ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), northwest of the pier and post office, dispenses tourist information. There's no ATM; the bank visits on the second Tuesday of each month.

Sights

Glorious views of the island's limestone valleys extend from the elliptical stone fort **Dún Chonchúir**, thought to have been built sometime between the 1st and 7th centuries.

Teach Synge (☎ 73036; admission €3; ☞ by appointment), a thatched cottage on the road just before you head up to the fort, is where the writer JM Synge spent his summers between 1898 and 1902.

Gill Cheannannach is a rough 8th- or 9th-century church, south of the pier. The well-preserved stone fort **Dún Fearbhaigh**, a short distance west, dates from the same era.

At the desolate western edge of the island, **Synge's Chair** is a lookout at the edge of a sheer limestone cliff with the surf from Gregory's Sound booming below. The cliff ledge is often sheltered from the wind, so do as Synge did and find a comfortable seat to take it all in.

On the walk out to Synge's Chair, a sign points the way to a **dochan**, hidden behind a house and shed.

In the east of the island, about 500m north of the boat landing stage, is **Trá Leitreach**, a safe, sheltered beach.

Sleeping & Eating

Most B&Bs serve evening meals, usually using organically grown food. Meals generally cost around €22 to €25.

Máire Mulkerrin (☎ 73016; s/d €25/40) Now in her 80s, Mrs Mulkerrin is a local icon in her skirts and shawls. She keeps a cosy, spick-and-span home, filled with faded family photos, and her stove warms the kitchen all day.

Ard Alainn (☎ 73027; s/d with shared bathroom €25/50; ☞ May-Sep) Signposted just over 2km from the pier, Ard Alainn has five simple rooms, all with shared bathroom. The breakfasts by hostess Maura Faherty will keep you going all day.

Tig Congaile (☎ 73085; tigcongaile@eircom.net; Moore Village, Inishmaan; s €40, d €54-70) Not far from the pier, Guatemalan-born Vilma Conneely adds unexpected diversity to the local dining scene (lunch dishes from €5, dinner from €20; open 10.30am to 9pm), making the most of limited local ingredients. She does a fine sea vegetable soup and her vegetable-and-herb quiche is wonderful. Guest rooms are modern and comfortable.

An Dún (☎ 73047; anduninismean@eircom.net; s €45-60, d €70-100) Opposite the entrance to Dún Chonchúir, modern An Dún has comfortable en-suite rooms and a sauna. It serves very hearty set dinners and nonguests are welcome, though you must make a reservation. An Dún also has a handy little grocery shop, good for buying essentials for your day hike.

Ostán Inisimeáin (☎ 73020; bfaherty@iol.ie; s €38-58, d €64-90) At the northern end of the island, out on the bare limestone flats, this pink-painted motel-style building has 10 rooms, a pub (dishes €5 to €9) and a large formal dining room (lunch and dinner, mains €13 to €32). Bar food and á la carte plates showcase the freshest of ingredients.

Teach Anna (☎ 73054; d €70) Run by islander Anna Byrne (whom you'll also meet at the post office, where she works by day), this homey B&B is five minutes' walk from the beach and has four rooms. The multiskilled

Anna cooks bargain-priced evening meals (€12) on request.

Teach Ósta (☎ 73003; mains from €10; ☺ noon-late) This terrific little pub hums on summer evenings and supplies snacks, sandwiches, soups and seafood platters. Though the pub often keeps going until the wee hours, food service generally stops around 7pm and may not be available in the winter months.

Shopping

The knitwear factory **Cniotáil Inis Meáin** (☎ 73 009) exports fine woollen garments to some of the world's most exclusive shops. You can buy the same sweaters here; call before visiting.

Getting Around

Walking is a fine way to explore the island's sights, but you may also be able to get an informal tour with locals from around €5.

INISHEER

☎ 099 / pop 300

Although Inisheer (Inis Oírr) is only 8km off the coast from Doolin in County Clare, the absence of tourist amenities nevertheless keeps visitor numbers down. The smallest of the Aran Islands has a palpable sense of enchantment, enhanced by the island's deep-rooted mythology and ethereal landscapes.

The wheels of change turn very slowly here. Electricity didn't come to the island until the 1970s and even then only by generator. It was connected to the mainland's electricity via an underwater cable in 1997.

Inisheer boasts a surprisingly large state-of-the-art community arts centre, which sits out on an exposed stretch of the northern side of the island as a beacon of the island's artistic traditions.

Information

In July and August a small **kiosk** (☺ 10am-6pm) at the harbour provides tourist information. Like Inishmaan, there's no ATM; the bank visits on the fourth Tuesday of each month.

Online, www.inisoirr-island.com is a handy resource for planning your trip.

Sights & Activities

The majority of Inisheer's sights are in the north of the island. The 15th-century **O'Brien's Castle** (Caislea'n Uí Bhriain), a 100m climb uphill to the island's highest point, has dra-

matic views over clover-covered fields to the beach and harbour. It was built within the remains of a ringfort called Dún Formna, dating from as early as the 1st century AD. The gate is sometimes locked, but if it's open you can explore the remains freely. Nearby is an 18th-century signal tower.

On the Strand (An Trá) is the 10th-century **Teampall Chaomháin** (Church of St Kevin), named for Inisheer's patron saint, who is buried close by. On the eve of his 14 June feast day a mass is held here in the open air at 9pm. Those with ailments sleep here for the night to be healed.

West of the small, sandy beach next to the pier, **Inisheer Heritage House** (☎ 75021; Inisheer; admission €2; ☺ 2-4pm Jul & Aug or by appointment) is a traditional stone-built thatched cottage with some interesting old photographs. It also has a craft shop and café.

Cill Ghobnait (Church of St Gobnait), southwest of Inisheer Heritage House, is a small 8th- or 9th-century church named after Gobnait, who fled here from Clare while trying to escape an enemy who was pursuing her.

About 2km southwest of the church is the **Tobar Éinne** (Well of St Enda). Locals still carry out a pilgrimage known as the *turas*, which involves, over the course of three consecutive Sundays, picking up seven stones from the ground nearby and walking around the small well seven times, putting one stone down each time, while saying the rosary until an elusive eel appears from the well's watery depths. If, during this ritual, you're lucky enough to see the eel, it's said your tongue will be bestowed with healing powers, literally enabling you to lick wounds.

The signposted 10.5km **Inis Oírr Way** (Inisheer Way) walking path brings you past the rusting hulk of the **Plassy**, a freighter wrecked in 1960 and thrown high up onto the rocks. Miraculously, all on board were saved; Tigh Ned's pub has a collection of photographs and documents detailing the rescue. An aerial shot of the wreck was used in the opening sequence of the iconic TV series *Father Ted* (see O Father where art Thou?, p419). The uninhabited **lighthouse** (1857) on the island's southern tip is off limits.

Festivals & Events

One of the arts centre's highlights is its week-long **Craiceann Inis Oírr International Bodhrán Summer School** (☎ 75067; www.craiceann.com) in June,

which includes *bodhrán* masterclasses, lectures and workshops, as well as related events such as Irish dancing. Craiceann takes its name from the Irish word for 'skin', referring to the goat skin used to make these circular drums, which are held under one arm and played with a wooden beater. The festival is headed up by Inisheer local Micheal O hAlmhain, who has performed with Irish bands including the Chieftains. During Craiceann, nightly drumming sessions take place in the island's pubs.

Sleeping & Eating

Bruí Radharc Na Mara Hostel (☎ 75024; maire.searraigh@oceanfree.net; dm €15; ☺ Mar-Oct) Hand-

ily located next to a pub and by the pier, this spotless Independent Holiday Hostels of Ireland (IH) hostel has ocean views, a self-catering kitchen and bikes for hire. The owners also run the adjacent B&B (rooms €40), with basic en-suite rooms.

Ard Mhuire (☎ 75005; unamcdonagh@hotmail.com; s/d €35/70; ☺ closed 10 Dec-10 Jan) As central as it gets, this 1934 double-decker house is to the left of the pier. It's home to the Conneely family, who have refurbished the guest rooms and put on a fine breakfast; dinner can also be arranged.

Óstán Inis Oírr (☎ 75020; s/d from €33/63; ☺ Apr-Sep) The Flaherty family's modern hotel, just

WALK: INISHEER

This moderate 12km (five hour) walk takes in many of Inisheer's sights. It virtually circumnavigates the island, taking you through the settled northern fringe, past the stone-walled fields in the centre and south, and around the wild and rocky south coast. For all but 2km along the southern shore, the walk follows quiet lanes. You'll come across yellow blazes on some sections of the walk, marking the Inis Oírr Way, which confines itself to the northern two-thirds of the island.

From the Inisheer ferry pier, walk west along the narrow road parallel to the shore and continue past Fisherman's Cottage Bistro. Ignore the waymarker pointing left at the next junction and go on straight ahead to the small fishing pier at the northwest corner of the island. Continue along the road, now with a gravel surface, past another acute-angled junction on the left (where the waymarkers reappear). Here the shingle shore is on one side of the road, and a dense mosaic of fields, enclosed by remarkably intact stone walls, is on the other.

About 1km from the acute junction, turn left with the painted sign; about 100m along the paved lane is the Tobhar Éinne.

Return to the coast road and continue southwest as it becomes a rough track. After about 600m, head roughly south across the limestone pavement and strips of grass to the shore. Follow the gently sloping rock platform around the southwestern headland (Ceann na Faochnaí) and walk east to the lighthouse near Fardurris Point (two hours from the ferry pier).

Walk around the wall enclosing the lighthouse and use a stile to cross another wall by the entrance gate. Now back on a level surface, follow the road generally northeast as it climbs gradually. Access to Cill na Seacht Niníon (the Church of the Seven Daughters) is from a point 1.5km from the lighthouse, almost opposite two metal-roofed sheds on the right; a pillar next to a gate bears the chapel's name and an arrow points vaguely in its direction. Use stiles to cross three fields to a rusty gate in the ivy-clad walls around the chapel site. In the largest stone enclosure are five grave slabs, one of which still has a faint incised cross.

Back on the road, continue northeast to the village of An Formna. Take the right fork, then turn right again at a T-junction and head south along the road above Lough More. Keep left at a track junction and continue to the Atlantic shore with the wreck of the *Plassy* just ahead (one hour from the lighthouse).

Head north, following the track, which then becomes a sealed road at the northern end of Lough More. Continue following the road along the northern shore of the island, past the airstrip.

At the airstrip you can diverge, if you wish, to the sandy hummock that shelters the ancient Teampall Chaomháin. A little further along the road, turn left to reach O'Brien's Castle. From here, follow the narrow road northwest, turn right at a T-junction and then make your way to Cnoc Rathnaí, a Bronze Age burial mound (1500 BC), which is remarkably intact considering it was buried under the sand until the 19th century, when it was rediscovered. Continue towards the beach; the pier is to your left through a maze of lanes.

up from the Strand, has homey rooms and serves hearty meals in its pub and restaurant (mains €8 to €14, open lunch and dinner, April to September).

Radharc an Chláir (☎ 75019; bridpoi@eircom.net; s/d €38/70) This pleasant B&B near O'Brien's Castle has views of the Cliffs of Moher and Galway Bay. You'll need to book several weeks ahead, as hostess Brid Poil's home cooking draws many repeat visitors. Guests can hire bikes (€10 per day) and arrange evening meals (€20).

Fisherman's Cottage (☎ 75073; mains €12-20; ☒ Apr-Oct) Cosy Fisherman's Cottage, near the pier, specialises in tasty, fresh seafood and organically grown vegetables.

Drinking

Tigh Ned (☎ 75004) Here since 1897, Tigh Ned is a welcoming, unpretentious place with lively, traditional music and inexpensive lunchtime fare.

Tigh Ruairí (☎ 75020) Rory Conneely's atmospheric digs hosts live music sessions.

Ostán Inis Oírr (☎ 75020) The hotel's pub is also a friendly spot for a pint.

Getting Around

Bikes can be rented from **Rothair Inis Oírr** (☎ 75033; per day €10; ☒ May-Sep). **Brú Radharc Na Mara Hostel** (☎ 75024; mairc.searraigh@oceanfree.net; per day €10; ☒ Mar-Oct) also hires bikes to nonguests.

You can take a tour of the island on a **pony trap** (per hr €5-10) in summer, or on an atmospheric tractor-drawn thatched-cottage-style **wagon** (☎ 086 607 3230; per hr €5-10).

CONNEMARA

In Irish, Connemara (Conamara) means 'Inlets of the Sea', which is borne out by the region's filigreed coastline.

The coastal road west of Spiddal (R336) winds around small bays and coves reminiscent of eastern Canada's remote reaches of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland (minus the moose). It strings together a succession of seaside hamlets, including the jewel-like fishing harbour at Roundstone, and sleepy Leenane on Killary Harbour, the country's only fjord. Clifden, Connemara's largest town, is spectacularly sited on a hill, while offshore lies the idyllic island of Inishbofin.

Connemara's interior is a kaleidoscope of rusty bogs, lonely valleys and shimmering black lakes. At its heart are the Maumturk Mountains and the pewter-tinged quartzite peaks of the Twelve Bens mountain range, with a network of scenic hiking and biking trails. It's dazzling at any time of day but especially as the sun starts its descent, when the landscape glows as if filtered through a topaz-coloured lens.

One of the most important Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) areas in the country begins around Spiddal and stretches along the coast as far as Cashel. Ireland's national Irish-language radio station, Radio na Gaeltachta (www.rte.ie/rnag) and Irish-language TV station, TG4 (www.tg4.ie), are both based in the region, as is the Irish-language weekly newspaper *Foinse* (www.foinse.ie in Irish).

If you intend any detailed exploration of the area, the excellent *Connemara: Introduction and Gazetteer*, by Tim Robinson, is a must. *Connemara: A Hill Walker's Guide*, by Robinson and Joss Lynam, is also invaluable.

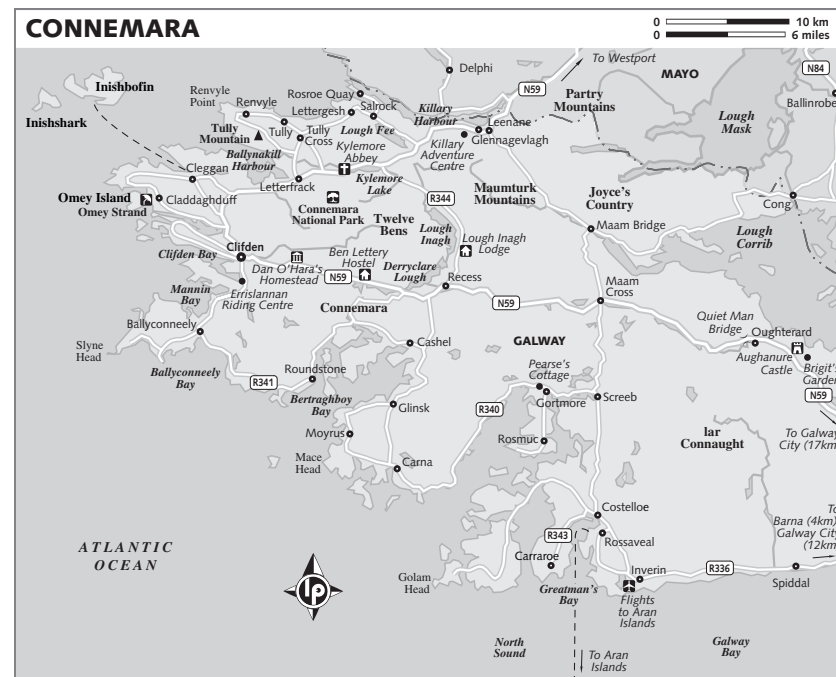
Galway's tourist office (p404) has a wealth of information on the area. Online, **Connemara Tourism** (www.connemara-tourism.org) and **Go Connemara** (www.goconnemara.com) have region-wide info and links.

Getting There & Around BUS

Organised bus tours from Galway (p408) are plentiful and offer a good overview of the region, though ideally you'll want more than one day to absorb the area's charms.

Bus Éireann (☎ 091-562 000; www.buseireann.ie) serves most of Connemara. Services can be sporadic, and many buses operate May to September only, or July and August only. Some drivers will stop in between towns if arrangements are made at the beginning of the trip.

Michael Nee Coaches (☎ 095-51082) is an independent line that specifically serves Connemara, with daily buses beginning in Galway, and connections within the area. Connemara towns served include Maam Cross, Recess, Cashel, Clifden, Letterfrack, Tully Cross and Cleggan. If you're going somewhere in-between towns (a hostel in the countryside, for example) you might be able to arrange a drop-off with the driver.



CAR

Your own wheels are the best way to get off this scenic region's beaten track – though watch out for the narrow roads' stone walls, just waiting to scrape the sides of your car.

Keep an eye out too for meandering Connemara sheep – characterised by thick creamy fleece and black faces and legs – which frequently wander onto the road. Even Connemara's flattest stretches of road tend to be bumpy due to the uneven bog beneath the tarmac.

Heading west from Galway, you can either take the coast road (R336) through Salthill, Barna and Spiddal, or the direct inland route (N59) through Oughterard. The journey from Maam Cross northwest to Leenane (R336) or northeast to Cong (R345) in County Mayo takes you through the stunning mountainous region of Joyce country.

Many road signs in this area are in Irish only, so take note of the Irish place names (in parentheses) that are also listed in this section.

COASTAL DRIVE – GALWAY CITY TO MACE HEAD

The slow coastal route between Galway and Connemara takes you past picturesque seascapes and villages.

Opposite the popular Blue Flag beach **Silver Strand**, 4.8km west of Galway, are the **Barna Woods**, a dense, deep green forest perfect for rambling and picnicking. Conserved by the Galway County Council, the woods contain the last natural growing oaks in Ireland's west.

The once unspoilt village of Barna, a further 3km west, has been inundated by recent development (to the chagrin of locals, who campaigned passionately and ultimately futilely against it). Barna is, however, home to some of the greater Galway area's best seafood at **O'Grady's on the Pier** (☎ 091-592223; www.ogradysonthepier.com; mains €15-30; ☒ from 6pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-2.45pm & from 6pm Sun). Daily specials include ocean-fresh catches such as grilled monkfish with sautéed potatoes and mushroom cream, and there are plenty of choices for carnivores. Michael O'Grady's vanilla-nut ice-cream cluster with caramel sauce is sublime; otherwise

you can finish off with a farmhouse cheese platter. Long, lazy Sunday lunches attract legions of locals; book ahead.

West again, **Spiddal** (An Spidéal) is a refreshingly untouched little village, and the start of the Gaeltacht region. On your right as you approach the village are the **Spiddal Craft & Design Studios** (☎ 091-553376; www.spiddalcraftvillage), where you can watch woodworkers, leatherworkers, sculptors and weavers at work, buy a T-shirt with an Irish-language slogan, or have a spot of lunch at the bistro (☎ 091-55030), which is in fact the best place to eat in town. Exceptional traditional music sessions take place at the unassuming **Tigh Hughes** (☎ 091-553447) – it's not uncommon for major musicians, such as members of the Waterboys and U2, to turn up unannounced and join in the craic. Sessions start at around 9pm on Tuesdays. The pub's just adjacent to the main street; turn right at the town centre's little crossroads next to

the bank, and it's a couple of doors up on your right.

A few kilometres west of Spiddal, the scenery becomes more dramatic, with parched fields crisscrossed by low stone walls rolling to a ragged shore. **Carraroe** (An Cheathrú Rua) has fine beaches, including the Coral Strand, which is composed entirely of shell and coral fragments.

Lettermore, Gorumna and Lettermullen islands are low and bleak, with a handful of farmers eking out an existence from tiny, rocky fields. Fish farming is big business.

Near Gortmore, along the R340, is **Pearse's Cottage** (Teach an Phiarsaigh; ☎ 091-574292; adult/family €1.50/4.25; ☎ 10am–6pm Easter & mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun spring & autumn). Pádraig Pearse (1879–1916) led the Easter Rising with James Connolly in 1916; after the revolt he was executed by the British. Pearse wrote some of his short stories and plays in this cottage.

VOICES: AOIFE NÍ THUAIRISG, PRESENTER, TG4

What impact has TG4 had?

Before the station was launched, the national image of the language was that it was parochial, that it was spoken by people who didn't want to integrate. The programme commissioners didn't have a lot of money when the station started so they took huge risks and hired young presenters who weren't afraid to stand up and voice strong opinions. Now you see shops and restaurants using Irish in their business names, and posh yummy mummies enrolling their children at expensive Irish-language schools. It's completely changed – it's become fashionable.

Is Irish your first language?

Yes. I'm from Connemara and we always spoke Irish at home, and I was educated completely in Irish. I loved Big Bird on *Sesame Street* as a kid, but my mum had to translate what he was saying because it was in English. Now the station addresses programming for kids, so they can watch shows like *SpongeBob SquarePants* in their own language.

Where is the dubbing done?

In studios all over Ireland – a nationwide industry has come out of the TV station. Irish has totally different dialects around the country – totally different phrasing – so we cover them all.

Are the voice-over talent and presenters all native Irish speakers?

No, a lot have learnt Irish. Sometimes people are intimidated talking to me because I'm a native speaker and they think their Irish isn't good enough, but it's great to talk to people in Irish and for them to realise their Irish doesn't have to be 'perfect' for them to feel comfortable using it. I'm very proud of the language. A lot of people my age learnt Irish at school, where learning derived from focusing on grammar; it was drummed into them. I'm glad that people can now experience the language in a way that's different and relevant.

In addition to television broadcasts, TG4's website (www.tg4.ie) streams programmes and has online archives of shows including episodes of Aoife's *Paisean Faisean* (with subtitles in English).

If you're keen to learn the language, you can enrol in short courses at the International Summer School of the **National University of Ireland, Galway** (☎ 091-495 442; www.nuigalway.ie/iss) and **Cnoc Suain Cultural Centre** (☎ 091-555 703; www.cnocsuain.com) in Spiddal.

Continuing along the R340 brings you to **Carna**, a small fishing village from where there are pleasant walks out to **Mweenish Island** or north to Moyrus and out to **Mace Head**. This wild headland is best known for its research station (closed to the public), which measures changes in the global atmosphere and their effect on weather and climate.

The following places are worth hitting the brakes for if you aren't planning to make Roundstone or beyond by nightfall.

Inland from Spiddal village on a trout-filled river, **Spiddal Caravan & Camping Park** (Pair Saoire an Spidéil; ☎ 091-553 372; pairsaoire@eircom.net; River Rd, Spiddal; camp/caravan sites €12/22; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct) has modern facilities, including clean, free showers.

The best thing about the whitewashed **Buninvhir B&B** (☎ 091-574 238; www.buninvhir.com; Derryrush, Rosmuc; s/d €35/58; ☎ Easter-Sep) is its uninterrupted view over Kilkieran Bay from the front terrace – which is to take nothing away from the cosy home's patchwork-quilted beds, flowering garden, and delicious evening meals (€20), which are served on the terrace in fine weather. Credit cards aren't accepted.

Set in a storybook garden roamed by ducks and chickens, **Cloch na Scith** (☎ 091 553 364; www.thatchcottage.com; Kellough, Spiddal; d €64-68, cottages from €250; ☎) is a century-old thatched cottage with a warm, friendly host, Nancy, who cooks bread in an iron pot over the peat fire (as her grandmother taught her) and serves Baileys by the fire. A separate self-catering thatched cottage on the property makes a great base for families.

At the head of Cashel Bay, **Cashel House Hotel** (☎ 095-31001; www.cashel-house-hotel.com; Cashel; s €95-135, d €190-310; ☎) is a *Great Gatsby*-style mansion with 32 period rooms surrounded by 17 hectares of woodland and gardens. It also has a stable of Connemara ponies (riding lessons available), a superb dining room and even a small private beach.

Guests can go fly fishing in the grounds of the majestic **Ballynahinch Castle Hotel** (☎ 095-31006; www.ballynahinch-castle.com; Recess; d €210-360; ☎ Mar-Nov; ☎), southwest of Recess, and anyone can stop by for a drink in the bar. Rooms are dressed in olive and gold fabrics (many with four-poster beds), from where you can gaze out at the river, mountains or stately courtyard. Seasonal closing dates vary – phone for details.

OUGHTERARD & AROUND

☎ 091 / pop 2400

The writer William Makepeace Thackeray sang the praises of the small town of Oughterard (Uachtar Árd), saying, 'A more beautiful village can scarcely be seen'. Fortunately, little has changed in the intervening years. Just 27km along the main road from Galway to Clifden, near Lough Corrib, this pretty gateway to Connemara is one of Ireland's principal angling centres.

Immediately west of Oughterard, the countryside opens up to sweeping panoramas of lakes, mountains and bogs that get more spectacular the further west you travel.

Nearby attractions include Aughanure Castle, a spiritual Celtic garden, the Quiet Man Bridge, and the scenic drive along the Glann road to a vantage point overlooking the Hill of Doon.

Information

Bank of Ireland (Main St) Has an ATM and bureau de change.

Post office (Main St)

Tourist office (☎ 552 808; www.connemarabeginns.com; Main St; ☎ 9.30am–5.30pm Mon–Fri) Also offers internet access at €1 per 15 minutes.

Sights

AUGHANURE CASTLE

Built in the 16th century, this bleak **fortress** (☎ 552 214; adult/child €2.75/1.25; ☎ 9.30am–6pm Apr–Oct) was home to the 'Fighting' O'Flahertys, who controlled the region for hundreds of years after they fought off the Normans. The six-storey tower house stands on a rocky outcrop overlooking Lough Corrib and has been extensively restored. Surrounding the castle are the remains of an unusual double bawn (area surrounded by walls outside the main castle, and acting as a defence and a place to keep cattle in times of trouble), and underneath the castle the lake washes through a number of natural caverns and caves.

Aughanure Castle is 3km east of Oughterard, off the main Galway road (N59).

BRIGIT'S GARDEN

Halfway between the villages of Moycullen and Oughterard is the magical **Brigit's Garden** (☎ 091-550 905; www.galwaygarden.com; Polagh, Roscahill; adult/child €7/4; ☎ 10am–5.50pm mid-Apr–Sep; ☎). Named for the Celtic goddess governing the life-cycle, it has four seasonal gardens based

around Celtic festivals, mythology and lore, along with Ireland's largest sundial. A nature trail meanders through woodlands and wildflower meadows, and a teashop serves homemade food sourced from the gardens. At various times, you might also catch New Age cookery classes, yoga workshops and pagan festivals. Best of all, Brigit's Garden is a not-for-profit initiative that's run to allow visitors to appreciate the area's cultural and environmental heritage. If you're coming on the Galway-Clifden bus, get off at the Roscahill post office, from where it's a signed 2km walk southeast, or call ahead and someone can usually pick you up from the bus stop.

QUIET MAN BRIDGE

Just 3km outside Oughterard (on your left as you head northwest) is the Quiet Man Bridge, which featured in the 1952 film of the same name starring Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne. Visible from the main road, you can turn down the short lane to walk over the quaint stone bridge and meditate on the surrounding 'Quiet Man Country'. (Though it's decidedly less quiet when bus tours pull up.)

Much of the film was shot in and around Ashford Castle in the town of Cong in neighbouring county Mayo.

Sleeping & Eating

Canrawer House (☎ 552 388; oughterardhostel.com; Station Rd; dm €15-17; ☹ Feb-Oct; (P)) Dorms and family rooms are bright and clean, and there's an outdoor patio where you can chat with other guests. If you want to catch the area's wild brown trout for dinner, the owner of this chaletlike timber-panelled hostel can take you. Lessons cost €25 per hour, and full-day guided lake tours including all gear cost €140.

Waterfall Lodge (☎ 552 168; www.waterfallodge.net; Glann Rd; s/d €50/80; (P)) Decorated in rose-coloured hues and lit by glowing lamps, this double-fronted Victorian B&B stands amid wooded gardens beside a brook a few moments' stroll from the village centre. Breakfast choices include kippers, homemade pancakes or melt-in-your-mouth French toast.

Boat Inn (☎ 552 196; www.theboatinn.com; Market Sq; d €90-120) In addition to providing comfy rooms, this inn (mains around €20; open lunch and dinner) serves traditional Irish stew to warm you up after a day's fishing and other family-friendly fare including sizzling fajitas, enormous beef burgers with home-

made sauce, and a crumble of the day with custard made on the premises. The bar hosts regular live music.

Currarevagh House (☎ 552 312; www.currarevagh.com; d €184-198; ☹ Mar-mid-Oct; (P)) You'd be hard pressed to find a more romantic place than this rambling 19th-century mansion on the shore of Lough Corrib. You can take afternoon tea (€9.90) by the open fire and dine on exquisite five-course dinners (€45; nonguests welcome). Currarevagh House can also pack picnic lunches (€13.50) to take fishing or on a day hike.

White Gables (☎ 555 744; Moycullen; set dinner menu €44.50, set Sun lunch menu €24.50, mains €24.50-29.50; ☹ from 7pm Tue-Sat, from 12.30pm & from 7pm Sun mid-Feb-mid-Dec) This candlelit restaurant inside a 1920s stone cottage is where Connemara families come together to celebrate special occasions. Twists on nostalgic favourites include pork schnitzel, chicken Kiev, seafood cocktail and a signature half roast duck with orange sauce, all accompanied by well-chosen wines. Dinner is served daily in July and August. The restaurant is in Moycullen village, 13km northwest of Galway on the N59.

Drinking

Power's Bar (☎ 557 047; Market Sq) Head to this thatched pub for a good pint and live music on weekends.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann has buses from Galway to Oughterard every three or four hours. If driving from Galway, take Newcastle road (N59) in the direction of Clifden.

LOUGH CORRIB

The Republic's biggest lake, Lough Corrib virtually cuts off western Galway from the rest of the country. Over 48km long and covering some 200 sq km, it encompasses over 360 islands; Inchagoill, the largest island, has a monastic settlement that visitors can visit from Oughterard or Cong.

Lough Corrib is world famous for its salmon, sea trout and brown trout. The highlight of the fishing calendar is the mayfly season, when zillions of the small bugs hatch over a few days (usually in May) and drive the fish and anglers into a frenzy. The hooks are baited with live flies, which join their cousins dancing on the surface of the lake. Salmon begin running around June. The owner of Oughterard's **Can-**

rawer House (☎ 552 388; oughterardhostel.com; Station Rd; ☹ Feb-Oct, is a good contact for information and boat hire; fishing lessons cost €25 per hour, and full-day guided lake tours including all fishing gear cost €140. You can buy fishing supplies from **Thomas Tuck** (☎ 552 335; Main St, Oughterard; ☹ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat).

The largest island on Lough Corrib, Inchagoill is a lonely place hiding many ancient remains. Most fascinating is an obelisk called **Lia Luguædon Mac Menueh** (Stone of Luguædon, Son of Menueh) marking a burial site. It stands about 75cm tall, near the Saints' Church, and some people claim that the Latin writing on the stone is the second-oldest Christian inscription in Europe, after those in the catacombs in Rome. **Teampall Phádraig** (St Patrick's Church) is a small oratory of a very early design with some later additions. The prettiest church is the Romanesque **Teampall na Naoimh** (Saints' Church), probably built in the 9th or 10th century. There are carvings around the arched doorway.

Inchagoill can be reached by boat from Oughterard (or Cong in County Mayo). **Corrib Cruises** (☎ 092-46029; www.corribcruises.com) sail from Oughterard to Inchagoill (adult/child €13/6) and on to Cong (€20/9). Departures are at 11am, 2.45pm and 5pm from May to October.

LOUGH INAGH VALLEY

☎ 091

The journey north along the Lough Inagh Valley, just north of the N59, is one of the most scenic in Ireland (a big call, we know). There are two fine approaches up valleys from the south, starting on either side of Recess, and the sweep of Derryclare and Inagh Loughs accompanies you most of the way. On the western side is the brooding **Twelve Bens** mountain range, while just beyond the valley on the northern side is a picturesque drive beside Kylemore Lake.

Towards the northern end of the valley, a track leads west off the road up a blind valley, which is also well worth exploring.

You'll wake up to the sound of sheep bleating at the spotless **Ben Lettery Hostel** (☎ 51136; www.anogie.ie/hostels/ben-lettery; Ballinafad; dm €12-17; ☹ Mar-Nov; (P)). On the main Clifden road, in the heart of the Connemara wilderness, it has a tidy, homey kitchen and living room, and is an excellent base to explore the Twelve Bens and Lough Inagh Valley. The hostel is 8km west of

Recess and 13km east of Clifden. Michael Nee Coaches will stop here if you arrange it with the driver, but note that it's only possible to check in between 5pm and 10pm.

Steeped in Victorian grandeur, the atmospheric **Lough Inagh Lodge** (☎ 34706; www.loughinagh lodgehotel.ie; s €104-138, d €168-240, dinner €43; (P)) is about 7km north of Recess on the R344. It serves dinner (€43), and in the quieter months it organises watercolour classes from €450 per person, including three nights' B&B accommodation plus two evening meals and three days' tuition; contact the lodge for course dates.

ROUNDSTONE

☎ 095 / pop 400

Clustered around a boat-filled harbour, Roundstone (Cloch na Rón) is one of Connemara's gems. Colourful terrace houses and inviting pubs overlook the dark recess of Bertraghboy Bay, which is home to lobster trawlers and traditional *currachs* with tarred canvas bottoms stretched over wicker frames. The idyllic surroundings continue to lure film makers, artists and musicians.

Sights & Activities

Just south of the village in an old Franciscan monastery is Malachy Kearns' **Roundstone Musical Instruments** (☎ 35808; www.bodhran.com; Michael Killeen Park; ☹ 9am-7pm Jul-Sep, 9.30am-6pm May-Jun & Sep-Oct, 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat Nov-Apr). Kearns is Ireland's only full-time maker of traditional *bodhráns*. He made the drums for *Riverdance* here, and he sells tin whistles, harps and inexpensive booklets filled with Irish ballads; there's also small free folk museum and a coffee shop. Adjacent **craft shops** sell everything from teapots to sweaters.

Looming above the stone pier is **Mt Errisbeg** (298m), the only significant hill along this section of coastline. The pleasant walk from Roundstone to the top takes about two hours. Follow the small road past O'Dowd's pub in the centre of the village. From the summit there are wonderful views across the bay to the distant humps of the Twelve Bens.

Galway Hooker sailing trips (☎ 21034; www.trueflight.ie; half/full-day trip €45/65; ☹ Apr-Oct) on a beautifully-restored traditional boat built in 1922 take you around Connemara's seal- and porpoise-inhabited inlets and bays.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S SALMON

If you're curious to discover how the area's famous salmon is smoked, you can tour the family-run **Connemara Smokehouse** (☎ 095-23739; www.smokehouse.ie; Bunowen Pier, Ballyconneely; 🕒 tours 3pm Wed-Jun-Aug). Free tours show you the hand filleting, traditional preparation, slicing and packing of the wild and organic salmon, and shed light on various smoking methods before finishing up with a tasting. Advance reservations are essential. Outside high season it's usually possible to stop by the smokehouse and stock up if you call ahead.

Festivals & Events

The **Roundstone Arts Week** (www.roundstoneartsweek.com), usually held late June or early July, gathers together local artists, musicians and writers.

Sleeping & Eating

Gurteen Beach Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 35882; www.gurteenbay.com; Roundstone; camp sites €10) This peaceful, well-equipped camping ground is in a great spot 2.5km west of town, near the beach.

Angler's Return (☎ 31091; www.anglersreturn.itgo.com; Toombeola; d from €90; 🕒 Mar-Nov; 📍) Less than 10 minutes' drive out of Roundstone along the R341, this garden-set B&B is perfect for those who fish – or for anyone seeking time out in the tranquil beauty of Bertraghboy Bay. Most of the cosy rooms have shared bathrooms, and evening meals can be arranged on request. The home is not suitable for children under four.

St Joseph's (☎ 35865; www.connemara.net/stjosephs; Main St; d €64-72; 🕒 closed late Dec; 📍) Christina Lowry's central B&B offers a warm welcome and beautiful views over the harbour.

O'Dowd's (☎ 35809; Main St; mains €12-20; 🕒 restaurant noon-10pm Apr-Sep, noon-3pm & 6-9.30pm Oct-Mar) This well-worn, comfortable old pub hasn't lost any of its authenticity since it starred in Hollywood flick *The Matchmaker*. It's a great spot to nurse a pint. Specialties at its adjoining restaurant include hot-buttered lobster and 'ocean rolls' (fillets of plaice stuffed with seafood in dill sauce). Cheaper bar food (€8 to €17) is available until 9pm.

ROUNDSTONE TO CLIFDEN

The R341 shadows the coast from the harbour-side hamlet of Roundstone to Clifden. Along this scenic stretch, beaches for summertime frolicking or spectacular wintry walks include the white sands of **Trá Mhóir** (Great Beach), **Gurteen Bay** (sometimes spelt Gorteen Bay) and **Dog's Bay**. Trá Mhóir is off the highway, but well worth the slight detour; to get there, turn off at Ballyconneely, heading south towards the Connemara Golf Club. You will pass the ruins of **Bunowen Castle** before reaching the shore.

Kite-surfing and buggy-boarding lessons are available along Connemara's coast; contact **Connemara Kite Sports** (☎ 095-43793, 087-9673077; www.connemarakitesports.com) for seasonal info.

Away from the coast, there is an alternate route between Roundstone and Clifden, which connects with the N59 east of Clifden. The old road is a bumpy ride, passing through the eerie, rust-collared wilderness of **Roundstone Bog**. Locals who believe the bog is haunted won't drive this road at night; indeed, the roughness of the road is reason enough to avoid it after dark. In summer, you might see turf being manually harvested, as blanket bogs cannot be cut mechanically.

CLIFDEN & AROUND

☎ 095 / pop 1900

Connemara's 'capital', Clifden (An Clochán), presides over the head of the narrow bay where the River Owenglin tumbles into the sea. Its Victorian houses and church spires rise on the horizon as you approach the town from the coast road, and the surrounding countryside offers walks through woods and above the shoreline.

Though the summer months clog Clifden's streets with tourists, winter gives the town a faded, forgotten charm. Year-round, its easy access by public or private transport (about 80km from Galway city) and good facilities make it a useful stop while exploring the region.

Information

There are banks with ATMs around Market Sq, as well as a large supermarket.

Post office (Main St)

Shamrock Washeteria (Market Sq) Wash those dirty clothes here.

Tourist office (☎ 21163; clifden@irelandwest.ie; Galway road; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Jun & Sep, 10am-5pm Jul & Aug)

Two Dog Internet Café (☎ 22186; Church Hill; per hr €5)

Sights & Activities

Connemara's past comes to life at **Dan O'Hara's Homestead** (☎ 21808; www.connemaraheritage.com; Letterishea; adult/under 12yr €7.50/4; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr-Oct, by appointment Nov-Mar). Farmer Dan O'Hara lived here until his eviction from the farm and subsequent immigration to New York, where he ended up selling matches on the street. Its present owners have restored the property, turning it into an illuminating heritage centre with varied activities such as demonstrations of bog cutting, thatching, sheep shearing and so on. You can pop in just to have a coffee or browse the craft shop. It's also possible to stay at the farmhouse; call for more information. The homestead's 7km east of town on the N59.

Heading directly west from Clifden's Market Sq, **Sky Road** traces a spectacular loop out to the township of Kingston and back to Clifden, taking in some rugged, stunningly beautiful coastal scenery en route. The round trip of about 12km can easily be walked or cycled, but if you're short on time you can also drive.

Books and maps outlining the area's myriad of walking routes are available at the **Connemara Walking Centre** (☎ 21379; walkwest@indigo.ie; Market St; 🕒 Mar-Sep). Tourist offices throughout County Galway also have information and sell detailed maps of routes, including the new 250km **Sli Chonamara** walking route, which has a variety of spur trails in the region.

If you'd rather not go it alone, field archaeologist and Connemara local **Michael Gibbons** (☎ 21492; www.walkingireland.com) leads day walks as well as longer 'walking festivals' coinciding with the Celtic calendar; contact him directly for prices and dates. **Connemara Safari** (☎ 21071; www.walkingconnemara.com) also conducts walking tours, including island-hopping tours. Prices start from €599 for five-day tours, including meals and accommodation.

And if you prefer to let someone else do the walking, you can ride gentle Connemara ponies from **Errislanann Riding Centre** (☎ 21134; info@connemara-tourism.org; Ballyconneely road). Guides provide lessons, and lead treks along the beach and up into the hills. Rates depend on type and length of ride you want to take. The centre is about 3.5km south of Clifden on the R341.

Sleeping

Some of the most appealing accommodation nestles around in the town's scenic outskirts.

Brookside Hostel (☎ 21812; www.brooksidehostel.com; Fairgreen; dm €13.50-15, d €36-40; 🕒 Mar-Oct; 📍) Run by Richard Bartley, who built it from scratch, this IHH hostel is located in a peaceful spot off the bottom of Market St, with the River Owenglin trickling past. Guided walks are available, and there's a bright, clean self-catering kitchen.

Clifden Town Hostel (☎ 21076; www.clifdentownhostel.com; Market St; dm €15-17, d €36-40; 📍) Right in the centre of town, and a stone's throw from Clifden's cafés, restaurants and pubs, this cheery IHH hostel is set in a cream-coloured house framed by big picture windows. It has 34 beds in its sunlit rooms.

Ben View House (☎ 21256; www.benviewhouse.com; Bridge St; s €30-55, d €60-80) This central 1848 town house has an antiquated charm provided by timber beams, polished floorboards and old-fashioned hospitality.

Seamist House (☎ 21441; Market St; www.connemara.net/seamist; s €50-70, d €70-100) Right in town but opening onto a private fairy tale garden (which also provides fruit for homemade jam spread on your freshly baked scones), this stone house has immaculate rooms and a homey atmosphere. Highly recommended.

Mallmore House (☎ 21460; www.mallmorecountryhouse.com; Ballyconneely road; d €70-80; 🕒 Mar-Sep; 📍) Unbeatable for the price, this colonnaded snow white Georgian manor house is set in 14 hectares of woodland about 2km from town. Its spacious rooms are elegantly furnished, and bountiful breakfasts include pancakes and smoked salmon.

Foyles (☎ 21801; www.foyleshotel.com; Main St; s €72, d €114-170; 🕒 Jun-Aug) A white-trimmed, Wedgwood blue landmark in the centre of town, Clifden's oldest hotel has 30 flowing rooms in romantic shades such as rose and olive, and a well-regarded on-site restaurant (mains €15 to €20) specialising in seafood. Unwind on the flower-filled patio garden or in the lively pub.

Quay House (☎ 21369; www.thequayhouse.com; Beach Rd; s €95-115, d €140-180; 🕒 mid-Mar-mid-Nov) Location and history make this a charmed spot. More than 200 years old, this place right on the water used to house the harbour master, but it was converted into a choice 14-room hotel long ago. Rooms are large and furnished with antiques, and some

have working fireplaces and views of the harbour. Breakfast is served in a vine-draped glass conservatory.

Abbeyglen Castle (☎ 21201; www.abbeyglen.ie; Sky Rd; s/d from €144/239; ☎ Feb-Dec; [P]) Should you be arriving by private helicopter, you can land on the lawns of this magnificent chateau. If not, don't worry, you'll still feel entirely welcome in the historic home of Clifden founder John d'Arcy. Tear yourself from its immense, sumptuously furnished rooms to play billiards, dine at the restaurant or drink in the chummy pub.

Eating & Drinking

Pubs and restaurants cluster around Clifden's town centre. As elsewhere in these parts, sea-food reigns supreme.

Two Dog Café (☎ 22186; 2 Church Hill; dishes €4-7) Painted bright orange and blue, this hip spot has good, strong coffee, fresh-baked goods, and light fare such as tortilla wraps. The upstairs internet terminals make this Europe's westernmost internet café.

Lowry's Bar (☎ 21347; Market St; meals €4-9; ☎ 10.30am-midnight Mon-Thu, 10.30am-1am Fri & Sat, 10.30am-11.30pm Sun) A time-worn local, Lowry's traditional pleasures extend from the age-old, unadorned look of the place to its céilidh sessions, which take place at least a couple of nights a week. The food is 'unpretentious Irish' (eg bangers and mash).

EJ Kings (☎ 21330; Market Sq; mains €13.50-22; ☎ 10.30am-11pm Sat-Thu, 10am-12.30am Fri & Sat) A busy old pub established in 1852, EJ Kings serves soups (including somewhat watery chowder), oak-smoked-salmon and crab-meat platters, and a fine Irish stew. Vegetarian options include tortillas stuffed with spinach and ricotta.

D'Arcy Inn (☎ 21146; Main St; mains around €15; ☎ 10.30am-late) Live music and poetry readings make Darcy's a sociable spot for seafood or just for a pint. During the winter months it's best to call ahead to check it's open.

Fogerty's (☎ 21427; Market St; mains €17.50-25; ☎ 5.30-10pm Thu-Tue) In a thatched stone house brightened by blue-painted window frames, Fogerty's cooks up traditional Irish and seafood dishes including a guaranteed-to-be-good catch of the day.

Abbeyglen Castle (☎ 21201; www.abbeyglen.ie; Sky Rd; set menu €49; ☎ 7-9pm Feb-Dec) If staying in Clifden's grand castle isn't an option, you can reserve ahead to dine here on Connemara

lamb, salmon, or crustaceans plucked from the live tank.

Getting There & Away

Buses including Bus Éireann services from Galway stop on Market St near the library.

Michael Nee Coaches (☎ 51082) runs between Clifden's main square and Galway three times daily, June to September. During the same period there are two buses daily to Cleggan (twice weekly from October to May), from where the ferry sails to Inishbofin.

Getting Around

The compact town centre is easy to cover on foot. **John Mannion & Son** (☎ 21160; Bridge St) hires out bicycles for €10 per day. The **Connemara Walking Centre** (☎ 21379; walkwest@indigo.ie; Market St; ☎ Mar-Sep) can also arrange bike hire.

CLAGGAGHDUFF & OMEV ISLAND

Following the fretted coastline north of Clifden brings you to the tiny village of **Claddaghduff** (An Cladach Dubh), which is signposted off the road to Cleggan. If you turn west here down by the Catholic church you will come out on **Omev Strand**, and at low tide you can drive or walk across the sand to **Omev Island** (population 20), a low islet of rock, grass, sand and a handful of houses. During summer, horse races are held on Omev Strand.

CLEGGAN

☎ 095 / pop 300

Most visitors whiz through Cleggan (An Cloigean), a small fishing village 16km northwest of Clifden, to hop on the Inishbofin ferry. While here, however, you can experience Ireland's 'wild west' at **Cleggan Riding Centre** (☎ 44746; prices vary), which offers horseback adventures including three-hour treks to Omev Island via the sandy causeway.

INISHBOFIN

☎ 095 / pop 200

By day sleepy Inishbofin is a haven of tranquillity. You can walk or bike its narrow, deserted lanes, green pastures and sandy beaches, with farm animals and seals for company. But with no garda on the island to enforce closing times at the pub, by night – you guessed it – Inishbofin has mighty fine craic.

Information

Inishbofin's small post office has a grocery shop and a currency-exchange facility. Pubs and hotels will usually change travellers cheques.

Sight & Activities

Situated 9km offshore, Inishbofin is compact – 6km long by 3km wide – and its highest point is a mere 86m above sea level. Just off the northern beach is **Lough Bó Finne**, from which the island gets its name; *bó finne* means 'white cow'.

St Colman exiled himself to Inishbofin in AD 664, after he fell out with the Church over its adoption of a new calendar. He set up a monastery, supposedly northeast of the harbour, where the more recent ruins of a small 13th-century church still stand. Grace O'Malley, the famous pirate queen, used Inishbofin as a base in the 16th century, and Cromwell's forces captured Inishbofin in 1652, building a star-shaped prison for priests and clerics. Just behind the pier, the small but comprehensive **heritage museum** (www.inishbofin.com; admission free; ☎ hr vary) gives an overview of the island's history. Displays include the contents of an old house, photographs, and traditional farming and fishing equipment.

The island's pristine waters offer superb **scuba diving** (see p434).

Festivals & Events

Inishbofin well and truly wakes up during the May **Inishbofin Arts Festival** (☎ 45861; www.inishbofin.com), which features events such as accordion workshops, archaeological walks, art exhibitions and concerts by high-profile Irish bands such as the Frames.

Sleeping & Eating

You can pitch a tent on most unfenced ground, but not on or near the beaches.

Inishbofin Island Hostel (☎ 45855; www.inishbofin-hostel.ie; camp sites €7, dm €15, d €36-40; ☎ early Apr-Sep) In an old farmhouse, this snug IHH hostel has glassed-in common areas with panoramic views and equally scenic camp sites. It's 500m up from the ferry dock.

Doonmore Hotel (☎ 45804; s €60-70, d €90-120; ☎ Apr-Sep) Close to the harbour, Doonmore has comfortable, unpretentious rooms. Lunch (€15) and dinner (€30) in the dining room take advantage of the abundance of locally caught seafood, and the hotel can

pack lunches for you to take while exploring the island.

Day's Inishbofin House (☎ 45809; www.inishbofin-house.com; d €110-240) You can nurture both body and soul at this revamped hotel – whether it's in the Egyptian linen-draped rooms (most with sea views from balconies or terraces), the on-site marine spa or the restaurant (meals €25 to €45), which serves Mediterranean fare such as roast-butternut-squash-and-mascarpone risotto, or pheasant-and-foie gras terrine.

Getting There & Around

Ferries from Cleggan to Inishbofin take 30 to 45 minutes and cost €15 return. Dolphins often swim alongside the boats. Confirm ahead, as ferries may be cancelled when seas are rough.

Island Discovery (☎ 45894, 45819; www.inishbofin-islanddiscovery.com) runs daily from Cleggan to Inishbofin.

Inishbofin Ferries (☎ 45903, 45806, 45831; inishbofin.ferry@eircom.net) operates the *Galway Bay* twice daily April to October, and three times daily June to August. This line also runs the older *Dún Aengus* mail boat (11.30am Monday to Saturday year-round).

Inishbofin Cycle Hire (☎ 45833), at the pier, hires out bicycles for €15 per day.

LETTERFRACK & AROUND

☎ 095 / pop 200

Founded by Quakers in the mid-19th century, Letterfrack (Leitir Fraic) is ideally situated for exploring Connemara National Park, Renvyle Point and Kylemore Abbey. The village is barely more than a crossroads with a few pubs and B&Bs, but the forested setting and nearby coast are a magnet for outdoors adventure seekers. Letterfrack is 15km northeast of Clifden on the N59.

Sights

KYLEMORE ABBEY

A few kilometres east of Letterfrack stands **Kylemore Abbey** (☎ 41146; www.kylemoreabbey.com; adult/under 12yr/student €12/free/7; ☎ abbey 9am-5.30pm mid-Mar-mid-Nov, 10am-4.30pm mid-Nov-mid-Mar, gardens 10am-5pm mid-Mar-Nov). Magnificently sited on the shores of a lake, this 19th-century neo-Gothic mansion was built for a wealthy English businessman, Mitchell Henry, who spent his honeymoon in Connemara; his wife died tragically young. Both now rest in a small **mausoleum** in the grounds, not far from a

small, restored **neo-Gothic chapel**, which can also be visited.

During WWI, a group of Benedictine nuns left Ypres in Belgium and set up in Kylemore Abbey. The nuns established an exclusive convent boarding school here, but the school will be closing in 2010 and, at the time of writing, Kylemore's long-term future was uncertain.

Until the school's closure, some sections of the abbey remain open to the public, displaying a couple of roped-off period-furnished rooms. Admission also covers the abbey's **Victorian walled gardens**.

Without paying admission, you can stroll around the lake and surrounding woods. There's also an on-site craft shop and a cafeteria-style **restaurant** (dishes €4-7; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) where you can get sandwiches and a couple of hot dishes such as spaghetti bolognese.

Kylemore's tranquillity is shattered in high summer with the arrival of up to 55 tour coaches per day, each one followed through the gates by an average of 50 cars (yes, about 2750 cars every day). At this time of year especially, one of the most peaceful ways to experience the area's surrounds is with **Kylemore Abbey Fishery** (☎ 41178; www.kylemoreabbeyfishery.net; per day fishing from €35, gear rental from €15), which arranges local lake and river fishing trips for salmon and trout.

CONNEMARA NATIONAL PARK

Immediately southeast of Letterfrack, **Connemara National Park** (☎ 41054; www.heritageireland.ie; Letterfrack; adult/child €2.90/1.30; ☎ visitors centre & facilities 10am-5.30pm Mar-May, 9.30am-6.30pm Jun-Aug, 10am-5.30pm Sep-early Oct, grounds open year-round) spans 2000 hectares of bog, mountain and heath. The headquarters and visitor centre are housed in old buildings just south of the crossroads in Letterfrack.

The park encloses a number of the **Twelve Bens**, including Bencullagh, Benbrack and Benbaun. The heart of the park is **Gleann Mór** (Big Glen), through which flows the River Polladirk. There's fine walking up the glen and over the surrounding mountains. There are also short, self-guided walks and, if the Bens look too daunting, you can hike up **Diamond Hill** nearby.

The visitor centre offers an introduction to the park's flora, fauna and geology, and visitors can scrutinise maps and various trails here before heading out into the park. Seeing

the exhibits on bog biology, and the video *Man and the Landscape* will make walking the park a more rewarding experience. The centre has an indoor eating area and rudimentary kitchen facilities for walkers.

Guided nature walks (incl in admission; ☎ walks 11am Mon, Wed & Fri Jun, 11am Mon, Wed & Fri-Sun Jul & Aug) depart from the visitor centre. They cover rough, boggy terrain – bring sturdy boots and rain gear.

Activities

Along the coast north of Letterfrack, especially from Tully Cross east to Lettergesh and Salrock, there are expanses of pure white sand, including **Glassillaun Beach**. Scuba-diving company **Scuba Dive West** (☎ 43922; www.scubadivest.com; Letterfrack) is based at Glassillaun Beach, and runs courses and dives around the surrounding coastlines and islands. A full day with guide and equipment costs €99/119 for shore/boat diving. There are also stunning beaches at **Gurteen** and at **Lettergesh**, where the beach horse-racing sequences for *The Quiet Man* were shot.

Invigorating **walks** can be enjoyed all along the coast, including around Renvyle Point to Derryinver Bay. An excellent hill walk, which takes four to five hours each way, starts from the post office at Lettergesh and heads up Binn Chuanna and Maolchnoc, and then down to Lough Fee. A 4km walk from Letterfrack to the peak of Tully Mountain takes 30 minutes and affords wonderful ocean views.

Courses

The thatched-cottage restaurant **Pangur Ban** (☎ 41243; www.pangurban.com; Letterfrack) makes a cosy setting for cookery courses. Two-day weekend courses start at €160 (you'll need to arrange your own accommodation), and cover a specific theme. 'Breads and cakes', for example, teaches you how to make yeast bread, traditional brown soda bread, zucchini-and-walnut bread, cranberry-and-nut bread, flourless almond tarts and coffee cake. Courses are limited to four to six people; Pangur Ban's website lists programme dates.

Sleeping & Eating

Renvyle Beach Caravan & Camping (☎ 43462; Renvyle; hiker & cyclist sites €8, camp sites €16; ☎ Easter-Sep) This camping ground, 1.5km west of Tully Cross, is in an enviable location, with direct access to the sandy beach.

Old Monastery Hostel (☎ 41132; www.oldmonasteryhostel.com; Letterfrack; camp sites from €9, dm €13-15, d €40-50; ☎ ☎ ☎) Down a wooded track (400m from the Letterfrack crossroads), this 19th-century stone house has been restored (including adding free wi-fi) without sacrificing its rustic charm. The hostel's book-filled parlour is lit by candles and a fireplace; there's a vegetarian buffet (€10) and the staff organise regular boat trips to remote islands.

Renvyle House Hotel (☎ 43511; www.renvyle.com; Renvyle; d €110-240; ☎ ☎) Allegedly haunted, this 56-room converted country house was

once owned by the poet Oliver St John Gogarty. Even if you're not staying here, it makes an atmospheric stop for a drink or snack after a walk along the peninsula. If you are, you can also play tennis or enjoy a round of golf on the hotel's nine-hole course.

Pangur Ban (☎ 41243; www.pangurban.com; Letterfrack; mains €15-24; ☎ 5.30-9.30pm Jul-Aug, 5.30-9.30pm Tue-Sat Mar-Jun & Sep-Dec) In a 300-year-old thatched cottage 100m west of the Letterfrack crossroads, Pangur Ban has captured the imagination of Ireland's foodies with inventive Irish cuisine such as lamb shanks braised in Guinness, and

WALK: KILLARY HARBOUR

This easy 18km walk (approximately seven hours) takes in the natural splendour and poignant human history of the area around Killary Harbour. The total ascent is 130m; Salrock Pass marks the modest high point of the circuit at 130m, making this route an ideal option if clouds are lying low over higher peaks in the area. The terrain covered is a mixture of quiet tarmac lanes, grassy *boreens* (small lanes or roadways) and rugged paths; boots are a good idea as sections of the trail can become boggy or muddy.

The route starts and finishes 3km southwest of Leenane, at the quarry situated 20m southwest of the River Bunowen on the main Leenane-Clifden road (N59). There's ample parking at the quarry, but getting here requires your own wheels.

When you come out of the quarry, you turn left, walk onwards for 400m and then take the first right. Heading down that road, you'll soon come to two gates and a sign that indicates that private vehicles may not proceed further. Pass through the right-hand gate and continue along the lane for a little over 1km. Lines of floats securing mussel beds bob in the harbour to the north and will be a constant presence for the first half of the route. The lane soon becomes a gravel track, and then, after passing through a couple of gates and crossing a bridge, which spans a waterfall, it narrows again to become a grassy *boreen*.

This area was badly affected by the Great Famine, and around 3km from the start of the walk you'll come to the first of several ruinous stone buildings that once made up the village of Foher, which was depopulated during the Famine. Follow the *boreen* along the front of the ruins, and pass over a stone stile in the wall to the west. The *boreen* now dwindles to a single-file path, and climbs up and around a rock outcrop. The retaining walls of the Famine road, which was constructed by locals in return for rations, are obvious at the side of the path.

The rugged landscape is now dotted with boulders and bands of rock, although the buildings and boats of Rosroe soon come into view ahead (1½ to two hours from the start). Pass along the south side of a large stone wall enclosing a field, and exit the *boreen* beside a cottage. Join the minor road leading to Rosroe harbour; the pier is about 200m along the road to the right, and well worth the short detour.

From the pier, retrace your steps along the road, continuing past the point where you came down off the *boreen*. Killary Harbour Little (or Little Killary) is the picturesque inlet to the south, its shape mimicking the larger-scale fjord further north. Follow the road for around 1km, climbing to a sharp right turn. Leave the lane here, continuing ahead (east) through a wooden gate. A short but steep ascent now leads to Salrock Pass, from where Killary Harbour and Little Killary are both visible.

The descent on the eastern side of the pass is even steeper, but you'll soon come to a junction of a fence and stone wall on your right. Head through a wooden gate on the left, and walk along a rough track that runs over Salrock, from where you follow a line of electricity poles all the way to the deserted village of Foher, which you passed on your outward journey. Trace the wall as it descends gradually through the ruins, rejoining the *boreen* at the eastern end of the hamlet. Retrace your initial steps back to the road and your starting point.

pot roast pheasant with apples, cider, and parsnip mash. If you want to recreate them yourself, Pangur Ban runs cookery courses.

Getting There & Away

Bus 420, run by **Bus Éireann** (☎ 091-562 000), travels year-round between Galway and Clifden (one way adult/child €9.80/6.10), calling at Salruck, Lettergesh, Tully Church, Kylemore, Letterfrack, Cleggan and Cladaghduff en route.

LEENANE & KILLARY HARBOUR

☎ 095

The small village of Leenane (also spelled Leenaun) drowns on the shore of Killary Harbour. Dotted with mussel rafts, the harbour is widely believed to be Ireland's only fjord. Slicing 16km inland and more than 45m deep in the centre, it certainly looks like a fjord, although some scientific studies suggest it may not actually have been glaciated. **Mt Mweelrea** (819m) towers to its north.

Leenane boasts both stage and screen connections. It was the location for *The Field* (1989), based on John B Keane's poignant play about a tenant farmer's ill-fated plans to pass on a rented piece of land to his son. The village's name made it onto the theatrical map with the success in London and New York of Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

Information

There's no bank or ATM, but the post office changes foreign currency.

Sights

After surveying the countryside studded with sheep, you can roam among them at the **Sheep & Wool Centre** (☎ 42323, 4231; www.sheepandwoolcentre.com; admission €4; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct). You can also see spinning and weaving demonstrations, learn about the history of dyeing at the little museum, and feed the farm animals – then dine yourself on homemade cakes, pies and Irish stew at the café. The centre's shop sells locally made handcrafts, as well as topographical walking maps. If you're here in the low season, it's still worth phoning as you may be able to pop by if the family is around.

Activities

Canoeing, sea kayaking, sailing, rock climbing, clay-pigeon shooting, windsurfing, water-

skiing, archery, day hikes and outdoor combat laser games are just some of the activities on offer at **Killary Adventure Centre** (☎ 43411; www.killary.com; half/full day from €40/80; ☎ 10am-5pm), approximately 3km west of Leenane on the N59. Between April and September, be sure to pack insect repellent to keep midges at bay.

From Nancy's Point, about 2km west of Leenane, **Killary Cruises** (☎ 091-566 736; www.killarycruises.com; adult/child/family €19/9/42) offers 1½-hour cruises of Killary Harbour aboard a catamaran. Dolphins leap around the boat, which passes by a mussel farm and stops at a salmon farm, where you'll see the fish being fed. There are four cruises per day from April to October.

There are several excellent **walks** from Leenane, including one to **Aasleagh Waterfall** (Eas Liath), about 3km away on the north-eastern side of Killary Harbour. Also from Leenane, the road runs west for about 2km along the southern shore. Where the highway veers inland, walkers can continue on an old road along the shore to the tiny fishing community of **Rosroe Quay** (population 11); see p435 for a detailed route description. For guided day and overnight walks in the region, Gerry Greensmyth from **Craugh Patrick Walking Tours** (☎ 098-26090; www.walkingguideireland.com) has a wealth of local expertise.

Sleeping & Eating

Sleepzone Connemara (☎ 42929; www.sleepzone.ie; camp sites €10, dm €13-22, s €30-40, d €44-60; ☎ Mar-Oct; ♻️) This 19th-century property has been converted to clean dorms and modernised private rooms. If you want to commune with the great outdoors, you can also pitch a tent here. Free wi-fi is available, along with a bar, barbecue terrace, tennis court and bike hire. The hostel runs a handy shuttle service to/from Galway (one way/return €8/12; Sleepzone guests only).

Killary Adventure Centre (☎ 43411; www.killaryadventure.ie; dm €18-24, d €64-70; ♻️) For those wanting to sleep and breathe the action lifestyle, the adventure centre has clean, spartan dorms and double rooms, as well as a restaurant (dinner €25) and bar with panoramas of Killary Harbour. Package rates are available for families.

Killary House (☎ 42254; www.connemara.com/killaryhouse; Leenane; d €50-60; ♻️) On a working farm just a short walk from Leenane, this cosy B&B looks out to the bay from its front

rooms, and up to the hills in its rear rooms. Cheaper rooms share a bathroom. Ask about on-site meals, including children's menus.

Blackberry Cafe (☎ 42240; Leenane; café dishes €4.50-11, dinner mains €14-25; ☎ noon-4.30pm & 6-9pm Jul & Aug, noon-4.30pm & 6-9pm Wed-Mon Easter-Jun & Sep) The unexpectedly contemporary Blackberry Café serves fabulous fresh seafood, such as Connemara smoked salmon or steamed mussels in garlic and white wine sauce.

Drinking

Farmers and other locals come for quiet pints and warming Irish coffees at a couple of authentic dark wood-panelled pubs with enormous open fireplaces on Leenane's main street.

SOUTH OF GALWAY CITY

Visitors often pass through this region en route to or from County Clare without stopping, but it's a charming spot to explore if you have time. If you're basing yourself in Galway city and you have wheels, its oyster restaurants merit a visit in their own right.

CLARINBRIDGE & KILCOLGAN

☎ 091 / pop 2100

An easy 16km south of Galway, Clarinbridge (Droichead an Chláirín) and Kilcolgan (Cill Choglán) are at their busiest during the **Clarinbridge Oyster Festival** (www.darenbridge.com), held during the second weekend of September. However, the oysters are actually at their best from May and through the summer. Clarinbridge is also good for rummaging the antique stores along the main road.

For a homey cup of tea served in china cups at frilly tables, stop in at **Claire's Tea Rooms** (☎ 776606; Clarinbridge; snacks €3-8; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 1-5pm Sun), set inside an old stone cottage.

The oyster festival is run by the folk at **Paddy Burke's Oyster Inn** (☎ 796 107; Clarinbridge; 6 oysters €10, mains €10-24; ☎ 12.30-10pm), an old-fashioned thatched inn by the bridge dishing up heaping servings of seafood.

Signposted near the post office just north of neighbouring Kilcolgan, **Moran's Oyster Cottage** (☎ 976 113; The Weir, Kilcolgan; 6 oysters €12, mains €13-20; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun)

is an atmospheric thatched pub and restaurant overlooking Dunbulcaun Bay, where the oysters are reared before they arrive on your plate.

Clarinbridge is on the main Galway-Gort-Ennis-Limerick road (N18) and is served by numerous Bus Éireann buses from Galway. Kilcolgan is also on the N18.

KINVARA

☎ 091 / pop 400

The small stone harbour of Kinvara (sometimes spelt Kinvarra) lolls at the southeastern corner of Galway Bay, which accounts for its Irish name, Cinn Mhara (Head of the sea). Traditional Galway Hooker sailing boats race here each year on the second weekend in August in the **Cruinniú na mBáid** (Gathering of the Boats).

Kinvara's other big date on its annual calendar is **Fleadh na gCuach** (Cuckoo Festival), a traditional music festival in late May that features over 100 musicians performing at upwards of 50 organised sessions. Spin-off events include a parade.

Details of both festivals are available on Kinvara's **website** (www.kinvara.com).

Sights & Activities

The chess piece-style **Dunguaire Castle** (☎ 637 108; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm May-Oct) was erected around 1520 by the O'Hynes clan and is in excellent condition following extensive restoration. It is widely believed that the castle occupies the former site of the 6th-century royal palace of Guaire Aidhne, the king of Connaught. Dunguaire's owners have included Oliver St John Gogarty (1878-1957) – poet, writer, surgeon and Irish Free State senator.

The most atmospheric way to visit the castle is to attend a **medieval banquet** (☎ 061-360 788; www.shannonheritage.com; banquet €48.95; ☎ 5.30pm & 8.45pm May-Oct). These intimate banquets include music, storytelling, a hearty chicken dinner, wine and a jug of mead.

Sleeping & Eating

Doorus House (☎ 637 512; doorushouse@kinvara.com; Doorus; dm €15-16; ♻️) History fills the air of this lovely An Óige hostel, 6km northwest of Kinvara. It's in an old mansion once owned by Count Floribund de Basterot, who entertained here such notables as WB Yeats, Lady

DETOUR: GORT & AROUND

If you're a fan of WB Yeats (and you have wheels), two sights connected to the great poet near the highway town of Gort are a worthwhile detour on your way to or from Galway.

A 16th-century Norman tower known as **Thoor Ballylee** (☎ 631 436; Peterswell; admission €6; 🚗 10am-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep) was the summer home of WB Yeats from 1922 to 1929, and was the inspiration for one of Yeats' best-known works, *The Tower*. The restored 16th-century tower contains the poet's furnishings and you can see an audiovisual presentation on his life. From Gort take the Loughrea road (N66) for about 3km and look for the sign.

About 3km north of Gort is **Coole Park** (☎ 631 804; www.coolepark.ie; admission €2.90; 🚗 10am-5pm Apr-May & Sep, 10am-6pm Jun-Aug). It was the home of Lady Augusta Gregory, co-founder of the Abbey Theatre and a patron of Yeats. An exhibition focuses on the literary importance of the house, and the flora and fauna of the surrounding nature reserve. The main attraction on the grounds is the autograph tree, on which many of Lady Gregory's esteemed literary guests carved their initials. Coole Park's restaurant (mains €8 to €12), in the property's former stables, serves wholesome wraps and homemade burgers.

In the same area, about 5km southwest of Gort, is the extensive monastic site of **Kilmacduagh**. Beside a small lake is a well-preserved 34m-high round tower, the remains of a small 14th-century cathedral (Teampall Mór MacDuagh), an oratory dedicated to St John the Baptist, and other little chapels. The original monastery is thought to have been founded by St Colman MacDuagh at the beginning of the 7th century. There are fine views over the Burren from here and you can visit any time.

If you happen to be passing through Gort in mid-June, you may think you've arrived in Rio. Gort has the highest Brazilian population per capita in Ireland, and its **Brazilian Festival** (<http://brasilianfestivalgort.blogspot.com>) fills the town with samba beats, *capoeira* (a combination of martial arts and dance) and Brazilian food.

Augusta Gregory, Douglas Hyde and Guy de Maupassant. Dorms are basic but spotless. The hostel's signposted off the main road to Ballyvaughan (N67).

Burren View (☎ 637 142; www.kinvara.com/burren-view; Dorous; d with shared/private bathroom €60/65; 🚗 Apr-Sep; 📍) About 6km northwest of Kinvara, the O'Connor family's farmhouse rests on a secluded peninsula with glorious views across Galway Bay to the Burren. A short stroll from the house is a Blue Flag beach.

Keough's (☎ 637 145; Main St, Kinvara; mains €8-15) This friendly local, where you'll often hear Irish spoken, serves up a fresh battered cod and pints of the good stuff. Traditional music sessions take place on Mondays and Thursdays, while Saturday nights swing with old-time dancing.

Getting There & Away

Bus 423, which links Galway with towns in county Clare, stops in Kinvara. From late May to late November, Bus Éireann's Galway-Killarney bus 50 stops in Kinvara three to four times daily Monday to Saturday, and twice on Sunday. For more details contact **Galway bus station** (☎ 091-562 000).

EASTERN GALWAY

Lough Corrib separates eastern Galway from the dramatic landscape of Connemara and the county's western coast, and this region is markedly different. Eastern Galway is relatively flat, and its underlying limestone has provided it with well-drained, fertile soil that is ideal for farming, giving it more in common with the country's midlands.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 091-562 000) services connect Galway with Athenry, Ballinasloe, and Loughrea. Services from Galway to/from Portumna require a change at Kilbeggan.

ATHENRY

☎ 091 / pop 2200

The name Athenry is synonymous with the stirring song 'The Fields of Athenry', composed by Pete St John in the 1970s, which recounts incarceration resulting from the Famine. Often thought to be adapted from an 1880s ballad (disputed by St John), it's been covered by countless artists, and is

sung by passionate crowds at sporting matches, including in adapted forms such as Liverpool Football Club's anthem, 'The Fields of Anfield Road'.

The walled town, 16km east of Galway, takes its own name from a nearby ford (*áth* in Irish), which crossed the River Clare east of the settlement and was the meeting point for three kingdoms, hence Áth an Rí (Ford of the Kings).

The informative **Athenry Arts & Heritage Activity Centre** (☎ 844 661; www.athenryheritagecentre.com; The Square; 🚗 10am-2pm Mon-Fri) has in-depth background on the town's sights and can outline walking itineraries. The **town website** (www.athenry.net) lists sleeping and eating options, and **Galway East Tourism** (☎ 850 687; www.galwayeast.com) also has information.

Touted as Ireland's most intact collection of medieval architecture, the city holds a number of preserved buildings, including a restored **Norman Castle**, the **Medieval Parish Church of St Mary's**, a **Dominican Priory** with superb masonry on its occupational gravestones, and an original **market cross**.

LOUGHREA & AROUND

☎ 091 / pop 4000

Named for the little lake at its southern edge, Loughrea (Baile Locha Riach) is a bustling market town 26km southeast of Galway. Loughrea has Ireland's last functioning medieval **moat**, which runs from the lake at Fair Green near the cathedral to the River Loughrea north of town.

Not to be confused with St Brendan's Church on Church St, which is now a library, **St Brendan's Catholic Cathedral** (☎ 841 212; Barrack St; admission free; 🚗 11.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri), dating from 1903, is renowned for its Celtic revival stained-glass windows, furnishings and marble columns.

Near Bullaun, 7km north of Loughrea, is the pillar-like **Turoe Stone**, covered in delicate La Tène-style relief carvings. It dates from between 300 BC and AD 100. The Turoe Stone wasn't set here originally, but was found at an Iron Age fort a few kilometres away.

On the road east to Ballinasloe, 6.5km from Loughrea, the **Dartfield Horse Museum & Park** (☎ 843 968; www.dartfieldhorsemuseum.com; adult/child €8/5; 🚗 9.30am-6pm) allows horse-lovers to learn about horse breeding, carriages, the colourful racing industry and

the horse's role in Irish history. Pony and carriage rides can be arranged.

Our pick **Meadow Court Hotel** (☎ 841 051; www.meadowcourthotel.com; Clostown; d from €116; 📍), a cherry red country manor 3.2km west of Loughrea, is an exceptional place to dine (mains €16 to €29; open lunch and dinner) and/or rest your head. It gets our pick for the most flawless sea bass in the west, fragrant with garlic and lime, while starters such as deep-fried mushrooms are also expertly prepared and presented, and the wine list is outstanding. Dreamy guest rooms come with canopied four-poster beds, broadband and room service.

BALLINASLOE

☎ 0509 / pop 6000

On the main Dublin-Galway road (N6), Ballinasloe (Béal Átha na Sluaighe) is famed for its historic October **horse fair** (www.ballinasloe.com), which dates right back to the High Kings of Tara. Attending the horse fair invariably involves sloshing through muddy fields – bring Wellington boots and don't wear white! But don't let the mud deter you: the fair has an old-time carnival atmosphere, created by the 80,000-plus horse traders and merry-makers who roll into town. They include Ireland's Travelling community, who camp nearby in traditional barrel-topped wagons. To learn more about Traveller culture, the websites of the **Irish Traveller Movement** (www.itmtrav.ie), **University College Dublin** (www.ucd.ie/folklore) and **Pavee Point Travellers Centre** (www.paveepoint.ie) are all excellent sources of information.

Around 6km southwest of town on the N6, Aghrim was the site of the bloodiest battle ever fought on Irish soil, which ended in a crucial victory by William of Orange over the Catholic forces of James II. The **Battle of Aghrim Visitor Centre** (☎ 73939; Aghrim; adult/child €4/3; 🚗 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 2-4pm Sun Jun-Aug; 📍) helps place it within the framework of the War of the Two Kings. Signposts from the interpretive centre indicate the actual battle site.

Hyne's Hostel (☎ 73734; info@auldshillelagh.com; Aghrim, Ballinasloe; dm €12-15; 📍 📍) has just 12 beds, so you'll need to book well ahead for summer or the horse fair. It hires out bikes and can arrange pick-up around the area.

CLONFERT CATHEDRAL

Heading 21km southeast of Ballinasloe brings you to the tiny 12th-century **Clonfert Cathedral**.

It's on the site of a monastery said to have been founded in AD 563 by St Brendan 'the Navigator', who is believed to be buried here. Although the historical jury is out on whether St Brendan 'the Navigator' reached America's shores in a tiny *currach* (rowing boat made of a framework of laths covered with tarred canvas), there are Old Irish Ogham (the earliest form of writing in Ireland) carvings in West Virginia that date from as early as the 6th century, suggesting an Irish presence well before Columbus set foot there.

The main attraction is the six-arch Romanesque doorway, adorned with surreal

human heads. The cathedral is off the R256; you'll need your own car to get here.

PORTUMNA

☎ 0509 / pop 1900

In the southeast corner of the county, the lakeside town of Portumna is popular for boating and fishing. **Lough Derg Holiday Park** (☎ 061-376 329; www.loughderg.net) rents boats for €45/65/190 per half-day/day/week.

Impressive **Portumna Castle** (☎ 41658; Castle Ave; adult/child €2/1; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr-Oct) was built in 1618 by Richard de Burgo (or Burke) and boasts an elaborate, geometrically laid-out garden.

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