

# Destination Ireland

After 10 years of the same government, the Republic went to the polls on 24 May 2007 with the whole country expecting change. The outgoing Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, couldn't quite escape the whiff of scandal surrounding his private finances and his party, Fianna Fáil, was under constant attack by the opposition for having squandered the opportunities presented them by the single greatest period of economic growth in history, with a slew of short-sighted decisions and broken promises. On 25 May, Ireland awoke to discover that despite what every poll had told them, the country wasn't quite ready for a whole new change of direction and had voted to put Bertie and his team back into power for another five years.

Who could blame them? On the surface, Ireland has never had it so good. The world's favourite poster-child for untrammelled economic development has become a marvel of dynamic entrepreneurialism, a forward-thinking paragon of modernity that is not about to take a break any time soon.

These are, unquestionably, exciting times, with the country virtually unrecognisable from the Ireland of 20 years ago, when high unemployment and a battered economy meant that emigration was a fact of life for someone in almost every family, and opportunities were slices of luck that really couldn't be trusted. But no country can change completely in such a short space of time – not even Ireland, which has undergone the kind of socioeconomic transformation Stalin would have dreamt about when concocting his five-year plans. Ireland has changed all right, but in so doing the country has developed two distinct personalities that will become evident as you make your way around.

You won't be able to avoid the much-trumpeted child of the Celtic Tiger, the architect of the New Ireland, a land of motorways and multiculturalism planned and developed in between double-decaf lattes and time-outs at the latest spa offering thermal mud treatment. With 60% of the population under 40, the memories of uncertain Ireland before the Celtic Tiger are fast receding in the face of the unfettered optimism brought on by these prosperous times. These Celtic cubs are overseeing the grand transformation of the country from rural backwater to the envy of Europe, with world-class hotels, dining from all corners of the globe and a range of services designed to get the most out of the country's natural bounty, which is pretty spectacular.

Ireland's *other* personality is a little more traditional, and if the regular polls of departing tourists are to be believed, still holds the key to Ireland's draw as a tourist destination. At the heart of it all is the often breathtaking scenery, still gorgeous enough to make your jaw drop despite the best efforts of developers to scar some of the most beautiful bits with roundabouts, brutal suburbs and summer bungalows. From the lonely, wind-lashed wilderness of Donegal to the postcard landscapes of West Cork, Ireland is one of the world's most beautiful countries, and worth every effort you make to explore it. The sometimes overwhelming popularity of the scenic superstars like Connemara and Kerry has seen the emergence of quieter idylls as the preferred destination of the discerning traveller, who has discovered the beauty of the lakes of Roscommon, the villages of Waterford and the rarely visited counties like Westmeath. Here you can come into contact with a more genuine Ireland, the kind removed from the slick machinery of the tourist trail.

The slow grind that resulted in the end of violence in Northern Ireland has meant that the province can finally go about showing to a much wider audience that it is just as beautiful and interesting as the rest of the island. In 2007, Lonely Planet's Blue List put it in the world's top 10 destinations to visit for good reason – the province has always had plenty to see, but it was tough to appreciate the likes of South Armagh's rural scenery when it was known as 'Bandit Country' due to the high level of IRA activity.

Ireland is a complex, often contradictory country, and those contradictions are evident everywhere you go, from the thatched rural pub advertising wi-fi connection and imported Australian wines to the group of Polish-born schoolkids chatting away to each other in Irish. No sooner do you make an assumption about the place than something will confound you completely, leaving you none the wiser than before you began. But don't worry, you're in good company: most of the Irish are as confused about it as you are.

All of this confusion hardly fits the traditional, timeworn view of a nation of friendly people made happy by the conviviality of a drink among friends, but the Irish have always mocked those fanciful notions kept alive by many a wishy-washy tourist brochure and the likes of *The Quiet Man*. Of course the Irish love a drink, but they know that they also have huge problems with the stuff, and the country is tackling the issue on a national level.

Yet for all of the problems thrown up by any modern society – and Ireland has plenty of them on its plate – the fact remains that the Irish warmth and welcome is the real deal, and millions of visitors testify to the sheer ease with which they made friends here. Someone *will* stop and help you find your way when you're standing on a corner gawking at a map; you *will* strike up a conversation if you're sitting alone in a pub; and there *is* a very good chance that if you're stuck somewhere a local will volunteer a lift to wherever you need to go. The Irish love complaining about their country – about the crappy weather, the horrible traffic, the unplanned construction, the venal corruption – and will swear to you that you're the luckiest person on earth because you don't have to live here, but they only do it because this is the greatest country on the planet. Make sense? Well, it does here.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 4.2 million (Republic), 1.7 million (Northern Ireland)

Unemployment rate: 4.3%

Inflation: 4.5%

Territory size: 70,300 sq km

Annual earnings from tourism: €5 million

Mobile phone subscriptions in Ireland: 4.3 million for 86% of the population

Number of visiting tourists per year: 7.3 million (more than there are residents)

Irish adults who have satellite TV: 25%

Biggest no-no: Don't say 'begorra' – they'll just laugh at you

Second-most spoken language: Mandarin Chinese

# Getting Started

Compact, relatively homogenous and *theoretically* crossed by car in less than four hours, Ireland doesn't pose any major challenges to the visitor other than the ones set by the often inclement weather; the horrendous traffic that can make getting through a two-dog town a 45-minute struggle against road rage; and the high price of pretty much everything, which will require an elastic budget. Otherwise, Ireland is a doddle.

## WHEN TO GO

The Irish weather works on the 'four seasons in a day' principle, which basically means that you can't predict a thing when it comes to the behaviour of the sky. Some basic assumptions, however, can be made.

In summer, from June to August, the days are reasonably warm and – most importantly – very long: at the height of summer you won't need to turn on lights until after 10pm. It is also peak tourist season, which means there are far more people just about everywhere but the most remote corners of the island, and prices are at their highest. Not surprisingly, most of the yearly festivals occur during these times so as to take advantage of the crowds and the more favourable weather.

Spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November) make good alternatives, although the country's ever-growing popularity as a tourist destination can often blur the lines between mid- and high-season tourism. Still, you have a better chance of some peace and quiet, and the weather can be surprisingly better in April and September than in mid-July – again, it's all part of the uncertainty principle. Spring festivities include the ever-popular St Patrick's Festival.

Although temperatures will barely venture below freezing, winter (December to February) can be brutal, but huge parts of the country – the west and northwest in particular – are at their savage and beautiful best in the cold winter light. Crowds are at their thinnest, but many of the country's tourist attractions and services close down in October and don't reopen until Easter, which paradoxically leaves visitors with a more convincing taste of how Ireland is experienced by most of the Irish: it's cold, grey and dark by 5pm, but there's always a pub to escape into when the rain starts sheeting down.

## COSTS & MONEY

There are no two ways about it: Ireland is an expensive destination by any standards. The country is obsessed with what they call 'rip-off culture', which

hurts locals as much as visitors. The sting is felt most everywhere, but visitors will feel it most when it comes to bed and board.

In Dublin, the bare minimum to survive is about €50 a day: €20 to €25 for a hostel and €20 for sustenance, which leaves enough for a pint. Outside the capital things are a little better, but not much: if you're in a tourist hot zone it'll be reflected in the prices, which are only marginally better than in Dublin. If your purse strings are a little more relaxed, you can get a decent bed for around €80 in the capital, €60 outside of it. For €120 you can sleep pretty luxuriously most anywhere except those *very* special places.

No matter where you are, eating out is expensive. For less than €10, don't expect much more than soup and what comes in between two slices of bread. Very ordinary meals will cost €20 or more; the better restaurants won't blink twice when charging €35 for the fish in a fancy sauce.

Car rental is also costly in Ireland. Be sure to check your car-insurance policy back home before accepting the exorbitant insurance policies offered at car-rental agencies. If your credit card usually covers car-rental insurance, confirm that the policy applies in Ireland.

## TRAVELLING SUSTAINABLY

Ireland's 40 shades of green don't, it seems, include the all-important eco-green, at least according to the European Environment Agency, which rates Ireland's carbon footprint as 5.0 global hectares per person, more than double the global average.

Everyone has a car, which results in longer traffic lines and a stressed-out infrastructure; everyone has plenty of money, which means that city break travel is increasingly ubiquitous – statistics show that the Irish take an average of three foreign holidays a year; and the Minister for Tourism announced in 2007 that the aim is to double the number of foreign tourists visiting Ireland to 10 million by the year 2012. Considering that domestic tourism accounts for another six million yearly visits and that hotels, restaurants and a host of facilities are constantly being built, upgraded and developed to deal with these massive numbers (for such a small country anyway), sustainable travel has become a core issue if Ireland is to continue attracting visitors with its mix of great scenic beauty, distinctive heritage and wonderful culture.

As so many visits to Ireland begin in Dublin, you could start your trip by dropping into **Cultivate** (☎ 01-674 5773; www.cultivate.ie; 15-19 West Essex St) in Temple Bar, Ireland's only sustainability-focused living and learning centre. The centre has an eco-shop, lots of information stands, and hosts workshops and classes on everything from composting to green building.

Throughout this book we have endeavoured to highlight any accommodation or project that puts green issues at the forefront of their planning; for more, see the Environment chapter (p74); the 'Eco Kind of Green' itinerary (p29); our Top 10 Green Projects (p24); and our Greendex (p759).

## Offsetting

Paying someone else to offset your greenhouse gas emissions isn't the perfect solution to the major issue of global warming, but it is a step in the right direction. The most popular offsetting programme involves tree-planting, but there are other schemes such as methane collection and combustion. **Carbon Neutral Ireland** (www.carbonneutralireland.ie) can help you calculate your emissions and advise you how to offset them.

## Planning

Create an itinerary that allows you to explore and experience the best of Ireland while maintaining some level of eco-responsibility. Your aim should

## HOW MUCH?

Irish Times €1.60  
1km taxi fare €1.45  
Cinema ticket €8.50  
Admission to Gaelic football match €12-15  
Aran sweater €50+

See Climate Charts (p703) for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Ireland won't test your survival skills unless you're the worse for wear in the middle of nowhere, but there are a few essentials you won't want to leave behind:

- Good walking shoes
- Raincoat
- UK/Ireland electrical adapter
- A finely honed sense of humour
- A hollow leg
- Decent Irish-themed playlists for your iPod – see p59 for our recommendations.

### GREEN WEBSITES

Check out the following online resources for in-depth info on how to travel in Ireland without being an environmental bully or leaving too deep a carbon footprint:

- **www.cultivate.ie** Sustainable living centre in Dublin's Temple Bar
- **www.sustourism.ie** All-Ireland project committed to building a sustainable tourist infrastructure
- **www.greenbox.ie** An integrated 'green zone' that includes Fermanagh, Leitrim, West Cavan, North Sligo, South Donegal and North West Monaghan
- **www.enfo.ie** Ireland's public information service on environmental matters, including sustainable development
- **www.thevillage.ie** Ireland's first eco-friendly and sustainable urban plan is an extension of the village of Cloughjordan, County Tipperary

be to benefit locally owned business and any venture that preserves the local culture.

This means choosing locally owned accommodation over the big, multi-national chain hotels (see below for our selection of green-friendly accommodation); restaurants that make an effort to use local produce; and activities that benefit the local community rather than exploit it. A good example is golf, where you should endeavour to play the older established courses rather than the newer mega-resorts designed to draw in wealthy players with a mix of US-style course design and on-course houses that are nothing more than a huge drain on local resources. Throughout this book we have endeavoured to keep all of these considerations uppermost in our thinking.

**Sustainable Tourism Ireland** ([www.sustourism.ie](http://www.sustourism.ie)) is a handy starting point with a list of enterprises from B&Bs to urban planning projects that put eco-responsibility and sustainability to the fore.

### Fly Less

There are numerous boat services serving Ireland from Britain and France and often some return fares don't cost that much more than one-way fares, not to mention the plethora of special offers designed to challenge the cheap flight hegemony. Boats arrive in Dublin, Belfast, Larne and Wexford; for more details, see the Transport chapter (p719).

### TOP 10 GREEN SLEEPS

- **Anna's House B&B** Strangford Lough, County Down; p620
- **Benwiskin Centre** Ballinrillick, County Sligo; p474
- **Coosan Cottage Eco Guesthouse** Athlone, County Westmeath; p501
- **Corcreggan Mill Cottage Hostel** Dunfanaghy, County Donegal; p525
- **Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre** Bawnboy, County Cavan; p483
- **Omagh Independent Hostel** Omagh, County Tyrone; p689
- **Otto's Creative Cooking** near Bandon, County Cork; p222
- **Phoenix Vegetarian Restaurant & Accommodation** Mt Caherconnee, County Kerry; p293
- **Rocky View Farmhouse** Fanore, County Clare; p395
- **Shiplake Mountain Hostel** Dunmanway, County Cork; p237

### Use Less Plastic

The Republic placed a levy of 15c on all plastic bags at the point of sale in 2002, and it has proved remarkably effective, reducing the use of these noxious carriers by up to 40%. Northern Ireland introduced a 5p levy in July 2007. We urge you to use as few plastic bags as possible; most shops sell cloth bags that can be stashed away when not in use.

### Stay Longer

An extended visit, as opposed to the rush-in, rush-out limitations of city-break travel, is preferable because it allows for 'slow travel' – the kind of exploratory travel that allows you to take your time and get to know a place without needing to rush (and find the fastest form of transport) to get you around. The ideal is a bike tour – throughout the book we have included details of rental agencies. Some organisations also run bike tours; see p720.

### TRAVEL LITERATURE

Travel in Ireland seems to inspire writers, some of whom seem obsessed with using Guinness as a metaphor for Irish life. As irritating as that is to the Irish and anyone else with an aversion to bad metaphors, some manage the job with cleverness and humour.

*Ireland – In a Glass of Its Own* by Peter Biddlecombe is a hilarious trip around Ireland, based on the premise that the 32 counties can be said to represent the constituent parts of a pint of the black stuff.

*Pint-Sized Ireland* by Evan McHugh is the story of the ultimate Aussie pilgrimage, a journey the length and breadth of Ireland to find the perfect pint. The entertaining means do justify the ridiculous ends.

*McCarthy's Bar* has sold millions of copies thanks to the colourful account of author Pete McCarthy's attempt to rediscover Ireland by having a pint in every pub that bears his name. His follow-up, *The Road to McCarthy*, is a look at the Irish diaspora.

*Silver Linings* by Martin Fletcher is a compelling portrait of Northern Ireland at odds with its bruised and tarnished image as a war-scarred region. Northerners on both sides of the divide are friendly, funny and as welcoming as anyone else on the island.

*Endurance* by Dermot Somers is a brilliant and fascinating collection of stories of heroic and historic travels in Ireland, from the mythic legends of old to the dawn of modern Ireland.

*A Secret Map of Ireland* is Rosita Boland's brilliantly insightful tale of her travels across the 32 counties, uncovering stories, myths and fascinating details about the counties, towns and villages she comes across.

*The Oxford Illustrated Literary Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* traces the movements of famous writers who have immortalised various towns and villages in Ireland.

*The Height of Nonsense* by Paul Clements is a fascinating story of Irish quirks, eccentrics and oddities, travelling the GMRs (Great Mountain Roads) in search of the truth about druids, banshees, highwaymen and loose women.

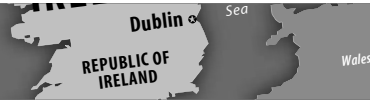
### INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet has become an indispensable planning tool for travellers. Ireland is well wired, so there's a lot of useful information available online. Here are a few sites to get you started.

**Blather** ([www.blather.net](http://www.blather.net)) This wry webzine dishes out healthy portions of irreverent commentary on all things Irish. It's a savvy way to get up-to-date on current events and attitudes.

'Travel in Ireland seems to inspire writers, some of whom seem obsessed with using Guinness as a metaphor for Irish life'

# TOP 10



## Must-See Irish Movies

Predeparture planning is always more fun if it includes a few flicks to get you in the mood. The following films are available on video or DVD. For more information about Irish cinema and TV, see p57.

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| 1 <i>Bloody Sunday</i> (2002) Director: Paul Greengrass       | 7 <i>Cal</i> (1984) Director: Pat O'Connor                   |
| 2 <i>The Dead</i> (1987) Director: John Huston                | 8 <i>Adam &amp; Paul</i> (2004) Director: Lenny Abrahamson   |
| 3 <i>My Left Foot</i> (1989) Director: Jim Sheridan           | 9 <i>The Magdalene Sisters</i> (2002) Director: Peter Mullan |
| 4 <i>The Crying Game</i> (1992) Director: Neil Jordan         | 10 <i>Michael Collins</i> (1996) Director: Neil Jordan       |
| 5 <i>The Quiet Man</i> (1952) Director: John Ford             |  |
| 6 <i>Inside l'm Dancing</i> (2004) Director: Damien O'Donnell |  |

## Top Irish Fiction

Getting stuck into some fiction is the best way to gain insight into Irish issues and culture, for there's no greater truth in Ireland than the story that's been made up. Here are the essentials to kick-start a lifelong passion; for more information see p55.

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| 1 <i>Dubliners</i> (1914) James Joyce              | 6 <i>The Ballroom of Romance &amp; Other Stories</i> (1972) William Trevor |
| 2 <i>The Book of Evidence</i> (1989) John Banville | 7 <i>Amongst Women</i> (1990) John McGahern                                |
| 3 <i>The Butcher Boy</i> (1992) Patrick McCabe     | 8 <i>All Summer</i> (2003) Claire Kilroy                                   |
| 4 <i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i> (1993) Roddy Doyle  | 9 <i>Facing White</i> (2007) Various Authors                               |
| 5 <i>The Third Policeman</i> (1967) Flann O'Brien  | 10 <i>Angela's Ashes</i> (1996) Frank McCourt                              |

## Top Green Projects

There's nothing more satisfying than helping, participating in, visiting...or just being aware of projects that are working to protect the very environment that drew you here in the first place.

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| 1 <b>Ecos Environmental Centre</b> (Ballymena, County Antrim, p674) A visitor centre dedicated to alternative energy sources and sustainable technology.             | 6 <b>The Village</b> (Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, p74) Sustainable community on a 67-acre lot adjoining Cloughjordan village.  |
| 2 <b>Copper Coast GeoPark</b> (Tramore, County Waterford, p192) Anglo-Irish enclave with the dubious distinction of being the only village in Ireland without a pub. | 7 <b>Rockfield Ecological Estate</b> (Mullingar, County Westmeath, p499) An inspiring insight into sustainable living, as well as traditional Irish culture and crafts.              |
| 3 <b>Cuilcagh Mountain Park</b> (County Fermanagh, p689) One of Europe's largest blanket bogs now supporting a regeneration project.                                 | 8 <b>Coosan Cottage Eco-Guesthouse</b> (Athlone, County Westmeath, p501) Eco-friendly guest cottage, utilising wind-generated electricity and sawdust-pellet heating.                |
| 4 <b>Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre</b> (Bawnboy, County Roscommon, p483) Galupa Buddhism, philosophy and meditation.  | 9 <b>Brigit's Garden</b> (Oughterard, County Galway, p427) A nonprofit garden with meandering trails through four seasonal gardens.  |
| 5 <b>T Bay</b> (Tramore, County Waterford, p192) Ireland's biggest surf school runs eco-walks around one of Europe's largest inter-tidal lagoons.                    | 10 <b>Bog of Allen Nature Centre</b> (Robertstown, County Kildare, p344) Institution run by the Irish Peatland Conservation Council tracing the history of bogs and peat production. |

**Entertainment Ireland** ([www.entertainmentireland.ie](http://www.entertainmentireland.ie)) Countrywide listings for clubs, theatres, festivals, cinemas, museums and much more. It's well worth consulting this site as you plan your next move in Ireland.

**Fáilte Ireland** ([www.ireland.ie](http://www.ireland.ie)) The Republic's tourist board information site has heaps of practical info. It features a huge accommodation database with photos.

**Fine Gael** ([www.ripoff.ie](http://www.ripoff.ie)) Not the website of the actual political party, but an antigovernment website sponsored by the main opposition party, whose aim is to win favour by appearing alongside the poor consumer; we don't buy it, but it does tell it like it is in relation to prices.

**Irish Election** ([www.irishelection.com](http://www.irishelection.com)) The best of Irish political blogging, this is a great site to familiarise yourself with the issues dominating the Irish scene.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Comprehensive travel information and advice.

**Mongrel** ([www.mongrel.ie](http://www.mongrel.ie)) Irreverent and hilarious, this is alternative Ireland's look at everything, from Americana to wedding videos.

**Northern Ireland Tourism** ([www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com)) Northern Ireland's official tourism information site is particularly strong on activities and accommodation.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### GO WEST!

#### One Week/Mayo to West Cork

Begin at the excavated **Céide Fields** (p457) in Mayo. Wind your way round the coast, stopping at some of Ireland's wildest beaches, to the pretty village of **Pollatomish** (p457). Head to the pub-packed heritage town of **Westport** (p446) continue past **Croagh Patrick** (p449) and through **Leenane** (p436) – situated on Ireland's only fjord – to **Connemara National Park** (p434). Take the beautiful coastal route, passing **Kylemore Abbey** (p433) and Clifden's scenic **Sky Road** (p431) through pretty **Roundstone** (p429), or the stunning wilderness of the inland route through Maam Cross to **Galway** (p403). Move on to the fishing villages of **Kinvara** (p437) and **Ballyvaughan** (p396) in the heart of the **Burren** (p388) and visit the ancient **Aillwee Caves** (p397). Explore the **Dingle Peninsula** (p284) before following the **Ring of Kerry** (p258), ending in **Killarney National Park** (p253). Continue down the **Beara Peninsula** (p239) to the Italianate **Garinish Island** (p240), with its exotic flowers. Follow the coast to **Cork** (p200) through Castletownshend and the fishing village of **Union Hall** (p227).

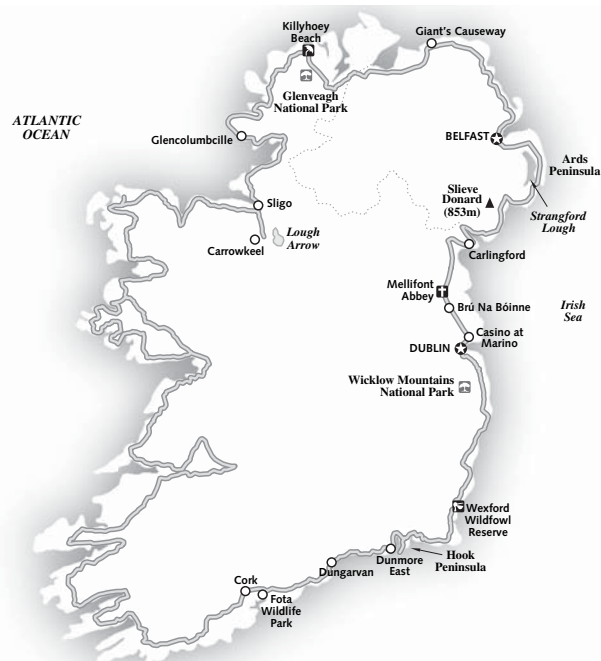
This tourist trail takes you past some of Ireland's most famous attractions and spectacular countryside. It's only about 300km so you could manage it in two days but what's the point? You won't be disappointed on this route.



### THE LONG WAY ROUND

#### Three Weeks/Starting & Ending in Dublin

Start your loop just north of Dublin at the **Casino at Marino** (p111), not a place to cash your chips but a 19th-century Italianate trompe l'oeil mansion. Continue north to the mind-blowing Neolithic necropolis at **Brú Na Bóinne** (p543), built before the Great Pyramids were even a twinkle in Pharaoh's eye. Continue north to **Mellifont Abbey** (p563), Ireland's first Cistercian abbey, and on to the pretty village of **Carlingford** (p574) on the lough, with its 16th-century buildings. Work your way through the Mourne Mountains – hiking to the top of **Slieve Donard** (p628) – to the **Ards Peninsula** (p616) and **Strangford Lough** (p620). Take a Black Taxi tour in **Belfast** (p576) before moving northwest to the World Heritage site of **Giant's Causeway** (p662), best enjoyed at sunset. Continue around the stunning coastline of north Donegal, stopping at stunning **Killyhoey Beach** (p525), to beautiful **Glenveagh National Park** (p530). Head south through the monastic ruins of **Glencolumbkille** (p515) and into lively **Sligo** (p463), where you can climb the Stone Age passage grave, **Carrowkeel** (p470), with panoramic views of Lough Arrow. For the west coast as far as Cork, follow the Into the West route (opposite). From Cork, head east to **Fota Wildlife Park** (p213) for a picnic and then on to **Dungarvan Castle** (p193), with its unusual 12th-century shell. Drive around the picturesque **Hook Peninsula** (p176), stopping for ice cream in the seaside town of **Dunmore East** (p190). Spot the unusual varieties of geese in the famous **Wexford Wildfowl Reserve** (p173) before moving on to County Wicklow and **Wicklow Mountains National Park** (p147). Now settle into a well-deserved pint of Guinness at the **Long Hall** (p131), back in Dublin.



A loop to give you a real feel for Ireland's savage and spectacular coastline, as well as the heart of its long history. Four days will see you complete the 750km that make the full circle, but little else; best done in a couple of weeks.

**TIP TO TOE****Two Weeks/Derry to Wexford**

Begin by walking the city walls of **Derry** (p640) and exploring its fascinating history. Delve deeper at one of Ireland's best museums, the **Ulster American Folk Park** (p690), which reproduces a typical 19th-century Ulster village at the time of mass emigration to America. Just south of here the town of **Omagh** (p689), site of one of the worst single atrocities in the North's history (a car bomb), acts as a stark reminder of the region's tragic political history. From here, head south to **Castle Coole** (p682), a National Trust–restored 18th-century mansion, before spending an afternoon boating or fishing on **Lough Erne** (p682). For more watery pastimes you can't beat **County Cavan** (p478), which has a lake for every day of the year. Hire a boat in Mountnugent and fish on **Lough Sheelin** (p482) before moving on to **Tullynally Castle's** (p499) Chinese and Tibetan garden in Westmeath. The **Seven Wonders of Fore** (p499), Westmeath's answer to the Seven Wonders of the World, while less awe inspiring, will keep you entertained for an hour or two before a wander around the splendid **Belvedere House** (p496), overlooking Lough Ennell, with its multimedia exhibition. Place a bet at **Kilbeggan Races** (p498) emboldened by a tippie of fine whiskey at **Locke's Distillery** (p498). Hike up the beautiful **Slieve Bloom Mountains** (p356) for the best view of the midlands, before moving south to the delightful village of **Inistioge** (p335) in County Kilkenny, with its quaint village square and rambling estate, Woodstock Park. In County Wexford have a picnic in the **John F Kennedy Arboretum** (p181) before a visit to the tranquil Cistercian **Tintern Abbey** (p177).

This north–south 400km route covers it all: from Ulster's fine architecture and heritage, through the midlands and its abundance of lakes, to the beautiful countryside of the sunny southeast. You will enjoy this selection of different tastes.

**ROADS LESS TRAVELLED****AN ECO KIND OF GREEN****One Week/Dublin to Tramore**

Get all the support info you'll need at **Cultivate** (p21) in Dublin, Ireland's only sustainable living information centre. You'll have to get out of the capital sharpish, but your first stop should be the **Rockfield Ecological Estate** (p499) in Rathowen, where you'll get inspiring insights into sustainable living, as well as traditional Irish culture and crafts. If you need some eco-R&R, stop by the **Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre** (p483) before bedding down at the ecofriendly **Coosan Cottage Eco Guesthouse** (p501) in Athlone. Head west to Connemara and **Brigit's Garden** (p427), before turning southward to West Cork, where organic local produce is almost a way of life. A great overnight option is the **Shiplake Mountain Hostel** (p237), where you sleep in old wooden caravans, shower using fresh spring water and breakfast on the hostel's own duck eggs before walking the local hills. Proof that eco-credentials aren't just earned roughing it is in the superb **Ballymaloe cookery school** (p216), home to Ireland's most famous chef Darina Allen (see also p273) and the place to learn the basics of Irish cooking. Moving east along the rugged coastline, stop at the **Copper Coast GeoPark** (p192), centred on Annetstown. This attractive Anglo-Irish enclave has a good surf beach and the dubious distinction of being the only village in Ireland without a pub! Your final stop is the cheap 'n' cheerful beach resort of Tramore, which has become an unlikely haven for New-Age Californians, one of whom runs **T-Bay** (p192), Ireland's biggest surf school and a nonprofit organisation that is trying to promote eco-awareness through surfing and guided walks.



Ireland's eco-credentials are only just being established, but here is a selection over 500km to prove that travelling sustainably can still bring you the best the country has to offer, from the surprisingly rich midlands through the rugged west to the scenic south.

## BEST OF THE ISLANDS

### Three Weeks/Tory to West Cork

Ireland's outlying islands are many and varied, and offer the visitor an insight into a traditional lifestyle rarely seen in the Western world. Start at the barren and remote **Tory** (p521), off Bloody Foreland in Donegal, a Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) area with a school of primitive painters and a wonderful spot for bird-watching. Joined to the mainland by a bridge, **Achill** (p452), in County Mayo, with its deserted Famine village and dramatic cliffs, is Ireland's largest offshore island and is renowned for its water sports. **Inishturk** (p451), just south of Achill, with fewer than 100 inhabitants, gets very little tourist traffic despite its sheltered sandy beaches. Off the coast of Galway, the three Aran Islands are probably Ireland's most visited. The largest, **Inishmór** (p417), has some fine archaeological remains, including the magical fort of Dún Aengus. The middle island, **Inishmaan** (p421), favourite of the writer JM Synge, is a pleasure to walk around with its stone walls and tiny fields. The smallest and least visited, **Inisheer** (p422), best accessed from Doolin in County Clare, has some wonderful wild walks. Some very special islands to visit are Europe's most westerly. On the **Blasket Islands** (p294), off Kerry, uninhabited since 1953, you can spot puffins, seals and porpoises. **Skellig Michael** (p263), off Caheriveen in Kerry, a Unesco World Heritage site and home to a 7th-century monastery, is a breathtaking, truly spiritual place and a highlight of any trip to Ireland. Ornithologists and orators alike will enjoy **Clear Island** (p230), also called Cape Clear Island, off the western coast of Cork, famous for its Manx shearwater and its lively Storytelling Festival in September.

If you're one to appreciate the cultural experience and simple pleasures of island life, you won't want to hurry this trail. Take three weeks if you can spare it and properly experience the unique differences of Ireland's islands. Otherwise try to get in at least a day trip.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### ADRENALINE ADVENTURES

Thrill seekers should kick off their action and adventure tour of the west coast of Ireland with a **rock-climbing** (p266) session on the cliffs of the Iveragh Peninsula in County Kerry. The next day, travel north along the coast to the windy world of Rough Point on the lovely Dingle Peninsula. There, you can take flight with some white-knuckle **kitesurfing** (p290). Stay firmly on the water next and build your biceps even more with some **sea kayaking** (p381) at the small town of Kilrush in County Clare. Cross the wilderness of Connemara by **mountain bike** (p432 and p433) and head for Glassillaun Beach, County Galway. There, go **scuba diving** (p434) in some of the country's clearest waters and see colourful marine life brought north by the Gulf Stream. Down the road in Leenane, scramble down on foot to Killary Harbour to sail its sheltered waters in a **catamaran** (p436). Then test your physical strength and endurance nearby on a **cross-country assault course** (p450) at beautiful Delphi, located next to Ireland's only fjord, before heading north to **surf** (p471) the waves on world-class, near-perfect 10ft tubes at Bundoran, County Donegal.



### CELTIC SITES & CHRISTIAN RUINS

Begin at the stunning Neolithic tombs of **Newgrange** (p543) and **Knowth** (p544) in County Meath in the heart of Brú na Bóinne (the Boyne Palace), where the legendary Irish hero Cúchulainn was conceived. Nearby, stand at the top of the celebrated **Hill of Tara** (p549), a site of immense folkloric significance and seat of the high kings of Ireland until the 11th century. Across the plain is the **Hill of Slane** (p546), where St Patrick lit a fire in 433 to proclaim Christianity throughout the land. Venture west to **Kells** (p555) on the road travelled by Queen Medb herself in the Irish Stone Age epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, pausing to explore the monastic ruins and high crosses before continuing to County Roscommon. Just outside Tulsk village is **Cruachan Aí** (p488), the most important Celtic site in Europe, with 60 scattered megalithic tombs and burial sites. Head south to **Clonmacnoise Abbey** (p362), the 6th-century monastic site in County Offaly. Continue south through the heart of the country to the impressive monastic site that sits atop the craggy **Rock of Cashel** (p310) in County Tipperary. Turn east and head through County Kilkenny, stopping at the Cistercian **Jerpoint Abbey** (p334) at the pretty village of Thomastown. From here, travel northeast to Wicklow and magnificent **Glendalough** (p152), where the substantial remains of a monastic settlement linger by two lakes – it's as atmospheric a site as you'll ever find.



## CHILDREN ON BOARD

For fun both historical and zoological, Ireland has a lot to offer. Step back in time with a multimedia tour of medieval Kerry at the **Kerry County Museum** (p278) in Tralee. Recharge your batteries on the Tralee and Dingle light **steam railway** (p278) and chug around Tralee Bay on a trip back in time. About 1km away from here, you can watch wheat being milled at Blennerville in Ireland's largest working **windmill** (p278), built in 1800. Still in County Kerry, you can zip on down the peninsula to Dingle to see turtles, stingrays and exotic fish up close in the **Dingle Oceanworld** (p286) aquarium. Popular features here are the touch pool, walk-through tunnel, shark tank and Amazon jungle section, complete with piranhas. Pursuing the theme of watery adventures, catch a boat into the bay to see the famously friendly **Fungie the dolphin** (p286) at play; the attention-loving bottlenose shows up most days. The next day make your way to Killarney and take a relaxing tour in the town's beloved horse-drawn **jaunting cars** (p253). From here, head east to the wonderful, fence-free **Fota Wildlife Park** (p213) in Carrigtwohill, East Cork, where you'll see more than 90 species of exotic and endangered wildlife like cheetahs, macaques and oryxes.



## THE SOUTHERN PANTRY

There are great restaurants and shops all over Ireland, but this mini-tour focuses on Ireland's largest county because it is just brimming with gourmet eateries and specialist food stores. Start in West Cork, where gourmet cuisine is taken for granted: in Clonakilty, **Twomey's** (p223) is where you can buy the best black pudding for which the town is famous. Cork is renowned for its cheeses, and in **Durrus** (p235) you can visit the local cheesemakers before making a pitstop at the superb **Good Things Café and Cookery School** (p235). Back east and south of Cork City, Kinsale is just full of top nosh, including the **Fishy Fishy Café** (p221), which is only open during the day. Southeast of Cork City, Cobh is home to the **Belvelly Smokehouse** (p215) where you can taste, learn and buy all kinds of smoked fish. All of this eating will build up a thirst, and you can quench it at the **Franciscan Well Brewery** (p209) in Cork City, where you can also stock up at the daily **English Market** (p207). From here, continue east to Midleton and the **Farmgate Restaurant** (p215), one of Ireland's very best. The farmers market is better than the one in Cork City, but it's only a weekly affair. Finally, don't forget the world-famous **Ballymaloe House** (p216), just south of Midleton.





# On the Road



## **FIONN DAVENPORT** Coordinating Author

Taken in front of City Hall (p96), illustrating two important points: when the summer sun shines, shorts and short sleeves make a mockery of Dublin's rainy reputation and cycling is by far the best way to get around the city, especially if you're a travel writer on a deadline.

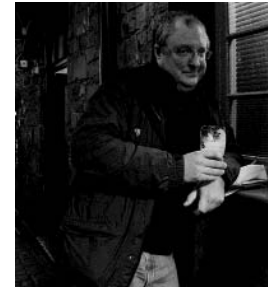


**JAMES BAINBRIDGE** This was snapped on the rocks at Derrynane National Historic Park (p265), while walking off lunch at the Blind Piper (p266). Later we descended to the beach, where an old man said my kagool-wrapped friend looked like Tom Crean. 'Who's he?' asked my friend. 'Google him,' came the canny old Kerryman's reply.

**AMANDA CANNING** I'd taken the coastal path out to Charles Fort (p218), nibbling wild garlic along the way. The views across the sparkling water back to Kinsale and out to the Atlantic were simply stunning. Coming back I stumbled across the wonderful Harbour Bar (p223) and a glorious day turned into a memorable night.



**TOM DOWNS** A woman in Sligo shared with me her observation that 'In Ireland, Americans like to take pictures of sheep'. I decided to take the concept a notch further and shoot a self portrait – with sheep. This was in County Donegal, in a field I walked through to reach St Colmcille's birthplace (p529).



## **RYAN VER BERKMOES** St Patrick's Day in Limerick, does it get

any more Irish than that? Well it does, because it was pissing down rain to boot – or on my boots. I took shelter in this pub and took solace in this pint. Even though the state of Irish beer is deplorable, (the Guinness is getting colder, milder and more quaffable; what pub has something other than bland international brews like Heineken and Budweiser along with the toothless Smithwicks and a flavour-free stout?), on this day with these people it was the best pint ever.



**CATHERINE LE NEVEZ** Galway promises to be brilliant craic but potentially disastrous for my research schedule when I'm invited to the pub over the road from where I'm staying for a 'quick pint'... which later goes on to see the pub's regulars pouring their own behind the bar. Ah, sure; when in Rome...



**NEIL WILSON** Exploring off the beaten track is one of the best bits of researching a Lonely Planet guide. As Robert Byron wrote, 'The supreme moments of travel are born of beauty and strangeness in equal parts', and Cuilcagh Mountain (p483), on the border between Counties Fermanagh and Cavan, is both strange and beautiful – an otherworldly plateau of fractured gritstone rising above a sea of blanket bog. One of the most interesting hikes I've ever done.

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