



Plan your dream trip to Ireland



EXCERPT FROM LONELY PLANET'S IRELAND

welcome to Ireland



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A small country with a big reputation, helped along by a timeless, age-caressed landscape and a fascinating, friendly people, whose lyrical nature is expressed in the warmth of their welcome.

(left) Evening at the Giant's Causeway (p658)
(below) Enjoying the craic in the Market Bar (p110), Dublin



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Ireland of the Postcard

Yes, it exists. Along the peninsulas of the southwest, the brooding loneliness of Connemara and the dramatic wildness of County Donegal. You'll also find it in the lakelands of Counties Leitrim and Roscommon and the undulating hills of the sunny southeast ('sunny' of course being a relative term). Ireland has modernised dramatically, but some things never change. Brave the raging Atlantic on a crossing to Skellig Michael or spend a summer's evening in the yard of a thatched-cottage pub and you'll experience an Ireland that has changed little in generations, and is likely the Ireland you most came to see.

Tread Carefully...

...for you tread on history. Everywhere you go Ireland's history presents itself, from the breathtaking monuments of prehistoric Ireland at Brú na Bóinne to the fabulous ruins of Ireland's rich monastic past at Glendalough and Clonmacnoise. More recent history is visible in the famine museum in Cobh to the interactive displays of Vinegar Hill in County Wexford. And there's history so young that it's still considered the present, best experienced on a black-taxi tour of West Belfast or an examination of Derry's astonishingly colourful political murals.

A Cultural Well

Ireland operates an astonishing cultural surplus. Throughout your travels you will be overwhelmed by the choices on offer – a play by one of the theatrical greats in Dublin, a traditional music 'session' in a west-Ireland pub or a rock gig in a Limerick saloon. The Irish summer is awash with all manner of festivals, celebrating everything from flowers in bloom to high literature.

Tá Fáilte Romhat

(Taw fall-cha row-at) – 'You're very welcome.' Or, more famously, *céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes. Why a hundred thousand when one is perfectly adequate everywhere else? Irish friendliness is a

tired cliché, an over-simplification of a character that is infinitely complex, but there's no denying that the Irish are warm and welcoming, if a little reserved at first. Wherever you meet them – the shop, the bar, the bank queue – there's a good chance a conversation will be struck up, pleasantries exchanged and, should you be a stranger in town, the offer of a helping hand extended. But, lest you think this is merely an act of unfettered altruism, rest assured that the comfort they seek is actually their own, for the Irish cannot be at ease in the company of those who aren't. A hundred thousand welcomes. It seems excessive, but in Ireland, excess is fine, so long as it's practised in moderation. Friendly but never fawning.

21 TOP EXPERIENCES



The Pub

1 Every town and hamlet has at least one: no matter where you go, you'll find that the social heart of the country beats loudest in the pub, still the best place to discover what makes the country tick. In suitable surroundings – whether a quiet traditional pub with flagstone floors and a large peat fire or a more modern bar with flashing lights and music – take a moment or an evening to listen for that beating heart...and drink some decent beer in the process. Pub in Temple Bar, Dublin, above

Dublin

2 Ireland's capital (p54) and largest city by some stretch is the main gateway into the country, but it has enough distractions to keep visitors mesmerised for at least a few days. From world-class museums and entertainment, superb dining and top-grade hotels, Dublin has all the baubles of a major international metropolis. But the real clinchers are Dubliners themselves, who are friendlier, more easy-going and welcoming than the burghers of virtually any other European capital. And it's the home of Guinness. O'Connell Bridge and O'Connell St, below

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Connemara, County Galway

3 A filigreed coast of tiny coves and beaches is the Connemara Peninsula's (p410) beautiful border with the wild waters of the Atlantic. Wandering characterful roads bring you from one village to another, each with trad pubs and restaurants serving seafood chowder cooked from recipes that are family secrets. Inland, the scenic drama is even greater. In fantastically desolate valleys, green hills, yellow wildflowers and wild streams reflecting the blue sky provide elemental beauty. Rambles take you far from others, back to a simpler time. Clifden and Connemara mountains, right



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Traditional Music

4 Western Europe's most vibrant folk music is Irish traditional music (p712), which may have earned worldwide fame thanks to the likes of Riverdance but is best expressed in a more sedate setting, usually an old-fashioned pub. The west of Ireland is particularly musical: from Donegal down to Kerry there are centres of musical excellence, none more so than Doolin (p311) in County Clare, the unofficial capital of Irish music. It's unlikely you'll be asked to join in, but there's nothing stopping your foot from tapping and your hands from clapping. Playing Celtic music at a céilidh, left



DOUG MCKINLAY/SONELEY PLANETIMAGES ©

Glendalough, County Wicklow

5 St Kevin knew a thing or two about magical locations. When he chose a remote cave on a glacial lake nestled at the base of a forested valley as his monastic retreat, he inadvertently founded a settlement (p142) that would later prove to be one of Ireland's most dynamic universities and, in our time, one of the country's most beautiful ruined sites. The remains of the settlement (including an intact round tower), coupled with the stunning scenery, are unforgettable. St Kevin's Kitchen, Glendalough, right



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Galway City

7 One word to describe Galway city (p384)? Craic! Ireland's liveliest city literally hums through the night at music-filled pubs where you can hear three old guys playing spoons and fiddles or a hot, young band. Join the locals as they bounce from place to place, never knowing what fun lies ahead but certain of the possibility. Add in local bounty such as the famous oysters and nearby adventure in the Connemara Peninsula and the Aran Islands and the fun never ends. Galway City harbour, below

Dingle, County Kerry

6 Dingle is the name of both the picturesque peninsula (p297) jutting into the Atlantic from County Kerry, strewn with ancient ruins, and its delightful main town (p299), the peninsula's beating heart. Fishing boats unload fish and shellfish that couldn't be any fresher if you caught it yourself, many pubs are untouched since their earlier incarnations as old-fashioned shops, artists sell their creations (including beautiful jewellery with Irish designs) at intriguing boutiques, and toe-tapping trad sessions take place around roaring pub fires. Sleat Head, Dingle Peninsula, above

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Walking & Hiking

8 Yes, you can visit the country easily enough by car, but Ireland is best explored on foot, whether you opt for a gentle afternoon stroll along a canal towpath or take on the challenge of any of the 31 waymarked long-distance routes. There are coastal walks and mountain hikes; you can explore towns and villages along the way or steer clear of civilisation by traipsing along lonely moorland and across barren bogs. All you'll need is a decent pair of boots and, inevitably, a rain jacket. Diamond Hill, Connemara National Park, below



Brú na Bóinne, County Meath

9 Looking at once ancient and yet eerily futuristic, Newgrange's immense, round, white stone walls topped by a grass dome is one of the most extraordinary sights you'll ever see. Part of the vast Neolithic necropolis Brú na Bóinne (the Boyne Palace; p534), it contains Ireland's finest Stone Age passage tomb, predating the Pyramids by some six centuries. Most extraordinary of all is the tomb's precise alignment with the sun at the time of the winter solstice. Early engineering at its finest. Passage tomb, Newgrange, below



Rock of Cashel, County Tipperary

11

10 Soaring up from the green Tipperary pastures, this ancient fortress (p335) takes your breath away at first sight. The seat of kings and churchmen who ruled over the region for more than a thousand years, it rivaled Tara as a centre of power in Ireland for 400 years. Entered through the 15th-century Hall of the Vicars Choral, its impervious walls guard an awesome enclosure with a complete round tower, a 13th-century Gothic cathedral and the most magnificent 12th-century Romanesque chapel in Ireland. Cathedral, Rock of Cashel, left

Links Golf

11 If Scotland is the home of golf, then Ireland is where golf goes on holiday. And the best vacation spots are along the sea, where the country's collection of seaside links are dotted in a steady string along virtually the entire Irish coastline, each more revealed than carved in the undulating, marram-grass-covered landscapes. Some of the world's best-known courses share spectacular scenery with lesser-known gems, and each offers the golfer the opportunity to test their skills against the raw materials provided by Mother Nature.



Cork City

12 The Republic's second city (p223) is second only in terms of size – in every other respect it will bear no competition. A tidy, compact city centre is home to an enticing collection of art galleries, museums and – most especially – places to eat. From cheap cafes to top-end gourmet restaurants, Cork City excels, although it's hardly a surprise given the county's exceptional foodie reputation. At the heart of it is the simply wonderful English Market, a covered produce market that is an attraction unto itself. St Fin Barre's Cathedral and the River Lee, Cork City, left



Ring of Kerry

13 Driving around the Ring of Kerry (p284) is an unforgettable experience in itself, but you don't need to limit yourself to the main route. Along this 179km loop around the Iveragh Peninsula there are countless opportunities for detours. Near Killorglin, it's a short hop up to the beautiful, little-known Cromane Peninsula. Between Portmagee and Waterville, you can explore the Skellig Ring. The peninsula's interior offers mesmerising mountain views. And that's just for starters. Wherever your travels take you, remember to charge your camera!



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Black Taxi Tour, Belfast

14 No trip to Northern Ireland is complete without visiting the Republican and Loyalist murals (p584) of Belfast's Falls and Shankhill districts. But for an outsider, the city's bitterly divided society can be hard to get your head around. Without a local guide to provide some background and explanation, the murals can be just so much garish paint. Belfast's black taxi tours are justifiably famous because they provide that context, with drivers who are both insightful and darkly humorous without making light of a serious and often tragic situation. Republican murals along Falls Rd, left



RICHARD CLIMMINSON/LOVELY PLANET IMAGES ©

Kilkenny City

13

15 From its regal castle to its soaring medieval cathedral, Kilkenny (p203) exudes a permanence and culture that have made it an unmissable stop on journeys to the south and west. Its namesake county boasts scores of artisans and craftspeople and you can browse their wares at Kilkenny's classy shops and boutiques. Chefs eschew Dublin in order to be close to the source of Kilkenny's wonderful produce and you can enjoy the local brewery's namesake brew at scores of delightful pubs. Houses along the River Nore, Kilkenny City, left

Causeway Coastal Walk

16 Put on your walking boots and rucksack and set off along one of Ireland's finest coastal walks, stretching for 16 scenic kilometres between the swaying rope bridge of Carrick-a-Rede (p659) and the geological flourish of the Giant's Causeway (p658). This is coastal hiking at its best, offering an ever-changing vista of cliffs and islands, sandy beaches and ruined castles, framed by scenic, seabird-haunted Rathlin Island at one end and the cheering prospect of a dram or two at the Old Bushmills Distillery at the other. Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, County Antrim, right

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Castles & Stately Homes

17 The Anglo-Normans left an indelible stamp on Ireland, best seen in the country's collection of handsome homes and impressive castles, built to reflect the power, glory and wealth of their respective owners. Although some have fallen into ruin, many have been meticulously maintained, including the superb country piles designed in the Georgian (or Palladian) style, found in pastoral settings around Dublin. Others have been converted from homes to luxury hotels and are memorable overnight experiences. Powerscourt Estate, County Wicklow, left

Clonmacnoise, County Offaly

18 One of Ireland's most important ancient monastic cities, Clonmacnoise (p509) was founded by St Ciarán in the 6th century and soon became an unrivalled bastion of religion, literature and art. Attracting monks and lay people from all over Europe, it helped earn Ireland the title of the 'land of saints and scholars'. Most of what remains of the magnificent ecclesiastical city dates from the 10th to 12th centuries and is in remarkably good condition with numerous early churches, high crosses, round towers and graves overlooking the River Shannon. Monastic site, Clonmacnoise, below



JOHN ELKIV/JONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

Derry/Londonderry

19 History runs deep in Northern Ireland's second city (p635). The symbols of the country's sectarian past are evident, from the 17th-century city walls built to protect Protestant settlers, to the bipartite Republican/Loyalist name, Derry/Londonderry. But the new bridge that spans the River Foyle provides another symbol – of an attempt to bridge that divide and to look to the future as a city filled with a restless creative energy, expressed in its powerful murals, vibrant music scene and numerous art galleries, and now nominated as UK City of Culture 2013. Maurice Harron's Hands Across the Divide Peace Monument, Derry/Londonderry, below



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A Gaelic Football or Hurling Match

20 It depends on whether you're in a football or hurling stronghold (some, like County Cork, are both) but attending a match of the country's chosen sport (p722) is not just a unique Irish experience but also a key to unlocking local passions and understanding one of the cultural pillars of Ireland. Whether you attend a club football match in County Galway or an intercounty hurling battle between old foes like Kilkenny and Tipperary, you cannot but be swept up in the emotion of it all. Galway v Tipperary Gaelic football match, left



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Clare Coast

21 Bathed in the golden glow of the late afternoon sun, the iconic Cliffs of Moher (p368) are but one of the splendours of County Clare. From a boat bobbing below, the towering stone faces have a jaw-dropping dramatic beauty that's enlivened by scores of sea birds, including cute little puffins. Down south in Loop Head, pillars of rock towering above the sea have abandoned stone cottages whose very existence is inexplicable. All along the coast are cute little villages like trad-session-filled Ennistymon and the surfer mecca of Lahinch. Cliffs of Moher, the Burren, above

first time

Everyone needs a helping hand when they visit a country for the first time. There are phrases to learn, customs to get used to and etiquette to understand. The following section will help demystify Ireland so your first trip goes as smoothly as your fifth.

Top Tips for Your Trip

- » Quality rather than quantity should be your goal: instead of a hair-raising race to see everything, pick a handful of destinations and give yourself time to linger. The most memorable experiences in Ireland are often the ones where you're doing very little at all.
- » If you're driving, get off the main roads when you can: some of the country's most stunning scenery is best enjoyed on secondary or tertiary roads that wind their narrow way through standout photo ops.
- » Make the effort to greet the locals: the best experiences of Ireland are to be had courtesy of the Irish themselves, whose helpfulness, friendliness and fun has not been overexaggerated.

Booking Ahead

If you're planning to visit in the high season, the sooner you book your accommodation the better – up to two months in advance for a July visit. Activities should also be booked now – cooking courses, organised tours, etc.

A month before you travel book your hire car and reserve a table in whatever top-end restaurant you plan to dine in. Now is also the time to make theatre reservations, especially for new productions.

Two weeks before you arrive, check attraction opening hours and prices. A week before, get the weather forecast. Then ignore it.

What to Wear

Ireland is a fairly casual destination and you can wear pretty much whatever you like all the time. For fancy dinners, smart casual is all that's required – no restaurant will insist on jackets or ties, as won't any theatre or concert hall.

Ireland's youth have become far more comfortable with their bodies than the generations that preceded them, so summer wear has seen hemlines rise and necklines plunge. Summers, however, are warm but rarely hot, so you'll always want something around your legs and shoulders when the inevitable cool sets in.

In the end, the factor that will determine your outfits the most is the weather, which also means that a light, waterproof jacket should always be close at hand, preferably one that you can fold and keep in a shoulder bag.

What to Pack

- » Good walking shoes, as Ireland is best appreciated on foot
- » Raincoat – you will undoubtedly need it
- » UK/Ireland electrical adapter
- » A finely honed sense of humour
- » A hollow leg – all that beer has to go somewhere
- » Irish-themed MP3 playlist

Checklist

- » Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months past your arrival date
- » Make all necessary bookings (for accommodation, events and travel)
- » Check the airline baggage restrictions
- » Inform your debit-/credit-card company
- » Arrange for appropriate travel insurance (see p729)
- » Check if you can use your mobile/cell phone (p731)

Etiquette

Although largely informal in their everyday dealings, the Irish do observe some (unspoken) rules of etiquette.

» Greetings

Shake hands with men, women and children when meeting for the first time and when saying goodbye. Irish expect a firm handshake with eye contact. Female friends are greeted with a single (air) kiss.

» Conversation

Generally friendly but often reserved, the Irish avoid conversations that might embarrass. They are deeply mistrustful of 'oversharers'.

» Language

The Irish speak English quickly and strong accents can often be indecipherable. Don't take offence at indiscriminate bad language; many Irish unconsciously pepper their speech with curse words, which are intended only to be emphatic.

» Round System

The Irish generally take it in turns to buy a 'round' of drinks for the whole group and everyone is expected to take part. The next round should always be bought before the first round is drunk.

Tipping

» Hotels

One euro per bag is standard; gratuity for cleaning staff completely at your discretion.

» Pubs

Not expected unless table service is provided, then €1/£1 for a round of drinks.

» Restaurants

For decent service 10%, up to 15% in more expensive places.

» Taxis

Tip 10% of fare, or rounded up to nearest euro/pound.

» Toilet Attendants

Only loose change, no more than 50c/50p.

Money

ATMs can generally be found throughout Ireland; even in the smallest villages chances are a shop will have one. All ATMs are linked to the main international money systems, so you should have no issue withdrawing money with your bank's own card – but be sure to check with your bank before you travel.

Credit and debit cards can be used almost everywhere except for some rural B&Bs that only accept cash. Make sure bars or restaurants will accept cards before you order – some don't. The most popular cards are Visa and MasterCard; American Express is only accepted by the major chains, and virtually no one will accept Diners or JCB. Chip-and-PIN is the norm for card transactions – only a few places will accept a signature.

If you don't want to rely on plastic, banks, post offices and some of the larger hotels will change cash and travellers cheques.

if you like...



Tracing Your Roots

Roughly 80 million people worldwide can claim to be part of, or descended from, the Irish diaspora, with about 41 million of those in the US alone. Most major towns have a heritage centre with a genealogical service.

Genealogical Office Based in the National Library in Dublin, this is the place to start your search for your Irish ancestors (p75)

PRONI (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) Belfast's purpose-built centre in the Titanic Quarter is the place to go to track down your Ulster family history (p592)

Dún na Sí Heritage Centre A folk park 16km east of Athlone with an associated genealogical centre attached (p525)

Ulster-American Folk Park Ulster's rich links with the US explored in one of Northern Ireland's best museums (p687)

Literary Corners

Four Nobel laureates for literature are just the highlight of a rich literary tradition. Ireland is one of the English-speaking world's most notable heavyweights of the written word, a tradition that continues to thrive through contemporary writers and literary festivals.

Cape Clear Island International Storytelling Festival The storytelling tradition is kept alive by tales tall and long from all over the world (p256)

Cúirt International Festival of Literature Galway attracts writers from all over the world to its April literary showcase (p395)

Dublin Literary Tours No city of comparable size has been more written about or produced as many great authors as the capital, so take one of its many literary tours to find out more (p94)

Listowel Writers Week The Irish literary festival, held in June in the hometown of John B Keane (p317)

Traditional Pubs

Everybody's got their favourite, so picking the best ones is a futile exercise. What can be done, however, is to select a handful that won't disappoint you, especially if you're looking for a traditional pub in the classic mould.

Blake's of the Hollow, Enniskillen Ulster's best pint of Guinness in a Victorian classic (p676)

John Benny's, Dingle Stone slab floor, memorabilia on the walls and rocking trad sessions most nights (p306)

McCarthy's, Fethard A pub, restaurant and undertakers, all in one (p342)

Morrissey's, Abbeyleix Half-pub, half-shop, it's one of the best drinking establishments on the whole island (p502)

Séhan Ua Neáchtain, Galway One of Ireland's best-known traditional pubs (p393)

Stag's Head, Dublin Beloved by students, auteurs and boozers alike, a Victorian classic with beautiful stained-glass windows (p113)

Vaughan's Pub, Killybegs Superb bar with outstanding reputation for traditional music (p376)



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» Clew Bay beneath Croagh Patrick (p432), County Mayo

Great Views

Irish scenery is among the most spectacular in Europe, with breathtaking views and stunning landscapes throughout the whole country. There are the famous spots, of course, but they're not alone.

Binevenagh Lake Spectacular view over Lough Foyle, Donegal and the Sperrin Mountains from the cliff top at the height of the Bishop's Rd (p650)

Clew Bay The 365 islands of this County Mayo bay are best viewed from the top of Croagh Patrick (p432)

Kilkee Cliffs Jaw-dropping views of soaring cliffs that aren't the Cliffs of Moher (p364)

Scarriff Inn Stunning views of Kenmare Bay and Bantry Bay from the windows of this Kerry restaurant (p294)

Poisoned Glen The views down this Donegal valley are breathtaking; the final touch is the ruined church at the foot of the glen (p480)

Irish Cooking Schools

The renaissance of Irish cuisine has been spearheaded by a visionary gang of Irish chefs and producers, many of whom have dedicated themselves to passing on their secrets by setting up a cookery school.

Ballymaloe The most famous cooking school in the country run by its best-known chef, Darina Allen (p236)

Belle Isle School of Cookery A reputable school at the north end of Upper Lough Erne (p677)

Ghan House This cookery school specialising in classic cuisine is attached to a beautiful 18th-century Georgian house (p558)

Source A small cookery school atop a restaurant that covers the full range of Irish traditional cooking, from farm to fork (p449)

Tannery Cookery School Well-known chef Paul Flynn runs a successful school at the back of his excellent restaurant (p191)

A Good Walk

From afternoon ambles to week-long hikes, Ireland offers plenty of opportunities to stretch your legs. You don't have to follow a waymarked way, but there are 31 of them in the country should you prefer a signposted hike.

Ardmore Cliff Walk Marvellous 5km walk from an ancient Christian well across sea cliffs to Ardmore town (p195)

Burren Way Any portion of this 123km marked way is rewarding (p370)

Causeway Coast Way The best section is the 16.5km hike between Carrick-a-Rede and the Giant's Causeway (p662)

Doolough Valley History and scenery combine on this route between Leenane and Westport (p430)

River Barrow Towpath A beautiful path along the Barrow between Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny and St Mullins in County Carlow (p201)

Ross Castle A 3km stroll through Killarney National Park (p279)

Traditional Music

Western Europe's most vibrant folk music is kept alive by musicians who ply their craft (and are plied with drink) in impromptu and organised sessions in pubs and music houses throughout the country; even the 'strictly for tourists' stuff will feature excellent performances.

An Droichead Excellent music sessions at an arts centre dedicated to Irish culture (p599)

Leo's Tavern Live nightly sessions in summer in a pub owned by Erya's parents (p480)

Matt Molloy's The Chieftain's fife player owns this pub where the live *céilidh* (session of traditional music and dancing) kick off at 9pm nightly (p436)

Miltown Malbay Every pub in this County Clare town features outstanding Irish trad sessions (p365)

Tig Cóilí Galway's best trad sessions in the pub whose name means 'house of music' (p393)

Marine Bar Wonderful music nightly during summer months at this 200-year-old pub (p193)

Ancient Ruins

Thanks to the pre-Celts, Celts and early Christians, ancient and monastic sites are a feature of the Irish landscape. Thanks to the Vikings and Henry VIII, many of these are ruins, but no less impressive.

Askeaton Evocative 14th-century ruins of a castle, monastery and a church (p330)

Brú na Bóinne Europe's most impressive Neolithic burial site (p534)

Carrowkeel Megalithic cemetery and majestic views (p453)

Clonmacnoise Ireland's finest monastic site (p509)

Devenish Island Ruins of an Augustinian monastery and near-perfect round tower on the biggest island in Lough Erne (p679)

Dún Aengus Stunning Stone Age fort perched perilously on Inishmór's cliffs (p400)

Glendalough Ruins of a once-powerful monastic city in stunning surroundings (p142)

If you like...hang-gliding and paragliding, some of the finest airwaves can be found at Mt Leinster (p181) in Carlow, the Great Sugarloaf Mountain (p152) in Wicklow and Benone and Magilligan Beaches (p650) in Derry.



Bookshops

Ireland's long and wonderful relationship with the written word has resulted in some marvellously atmospheric bookshops where you can while away an hour or three and perhaps even pick up a rare copy of your favourite Irish book.

An Café Liteártha This specialist bookstore sells Irish-interest books and there's an idyllic little café at the back; settle in with a book and a scone (p306).

An Cló Ceart Irish-language books, traditional music and other examples of fine Irish culture, including woodwork and other crafts (p647)

Cathach Books Dublin's best second-hand bookstore specialises in Irish-interest books and some outstanding first editions, including ones by Ireland's literary giants (p123)

Charlie Byrne's Rambling rooms hold a treasure trove of new, second-hand and hard-to-find books (p394)

month by month

February

Bad weather makes February the perfect month for indoor activities. Some museums launch new exhibits, and it's a good time to visit the major towns and cities.

★ Dublin International Film Festival

Sponsored by Jameson, the island's biggest film festival (www.jdifff.com) runs during the last two weeks of February, offering a mix of local flicks, arty international films and advance releases of mainstream movies.

March

Spring is in the air, and the whole country is getting ready for arguably the world's most famous parade. Dublin's is the biggest, but every town in Ireland holds one.

★ St Patrick's Day

Ireland erupts into one giant celebration on 17 March (www.stpatricksdays.com), but Dublin throws a five-day party around

the parade (attended by 600,000), with gigs and festivities that leave the city with a giant hangover.

April

The weather is getting better, the flowers are beginning to bloom and the festival season begins anew. Seasonal attractions start to open up around the middle of the month or at Easter.

★ Circuit of Ireland

International Rally Northern Ireland's most prestigious rally race – known locally as the 'Circuit' (www.circuitofireland.net) – sees over 130 competitors throttle and turn through some 550km (342 miles) of Northern Ireland and parts of the Republic over two days at Easter.

★ Irish Grand National

Ireland loves horse racing, and the race they love the most is the Grand National (www.fairyhouse.ie), the showcase of the national hunt season that takes place at Fairyhouse in County Meath on Easter Monday.

Top Events

- 1 **St Patrick's Day**, March
- 2 **Galway Arts Festival**, July
- 3 **Willie Clancy Summer School**, July
- 4 **Féile An Phobail**, August
- 5 **All-Ireland Finals**, September

★ World Irish Dancing Championships

There's far more to Irish dancing than Riverdance. Every April, some 4500 competitors from all over the world gather to test their steps and skills against the very best. The location varies from year to year; see www.worldirishdancing.com for details.

May

The May Bank Holiday (on the first Monday) sees the first of the busy summer weekends as the Irish take to the roads to enjoy the budding good weather.

★ Cork International Choral Festival

One of Europe's premier choral festivals (www.corkchoral.ie), with the winners going on to the Fleischmann International Trophy Competition; held over four days from the first Monday of May.

★ North West 200

Ireland's most famous road race (www.northwest200.org) is also the country's biggest

outdoor sporting event; 150,000-plus people line the triangular route to cheer on some of the biggest names in motorcycle racing. Held in mid-May.

★ Fleadh Nua

The third week of May sees the cream of the traditional music crop come to Ennis, County Clare, for one of the country's most important festivals (www.comhaltas.ie).

June

The bank holiday at the beginning of the month sees the country spoilt for choice as to what to do. Weekend traffic is getting busier, the weather gets better.

★ Cat Laughs

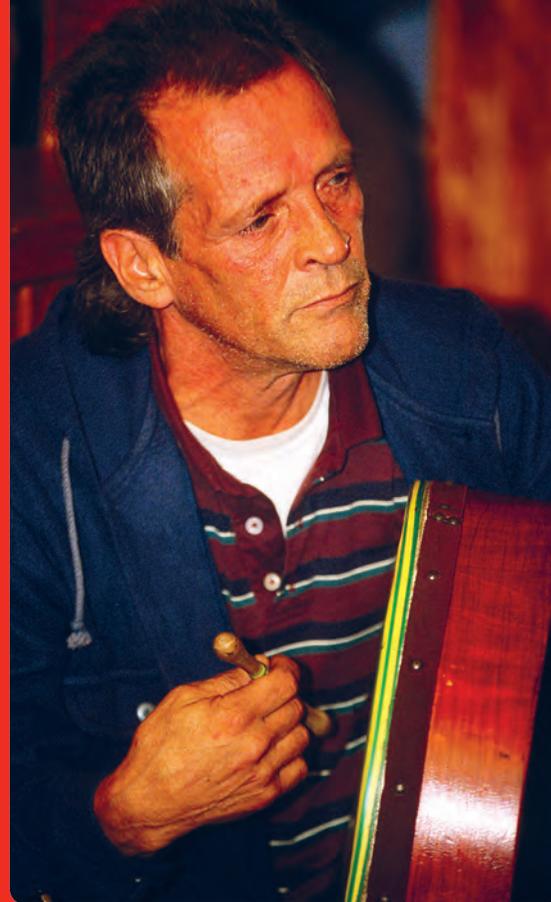
Kilkenny gets very, very funny in early June with the country's premier comedy festival (www.thecatlaughs.com), which draws comedians both known and unknown from the four corners of the globe.

★ Irish Derby

Wallets are packed and fancy hats donned for the best flat-race festival in the country (www.curragh.ie), run during the first week of the month.

★ Bloomsday

Edwardian dress and breakfast of 'the inner organs of beast and fowl' are but two of the elements of the Dublin festival celebrating 16 June, the day on which Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place; the real highlight is retracing Leopold Bloom's daily steps (p99).



(above) Irish musician playing in a Doolin pub
(below) St Patrick's Day celebrations



July

There isn't a weekend in the month that a major festival doesn't take place, while visitors to Galway will find that the city is in full swing for the entire month.

★ Willie Clancy Summer School

Inaugurated to celebrate the memory of a famed local piper, this exceptional festival of traditional music sees the world's best players show up for gigs, pub sessions and workshops over 10 days in Miltown Malbay, County Clare (p366).

★ Galway Arts Festival

Music, drama and a host of artistic endeavours are on the menu at the most important arts festival in the country, which sees Galway go merriment mad for the last two weeks of the month (p395).

★ Galway Film Fleadh

Irish and international releases make up the program at one of the country's premier film festivals, held in early July (p395).

★ Oxegen

Ireland's answer to Glastonbury is a three-day supergig (www.oxegen.ie) in mid-July at Punchestown Racecourse in County Kildare, featuring some of the big names in rock and pop (p97).

★ Killarney Summerfest

From kayaking to street theatre to gigs by international

artists, this week-long extravaganza (www.killarneysummerfest.com) in late July has something for everybody.

August

Schools are closed, the sun is shining (or not!) and Ireland is in holiday mood. Seaside towns and tourist centres are at their busiest as the country looks to make the most of its time off.

★ Féile An Phobail

The name translates simply as the 'people's festival' and it is just that: Europe's largest community arts festival takes place on the Falls Rd in West Belfast over two weeks (p589).

★ Fleadh Cheoil nah Éireann

The mother of all Irish music festivals (www.comhaltas.ie; usually at the end of the month) attracts in excess of 250,000 music-lovers and revellers to whichever town is playing host – there's some great music amid the drinking.

★ Galway Race Week

The biggest horse-racing festival west of the Shannon is not just about the horses, it's also a celebration of Irish culture, sporting gambles and elaborate hats (p395).

★ Mary From Dungloe

Ireland's second-most important beauty pageant takes place in Dungloe, County Donegal, at the beginning of the month – although it's an excuse for a giant party, the young

women really do want to be crowned the year's 'Mary'.

★ Puck Fair

Ireland's quirkiest premise for a festival: crown a goat king and celebrate for three days. Quirky idea, brilliant festival that takes place in Killorglin in mid-August (p285).

★ Rose of Tralee

The Irish beauty pageant (www.roseoftralee.ie) sees wannabe Roses plucked from Irish communities throughout the world competing for the ultimate prize. For everyone else, it's a big party (p313).

September

Summer may be over, but September weather can be surprisingly good, so it's often the ideal time to enjoy the last vestiges of the sun as the crowds dwindle.

★ Galway International Oyster Festival

Galway kicks off its oyster season with a festival (www.galwayoysterfest.com) celebrating the local catch. Music and beer have been the accompaniment since its inception in 1953.

★ Dublin Fringe Festival

Upwards of 100 different performances take the stage, the street, the bar and the car in the fringe festival (www.fringefest.com) that is unquestionably more innovative than the main theatre festival that follows it.

★ All-Ireland Finals

The second and fourth Sundays of the month see the finals of the hurling and Gaelic football championships respectively, with 80,000-plus crowds thronging into Dublin's Croke Park for the biggest sporting days of the year.

October

The weather starts to turn cold, so it's time to move the fun indoors again. The calendar is still packed with activities and distractions, especially over the last weekend of the month.

★ Dublin Theatre Festival

The most prestigious theatre festival in the country (www.dublintheatrefestival.com) sees new work and

new versions of old work staged in theatres and venues throughout the capital.

★ Wexford Opera Festival

Opera fans gather in the atmospheric grounds of Johnstown Castle to enjoy Ireland's premier festival of opera (www.wexfordopera.com), which eschews the big hits in favour of lesser-known works (p170).

★ Cork Jazz Festival

Ireland's best-known jazz festival (www.corkjazzfestival.com) sees Cork taken over by over a thousand musicians and their multitude of fans during the last weekend of the month.

★ Belfast Festival at Queen's

Northern Ireland's top arts festival (www.belfastfestival.com) attracts performers

from all over the world for the second half of the month; on offer is everything from visual arts to dance.

December

Christmas dominates the calendar as the country prepares for the feast with frenzied shopping and after-work drinks with friends and family arrived home from abroad. On Christmas Day nothing is open.

★ Christmas

This is a quiet affair in the countryside, though on 26 December (St Stephen's Day) the ancient custom of Wren Boys is re-enacted, most notably in Dingle, County Kerry, when groups of children dress up and go about singing hymns.

itineraries

Whether you've got six days or 60, these itineraries provide a starting point for the trip of a lifetime. Want more inspiration? Head online to lonelyplanet.com/thorntree to chat with other travellers.



One Week Ireland Highlights

This tourist trail takes you past some of Ireland's most famous attractions and through spectacular countryside. It's only about 300km so you could manage it in three days, but what's the point? Start with a whistle-stop tour of **Dublin**, including visits to Trinity College and the Book of Kells as well as a sample of Guinness in its hometown. The next day, head west to **Galway**, from which you should take a drive through stunning, brooding **Connemara** (which can be driven in a nice loop) before heading southward through the moonlike landscape of the **Burren**. Take a detour to the **Cliffs of Moher**, then head to **Ennis**, a good spot to enjoy a bit of traditional Irish music. Keep going south through the **Connor Pass** into County Kerry, stopping for a half-day in **Dingle** before setting out to visit its peninsula, particularly the views and prehistoric monuments of **Slea Head**. Continue on to **Killarney**, which will be the perfect base from which to explore the famous **Ring of Kerry**, a much-trafficked loop around the Iveragh Peninsula. The drive back to Dublin should provide enough time to plan your return visit.



Three Weeks The Islands

Start at the remote, Irish-speaking **Tory Island** in Donegal, a wonderful bird-watching spot. Joined to the mainland by a bridge, **Achill Island**, in County Mayo, is renowned for its dramatic cliffs, water sports and deserted famine village. Off the coast of Galway, the three Aran Islands are probably Ireland's most visited. The largest, **Inishmór**, has some fine archaeological remains, including the magical fort of Dún Aengus. The middle island, **Inishmaan**, 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**, best accessed from Doolin in County Clare, has some wonderful wild walks. Some other very special islands to visit are Europe's most westerly. Uninhabited since 1953, the **Blasket Islands**, off the Kerry coast, offer the chance to spot puffins, seals and porpoises. **Skellig Michael**, off Caheriveen in Kerry, is a Unesco World Heritage site and home to a 7th-century monastery – it's a breathtaking, spiritual place and a highlight of any trip to Ireland. Ornithologists and orators alike will enjoy **Clear Island**, off the western coast of Cork, famous for its Manx shearwaters and its lively Storytelling Festival in September.

Three Weeks Coastal Tour

Start in **Dublin** then head north to the Neolithic necropolis at **Brú Na Bóinne**. Continue north to **Mellifont Abbey** before crossing the border into Northern Ireland and **Belfast**. Go northwest along the Antrim coast to the **Giant's Causeway**. Continue around the coastline of north Donegal, stopping at **Glenveagh National Park**. Head south into **Sligo** and climb the Stone Age passage grave at **Carrowkeel** for views of Lough Arrow. Make your way to the southwest via **Connemara**. Wonder at the **Burren** and check out traditional music in **Doolin** before crossing into County Kerry and exploring the **Dingle Peninsula**. Go through **Killarney** on your way round the **Ring of Kerry**. Camp in **Kenmare** and explore the **Beara Peninsula**, then Ireland's second city, **Cork**. Explore County Waterford from seaside **Ardmore**. Visit **Dunganarvan** and its castle, and the Waterford Museum of Treasures in **Waterford**. Go northwards through Thomastown and to St Canice's Cathedral in **Kilkenny** before exploring the city's medieval core. Visit **Castletown House** in County Kildare, then cut east to **Glendalough** in the **Wicklow Mountains National Park**. Head back to Dublin.



10 Days

Northern Delights

One of the many benefits to a more peaceful Northern Ireland has been the ability of the province to showcase its outstanding visitor attractions and superb scenery. Start in **Belfast**, where you should take a black taxi tour and/or visit the docks on a boat tour, before heading north toward the Antrim coast and the **Carrick-a-Rede** Rope Bridge – it's a short but brave walk across the bridge but the views are worth it. Nearby is the Unesco World Heritage **Giant's Causeway** that shouldn't be missed by any visitor to Northern Ireland and, just beyond it, the fascinating village of **Bushmills**, home to the famous distillery. **Derry City** is worth a day – walk the city's walls and explore its more recent past in the Bogside and then cross the invisible border into the Republic by visiting the **Inishowen Peninsula** in Donegal. Back in the North, go southeast to **Lough Erne**, taking in both **White Island** and the carved stones of **Devenish Island**, before heading east to the famed **Mourne Mountains**, where you can hike along ancient smugglers' trails – or just admire the fabulous views before heading back to Belfast.

One Week

Ireland of the Ancients

Begin at the stunning Neolithic tombs of **Newgrange** and **Knowth** in County Meath, in the heart of **Brú na Bóinne**. Nearby, stand at the top of the celebrated **Hill of Tara**, 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**, where St Patrick lit a fire in 433 to proclaim Christianity throughout the land. To the west is the Neolithic monument of **Loughcrew** – a quieter alternative to Brú na Bóinne. Keep going west to County Roscommon. Just outside Tulsk village is **Cruachan Aí**, the most important Celtic site in Europe, with 60 scattered megalithic tombs and burial sites. Head south to **Clonmacnoise Abbey**, the 6th-century monastic site in County Offaly. Continue south through the heart of the country to the impressive **Rock of Cashel** in County Tipperary. Turn east and head through County Kilkenny, stopping at the Cistercian **Jerpoint Abbey**, at the pretty village of Thomastown. From here, travel northeast to Wicklow and magnificent **Glendalough**, where the substantial remains of a monastic settlement linger by two beautiful lakes.



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