

# Northwest

## HIGHLIGHTS

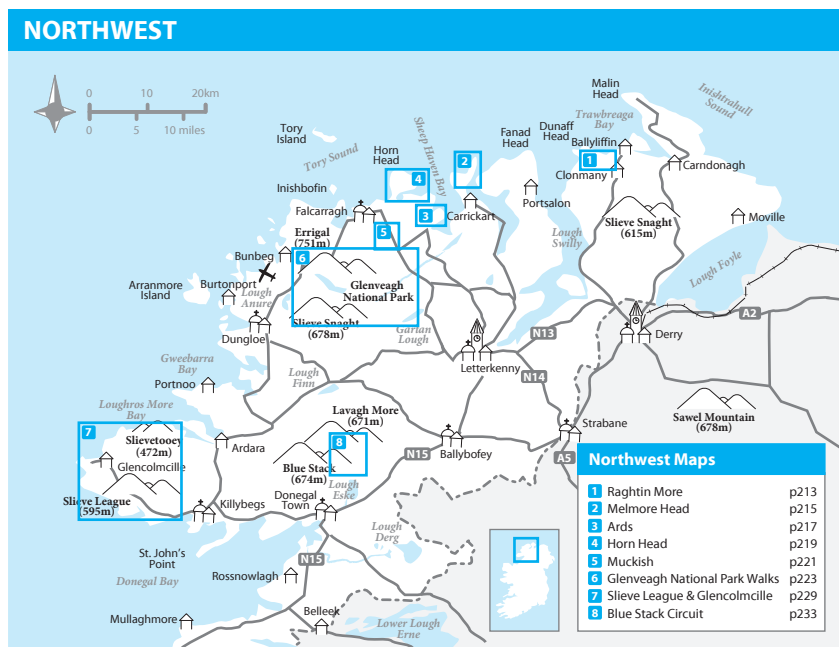
- Wandering along the delightful forest and coastal paths of the **Ards Peninsula** (p216)
- Enjoying far-ranging views across Glenveagh National Park from the conical summit of **Errigal** (p222)
- Gazing out over the Marble Arch and the spectacular coastal architecture of **Horn Head** (p218)
- Walking along some of the finest sea cliffs in Europe at **Slieve League** (p228) and **Glencolumcille** (p230)

**Highest peak in the region: Errigal, Derryveagh Mountains, 751m**

For many, County Donegal in Ireland's northwest corner is second to none among the country's generous collection of walking areas. Donegal is a favourite thanks to its sheer wealth of places to explore, including the spectacularly indented coastline (with towering cliffs and secluded inlets), as well as remote and rugged mountains, glens and moors. Although Donegal's mountains are quite modest when set against Ireland's other peaks (there is only one rising above 700m), they lack nothing in scenic quality and variety: the clean lines of Errigal's white cone contrast sharply with the sprawling, flat-topped massif of nearby Muckish.

Donegal is also a place of high cultural interest, where rural areas still revolve around traditional lifestyles. It contains large Gaeltacht areas, where Irish is the first language, and Irish culture is ardently promoted and nurtured. Overall, the northwest has a rather seductive and intriguing other-worldly feel, somewhat isolated from the rest of Ireland. It's often said that you can never leave Donegal for good; even after one visit, it's easy to agree.





## HISTORY

There are many reminders of Donegal's ancient past in the countryside, including prehistoric burial cairns, Iron Age forts and carved Celtic crosses. In historic times Donegal (meaning 'fort of the foreigners', most likely a reference to Viking invaders) was part of the old Irish kingdom of Ulster.

The county has been the setting for some crucial events in Ireland's history. These include the work of early Christian missionaries (led by Columba who was born in Glenties, County Donegal) and the flight of the Earls (the last of Ulster's Celtic chiefs) from Rathmullan on the Fanad coast in 1607. The latter event was the prelude to the colonisation of County Donegal as part of Ulster by English and Scots settlers.

At the start of the 19th century, Napoleon's empire-building activities alarmed British authorities and, in response, watchtowers were built along the Irish coast, in sight of each other. Many of these survive, to a greater or lesser extent, at prominent outposts in the region such as Horn Head. A few coastguard lookouts erected during WWI are also still standing.

Several places described in this chapter were caught up in the civil war of the early 1920s, notably the castle in Glenveagh National Park. Although Ireland remained neutral during WWII, the strife could not be ignored, as demonstrated by the prominent warnings to aircraft, in the form of the word EIRE written in stones, that can still be seen here and there along the coast.

## ENVIRONMENT

County Donegal is perhaps the most geologically complex part of Ireland. Many of its most prominent peaks are composed of quartzite, schist and marble, which were deposited about 600 million years ago and folded and compressed 200 million years later. This was one phase of the major earth-building event known as the Caledonian orogeny. In another phase, the mountains were pushed up and granite formed below the surface. Aeons later this rock underlayer was exposed, and is now visible as the rounded Derryveagh and Glendowan Mountains. Later again, during the last ice age, ice-filled gaps and dykes in the surface rock wore away the surrounding stone to