

Northern Ireland

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gazing across the city of Belfast from the airy heights of **Cave Hill** (p243)
- Wandering along the shoreline of Strangford Lough from **Castle Ward** (p250)
- Delighting in the views across the Mourne Mountains from **Slieve Donard** (p255)
- Exploring the spectacular rock formations along the **Causeway Coast Way** (p268)

Highest peak in the region: Slieve Donard, Mourne Mountains, 850m

Northern Ireland has suffered a rather uninviting international reputation over the past 50 years, and the political turmoil has done a great job in masking the region's charms. But local walkers know the natural assets on their doorstep rival any in Britain or Ireland, and continued to enjoy their mountains and coastline throughout the years of unrest. Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the region's inhabitants have been joined by an increasing number of visiting walkers keen to explore what is still an under-appreciated resource. If Northern Ireland's best walking venues were near Dublin, they'd be overwhelmed with people. But here it's still possible to stroll through fantastic scenery and feel like you're breaking new ground.

The real pleasure of Northern Ireland lies in the variety of its landscapes. One day you could be gazing over the clustered peaks of the Mourne Mountains, the next marvelling at the eroding forces of the ocean from a dramatic cliff-top path. Some routes begin in the urban heart of Belfast city, while others explore remote valleys where you'd be forgiven for thinking you were still in the 1970s.

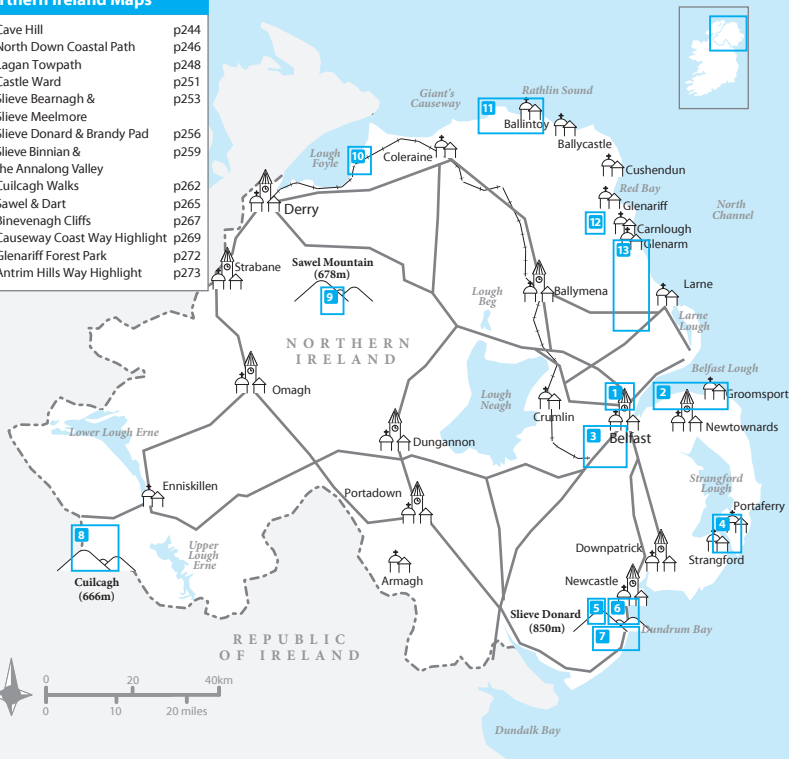
The routes described in this chapter represent the elite of Northern Ireland's walking opportunities. Beginning in the region's capital, there are the cliffs of Cave Hill and the gentle North Down Coastal Path along the shore of Belfast Lough. In the south, you'll find a range of rugged outings in the Mournes, balanced by trips around the wooded grounds of historic manor-house estates. In the west are the relatively gentle Sperrin Mountains, along with the lakeland summit of Cuilcagh. The highlight of the northeast is the world-famous Causeway Coast, matched in beauty by walks through the beautiful Glens of Antrim. With so much on offer, it's easy to appreciate how you could spend a month exploring this region alone.



NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Maps

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HISTORY

The northeast of Northern Ireland was home to some of Ireland's earliest human inhabitants. Evidence suggests that Middle Stone Age people arrived on the Antrim Coast, from Scotland, 9000 years ago. The north was quickly settled and the countryside is littered with stone-built monuments from the Neolithic period. St Patrick later used the same area as a base from which to spread Christianity throughout the country.

By the 16th century, the north was the last stronghold of the Irish chiefs in the resistance against the increasing control of the British crown. The defeat of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and his departure from Ireland in 1607 left the region leaderless. Soon after, Elizabeth I and then James

I set out the 'Plantation' of Ulster, removing Catholic landowners and replacing them with Scottish and English Protestants. This wholesale removal of people from their land, coupled with religious antagonism, initiated a conflict that still has two significant sections of the North's population at odds. It is also the source of the population pattern that led to partition. In 1921, while the rest of Ireland was gaining independence from Britain, the Anglo-Irish Treaty provided for the six predominantly Protestant counties of Ulster to remain within the United Kingdom, creating the province of Northern Ireland.

By the late 1960s, civil rights protests by Catholics in Derry and the unfortunate intervention of the police and British army ignited the Troubles, pitting Loyalists