

NEIGHBOURHOODS

top picks

- **Chester Beatty Library** (p72) A stunning collection of books and objets d'art.
- **Trinity College** (p66) Ireland's foremost university and most beautiful campus.
- **Dublin City Gallery – The Hugh Lane** (p104) Modern art at its finest, including Francis Bacon's studio.
- **Kilmainham Gaol** (p97) Irish history in all its bloody gore and horror.
- **Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA)** (p98) The country's foremost collection of contemporary art.
- **Marsh's Library** (p95) Ireland's oldest library is a well-kept secret wonder.
- **St Patrick's Cathedral** (p93) Elegance, piety and a tempestuous history.
- **Old Jameson Distillery** (p105) The nuts and bolts of Irish whiskey, plus a taster.

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Dublin may be bulging round its ever-expanding edges, but the city centre – defined by the bits within the two canals that create an almost perfect ring around it – remains very compact, lending it the atmosphere of a busy provincial town rather than an alienating metropolis. Not that you can't get confused around here though: the geographic area of Dublin's city centre may be small, but it's a somewhat haphazard mix of medieval street arrangements and 18th-century town planning, which sought to make some sense of the spider's web of streets and alleys that spread their way outwards from both sides of the river.

The River Liffey – that pea-brown stretch of barely moving water that bisects the city into neat halves – serves as the handiest way of determining your whereabouts: you're either north or south of it, presented simply as north side and south side. The river also serves as the traditional social divide of Dublin: working class and poor north of the Liffey, posh and wealthy south of it. Spend enough time in Dublin and you'll hear the jokes.

Although most of the city centre has been given the gentrification once-over, the south side remains the most salubrious part of the city and will probably be the focus of most of your visit here. At the heart of it all is the pedestrianised shopping feast that is Grafton St, bookended by the beautiful expanses of the Elizabethan Trinity College to the north and Georgian St Stephen's Green to the south; as pretty a city square as you're likely to see anywhere in Europe. This is where you'll find the bulk of the city's main attractions, the best bars and much of the nightlife.

To the east, the equally elegant Merrion Sq is the heart of the Georgian city and the nexus of Irish political power – the front entrance of the houses of parliament and the office of the taoiseach (prime minister) look over the square, as do two of the city's most impressive museums.

To the west, past the oldest bits of the city (the medieval Liberties) and the two Norman cathedrals, is the world-famous Guinness factory and museum, as well as Kilmainham Gaol and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, two outstanding attractions that should be a part of every itinerary.

North of the river, the graceful avenue that is O'Connell St introduces visitors to what many Dubliners believe is the 'real' Dublin, where salt-of-the-earth locals traditionally suspicious of their south side counterparts are now mixing it with whole new communities of non-nationals, creating genuinely multicultural neighbourhoods where old-style fish-and-fowl vendors of the Molly Malone variety and entrepreneurs from Nigeria, Korea, Poland and elsewhere are all looking to make a buck.

To the east, straddling both sides of the river, is the Docklands area, where the new office blocks and eye-catching modern architecture are the most conspicuous example of the sky-high ambitions of the Celtic Tiger. West of O'Connell St is the old market section of Smithfield, which has a couple of interesting night-time distractions, and beyond it, the pride of all Dubliners, Phoenix Park – the city's gigantic green lung, which is twice the size of New York's Central Park.

Beyond the canals – the Royal to the north, the Grand to the south – are the suburbs, where you'll find a handful of interesting attractions, including a botanic garden, a superb sports museum and some lovely little seaside villages that privileged Dubliners expensively call 'home'.

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