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County Donegal

POPULATION: 161,000 / AREA: 3001 SQ KM

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Why Go?

'Up here it's different', the saying goes, and it's true. County Donegal is the wild child of Ireland. Even before the twins of history and politics conspired to isolate it, Donegal was a place like no other on the island. It's a county of extremes; at times bleak and desolate and beaten by brutal weather, yet in turn a land of unspoilt splendour where stark mountains and sweeping beaches bask in glorious sunshine. The rugged interior with its gorgeous mountain passes and shimmering lakes is only marginally outdone by the long and labyrinthine coastline with its precipitous cliffs, windswept peninsulas and vast expanses of golden sand. The landscape here easily rivals anything Connemara or Kerry has to offer but Donegal sees only a fraction of their visitors. Proudly different and fiercely independent, one-third of the county is official Gaeltacht territory, where Irish is still the lingua franca.

When to Go

Donegal's character is forged by its impetuous weather. In winter the howling winds and sheeting rain can feel Arctic, and storms arrive unannounced. In summer the weather isn't much more reliable but the clouds regularly break into brilliant sunshine that transforms brooding blues and greys into sparkling green. At this time of year you'll also get the pick of traditional music, storytelling and dance festivals that spring up across the county. The beach-side hotels and restaurants come out of hibernation and the surfers hit the waves.

Getting There & Away

Donegal Airport (www.donegalairport.ie) has flights to/from Dublin (50 minutes, two daily) and to Glasgow Prestwick (50 minutes, three per week). It's in the townland (an ancient unit of local government) of Carrick Finn (Charraig Fhion), about 3km northwest of Annagry along the northwestern coast. There's no public transport to the airport, but there are car-rental desks in the terminal.

The **City of Derry Airport** (www.cityofderryairport.com) is just beyond the county's eastern border, in Northern Ireland.

Getting Around

Donegal is not served by train. The bus is your main transport option if you don't have your own car.

In addition to **Bus Éireann** (www.buseireann.ie), private bus company **Lough Swilly** (in Letterkenny 074-912 2863, in Derry 028-7126 2017; www.loughswillybusco.com) traverses the county. Coaches operated by **Feda O'Donnell** (074-954 8114; www.feda.ie) serve the western half of the county from Bundoran to Crolly. Timetables change seasonally, however, so check the website for the latest information.

When driving, road signs in the Gaeltacht communities are in Irish only – although we use English transliterations, their Irish names are included in brackets.

DONEGAL TOWN

POP 2339

Pretty Donegal town occupies a strategic spot at the mouth of Donegal Bay. With a backdrop of the Blue Stack Mountains, a handsome and well-preserved castle, friendly locals and a good choice of places to eat and stay, it makes an excellent base for exploring the wild coastline nearby. On the banks of the River Eske, Donegal town was a stamping ground of the O'Donnells, the great chieftains who ruled the northwest from the 15th to 17th centuries. Today, despite being the county's namesake, it's neither its largest (Letterkenny), nor the county town (the even smaller town of Lifford).

Sights & Activities

Donegal Castle HISTORIC BUILDING

(www.heritageireland.ie; Castle St; adult/child €4/2; 10am-6pm Easter–mid-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Thu-Mon mid-Sep–Easter) Guarding a picturesque bend of the River Eske, Donegal Castle remains an imperious monument to both Irish and English might. Built by the O'Donnells in 1474, it served as the seat of their formidable power until 1607, when the English decided to be rid of pesky Irish chieftains once and for all. Rory O'Donnell was no pushover, though, torching his own castle before fleeing to France in the infamous Flight of the Earls. Their defeat paved the way for the Plantation of Ulster by thousands of newly arrived Scots and English Protestants, creating the divisions that still afflict the island to this day.

The castle was rebuilt in 1623 by Sir Basil Brooke, along with the adjacent three-storey Jacobean house. Further restoration in the 1990s has made it a wonderfully atmospheric place to visit, with rooms furnished with French tapestries and Persian rugs. There are guided tours every hour.

Diamond Obelisk MONUMENT

In 1474 Red Hugh O'Donnell and his wife, Nuala O'Brien, founded Donegal's Franciscan friary by the shore south of town. It was accidentally blown up in 1601 by Rory O'Donnell while laying siege to an English garrison, and little remains. Four of its friars, fearing that the arrival of the English meant the end of Celtic culture, chronicled the whole of known Celtic history and mythology from 40 years before the Flood to AD 1618 in *The Annals of the Four Masters* – still one of the most important sources of early Irish history. The obelisk (1937), in the Diamond, commemorates the work, copies of which are displayed in the National Library in Dublin.

Donegal Bay Waterbus BOAT TRIPS

(www.donegalbaywaterbus.com; Donegal Pier; adult/child €15/5; Easter-Oct) The most enjoyable way to explore the highlights of Donegal Bay is to take a 1¼-hour boat tour taking in everything from historic sites to seal-inhabited coves, admiring an island manor and a ruined castle along the way. The tour runs up to three times daily.

Sleeping

Good B&Bs and mediocre hotels are plentiful around Donegal town; for high-end luxury head out to nearby Lough Eske.

Ard na Breatha B&B €€

(074-972 2288; www.ardnabreatha.com; Drumrooske Middle; s/d from €70/110; Feb-Oct; P) In an elevated setting 1.5km north of town, this boutique guesthouse on a working farm has tasteful rooms with pine furniture and