



Counties Down & Armagh

POPULATION: 652,000 / AREA: 3702 SQ KM

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Best Places to Eat

- » Jeffers by the Marina (p610)
- » Plough Inn (p607)
- » Restaurant 23 (p626)
- » Uluru Bistro (p632)
- » Mourne Seafood Bar (p623)

Best Places to Stay

- » Anna's House (p615)
- » Fortwilliam Country House (p607)
- » Hebron House (p609)
- » Dufferin Coaching Inn (p615)
- » Cuan (p620)

Why Go?

From the hilltop viewpoint of Scrabo Tower, near Newtownards, the treasures of County Down lie scattered all around you. The sparkling, island-fringed waters of Strangford Lough stretch to the south, with the bird-haunted mudflats of Castle Espie and Nendrum's ancient monastery on one shore, and the picturesque Ards Peninsula on the other. On a clear day you can see the Mourne Mountains in the distance, their velvet curves sweeping down to the sea. Nearby are Downpatrick and Lecale, the old stamping grounds of Ireland's patron saint.

Down's neighbour County Armagh is largely rural, from the low, rugged hills of the south to the lush apple orchards and strawberry fields of the north, with Ireland's ecclesiastical capital, the neat little city of Armagh, in the middle. South Armagh is a peaceful backwater, where you can wander back and forth across the border with the Republic without even noticing.

When to Go

May brings white clouds of apple blossom to County Armagh's orchards, a season celebrated by the Apple Blossom Fair in the early part of the month. Summertime generally has the best weather for hiking and cycling, and August sees the International Walking Festival in the Mourne Mountains. Spring and autumn are both good for birdwatching, but keen birders have a big X on their calendars in October, when tens of thousands of overwintering brent geese begin to arrive at Castle Espie on Strangford Lough.

Counties Down & Armagh Highlights

1 Hike along ancient smugglers' trails among the granite peaks of the **Mourne Mountains** (p623)

2 Test the menus at top-notch restaurants in **Hillsborough** (p607), **Warrenpoint** (p626) and **Bangor** (p608)

3 Explore the stately halls and exquisite gardens of **Mount Stewart House** (p613)

4 Watch vast flocks of geese, ducks and waders at **Castle Espie** (p614)

5 Get off the beaten track on the back roads of **South Armagh** (p627)

6 Follow in the footsteps of Ireland's patron saint in and around **Downpatrick** (p618)

7 Learn the rules of the esoteric Irish sport of road bowling in **Armagh City** (p629)

