



# Counties Wicklow & Kildare

POPULATION: 345,000 / AREA: 3718 SQ KM

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## Best Places to Eat

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## Best Places to Stay

- » Brook Lodge & Wells Spa (p156)
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- » Sheepwalk House & Cottages (p157)

## Why Go?

Wicklow and Kildare may be neighbours and have a boundary with Dublin in common, but that's where the similarities end.

South of the capital is scenic, wild Wicklow. Its most imposing natural feature is a gorse-and-bracken mountain spine that is home to one of Ireland's most stunning landscapes, replete with dramatic glacial valleys, soaring mountain passes and important archaeological treasures – from breathtaking early-Christian sites to the elegant country homes of the wealthiest of Ireland's 18th-century nobility.

To the west, Kildare is far more sedate but one of the country's most prosperous farming counties. It is also where you'll find some of the most lucrative thoroughbred stud farms in the world, many with links to the horse-breeding centre of Kentucky in the US. Horse breeding is a big deal in Ireland, but in Kildare it's the very lifeblood of the county, generating many millions of tax-free euro.

## When to Go

Summer – June to September – is the best time to visit Wicklow, especially if you're going to walk the Wicklow Way or do a little green thumb exploring, as the Wicklow Gardens Festival runs from Easter to late August and the Wicklow Arts Festival takes place in May. The Irish Derby – the most prestigious flat race in the Irish racing calendar – is run in late June at the Curragh in County Kildare, but there are meets there right up to October.

## COUNTY WICKLOW

Just south of Dublin, Wicklow (Cill Mhantáin) is the capital's favourite playground, a wild pleasure garden of coastline, woodland and a daunting mountain range through which runs the country's most popular walking trail.

Stretching 132km from Dublin's southern suburbs to the rolling fields of County Carlow, the Wicklow Way leads walkers along disused military supply lines, old bog roads and nature trails. Along the way you can explore monastic ruins, handsome gardens and some magnificent 18th-century mansions.

### National Parks

Wicklow Mountains National Park covers just over 200 sq km of mountainous blanket bogs and woodland. Within the boundaries of the protected area are two nature reserves, owned and managed by the Heritage Service and legally protected by the Wildlife Act 1976. The larger reserve, west of the Glendalough Visitor Centre, conserves the extensive heath and bog of the Glendalough Valley plus the Upper Lake and valley slopes on either side. The second, Glendalough Wood Nature Reserve, conserves oak woods stretching from the Upper Lake as far as the Rathdrum road to the east.

Most of Ireland's native mammal species can be found within the confines of the park. Large herds of deer roam on the open hill areas, though these were introduced in the 20th century as the native red-deer population became extinct during the first half of the 18th century. The uplands are the preserve of foxes, badgers and hares. Red squirrels are usually found in the pine woodlands – look out for them around the Upper Lake.

The bird population of the park is plentiful. Birds of prey abound, the most common being peregrine falcons, marlins, kestrels, hawks and sparrowhawks. Hen harriers are a rarer sight, though they too live in the park. Moorland birds found in the area include meadow pipits and skylarks. Less common birds such as whinchats, ring ouzels and dippers can be spotted, as can red grouse, whose numbers are quickly disappearing in other parts of Ireland. For information, call in or contact the **National Park Information Point** (Map p146; ☎0404-45425; www.wicklownationalpark.ie; Bolger's Cottage, Miners' Rd, Upper Lake, Glendalough; ☀10am-6pm May-Sep, to dusk Sat & Sun Oct-Apr), off the Green Rd that runs by the Upper Lake, about 2km from the

Glendalough Visitor Centre. There's usually someone on hand to help, but if you find it closed the staff may be out running guided walks. *Exploring the Glendalough Valley* (Heritage Service; €2) is a good booklet on the trails in the area.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Wicklow is relatively easy to get around.

**CAR** The main routes are the N11 (M11), which runs north-south through the county from Dublin to Wexford, and the N81, which runs down the western spine of the Wicklow Mountains through Blessington into County Carlow.

**BUS** St Kevin's Bus runs twice daily from Dublin and Bray to Roundwood and Glendalough. Dublin Bus 65 runs regularly as far as Blessington.

**TRAIN** The Dublin Area Rapid Transport (DART) suburban rail line runs southward from Dublin as far as Bray, and there are regular train and bus connections from the capital to Wicklow town and Arklow.

For more details, see the Getting There & Away section for each town.

## Wicklow Mountains

As you leave Dublin and cross into Wicklow, the landscape changes dramatically. From Killakee, still in Dublin, the Military Rd begins a 30km southward journey across vast sweeps of gorse-, bracken- and heather-clad moors, bogs and mountains dotted with small corrie lakes.

The numbers and statistics aren't all that impressive. The highest peak in the range, Lugnaquilla (924m), is really more of a very large hill, but that hardly matters here. This vast granite intrusion, a welling-up of hot igneous rock that solidified some 400 million years ago, was shaped during the Ice Ages into the schist-capped mountains visible today. The peaks are marvellously desolate and as raw as only nature can be. Between the mountains are a number of deep glacial valleys, most notably Glenmacnass, Glen mature and Glendalough; while corrie lakes such as Lough Bray Upper and Lower, gouged by ice at the head of the glaciers, complete the wild topography.

The narrow Military Rd winds its way through the most remote parts of the mountains, offering some extraordinary views of the surrounding countryside. The best place