



Counties Meath, Louth, Cavan & Monaghan

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Why Go?

The fertile fields of Counties Meath and Louth attracted Ireland's first settlers, making it the birthplace of Irish civilisation. Although the counties are now part of Dublin's commuter belt, their legacies endure at the mystical tombs at Brú na Bóinne and Loughcrew – which both predate the Egyptian pyramids – and at Tara, gateway to the other world and seat of the high kings of Ireland. Following St Patrick's arrival, the faithful built abbeys, high crosses and round towers to protect their treasured manuscripts. Magnificent ruins throughout Meath and Louth still whisper tales of a time when Ireland was known as the Land of Saints and Scholars.

The emerald hills and fish-filled lakes of Counties Cavan and Monaghan are similarly contemplative. Outdoor activities abound in this little-visited corner of Ireland: boats cruise the Shannon–Erne Waterway, while walking trails take in the wild scenery and expansive views of the Cuilcagh Mountains.

When to Go

- ➔ Sightseers should try and avoid November to March when many of the historic sites have reduced hours or are closed altogether.
- ➔ April is, unusually, the driest month of the year. The daffodils are in flower, along with a riot of wildflowers, so it's scenic (and less soggy) for walkers.
- ➔ Summertime is festive time in Drogheda with the annual Arts Festival in May, the Samba Festival in June and the Food Festival in August – the same month as Carlingford's famous Oyster Festival. Foodies take note....

COUNTY MEATH

Meath's rich soil, laid down during the last ice age, attracted settlers as early as 8000 BC. They worked their way up the banks of the River Boyne, transforming the landscape from forest to farmland. One of the five provinces of ancient Ireland, Meath was at the centre of Irish politics for centuries.

Today, Meath's fertile land and plentiful water supply make it an important centre of agriculture. Less happily, its proximity to Dublin brought about unchecked growth during the Celtic Tiger's peak and the larger towns are surrounded with soulless housing estates with heavy traffic at commuter time.

For visitors, though, there are numerous attractions here, including many tangible reminders of Meath's fascinating history. You'll find plenty of information at www.meath.ie/tourism.

Brú na Bóinne

The vast Neolithic necropolis known as Brú na Bóinne (the Boyne Palace) is one of the most extraordinary sites in Europe. A thousand years older than Stonehenge, it's a powerful and evocative testament to the mind-boggling achievements of prehistoric humankind.

The complex was built to house the remains of those who were at the top of the social heap and its tombs were the largest artificial structures in Ireland until the construction of the Anglo-Norman castles 4000 years later. The area consists of many different sites; the three principal ones are Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.

Over the centuries the tombs decayed, were covered by grass and trees, and were plundered by everybody from Vikings to Victorian treasure hunters, whose carved initials can be seen on the great stones of Newgrange. The countryside around the tombs is home to countless other ancient tumuli (burial mounds) and standing stones.



Sights



Newgrange

(www.newgrange.com; adult/student incl visitor centre €6/3; ☀ 9am-5pm Nov-Jan, 9.30am-5.30pm Feb-Apr, 9am-6.30pm May, 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5.30pm Oct) Even from afar, you know that Newgrange is something special. Its white round stone walls topped by a grass dome look other-worldly, and just the size is im-

HISTORIC SITE

pressive: 80m in diameter and 13m high. But underneath it gets even better. Here lies the finest Stone Age passage tomb in Ireland, and one of the most remarkable prehistoric sites in Europe. It dates from around 3200 BC, predating the pyramids by some six centuries.

No one is quite sure of its original purpose. It could have been a burial place for kings or a centre for ritual, although the tomb's precise alignment with the sun at the time of the **winter solstice** also suggests it was designed to act as a calendar.

The name derives from 'New Granary' (the tomb did in fact serve as a repository for wheat and grain at one stage), although a more popular belief is that it comes from the Irish for 'Cave of Gráinne', a reference to a popular Celtic myth. *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne* that tells of the illicit love between the woman betrothed to Fionn McCumhaill (or Finn McCool), leader of the Fianna, and Diarmuid, one of his most trusted lieutenants. When Diarmuid was fatally wounded, his body was brought to Newgrange by the god Aengus in a vain attempt to save him, and the despairing Gráinne followed him into the cave, where she remained long after he died. This suspiciously Arthurian tale (sub in Lancelot and Guinevere for Diarmuid and Gráinne) is undoubtedly a myth, but it's still a pretty good story. Newgrange also plays another role in Celtic mythology as the site where the hero Cúchulainn was conceived.

Over time, Newgrange, like Dowth and Knowth, deteriorated and at one stage was even used as a quarry. The site was extensively restored in 1962 and again in 1975.

A superbly carved kerbstone with double and triple spirals guards the tomb's main entrance, but the area has been reconstructed so that tourists don't have to clamber in over it. Above the entrance is a slit, or roof-box, which lets light in. Another beautifully decorated kerbstone stands at the exact opposite side of the mound. Some experts say that a ring of standing stones encircled the mound, forming a great circle about 100m in diameter, but only 12 of these stones remain, with traces of others below ground level.

Holding the whole structure together are the 97 boulders of the kerb ring, designed to stop the mound from collapsing outwards. Eleven of these are decorated with motifs similar to those on the main entrance stone, although only three have extensive carvings.