



Counties Wexford, Waterford, Carlow & Kilkenny

POP 507,000 / AREA 7193 SQ KM

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Best Historic Buildings

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Best Gardens

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Why Go?

Counties Wexford, Waterford, Carlow and Kilkenny are (along with the southern chunk of Tipperary) collectively referred to as the 'sunny southeast'. This being Ireland the term is, of course, relative. But it *is* the country's warmest, driest region. A golden tiara of wide sandy beaches graces the counties of Wexford and Waterford. There are plenty of eye-catching gems here as well, including picturesque fishing villages, elegant seaside towns and dramatic windswept peninsulas. If you're looking for real sparkle, check out the world-acclaimed Waterford crystal. Deeper inland, the meandering River Barrow separates the verdant counties of Carlow and Kilkenny. County Carlow offers farm-filled spaces, country lodgings and flowering estates. County Kilkenny's namesake city is the urban star with a castle, cathedral, medieval lanes and superb pubs and restaurants. The region's history is suitably swashbuckling with marauding Vikings, shadowy knights' sects and some of the country's most impressive fortresses and castles.

When to Go

- ➔ June to September is the best time for enjoying the superb beaches, seafront cafes and restaurants
- ➔ April to October is good for hiking and walking, although be sure to pack waterproof gear and warm clothing
- ➔ October to early November is great for music lovers with Wexford's world-acclaimed opera festival, while country and trad music fans should head for Kilkenny's *Celtic Festival* also held at this time of year
- ➔ Spring and autumn are the best months to visit if you are economising as prices (and tourists) dip when compared to mid-summer.

COUNTY WEXFORD

POP 145,273

County Wexford's navigable rivers and fertile land have long lured invaders and privateers. The Vikings founded Ireland's first major towns on the wide, easy-flowing River Slaney, which cuts through the middle of the county. The most enjoyable modern way for visitors to appreciate Wexford's swashbuckling maritime history is pausing in pretty waterfront villages and sampling catches from the surrounding waves.

Wexford Town

POP 19,913

At first glance, Wexford (Loch Garman) appears a sleepy port town with a silted estuary that sees considerably less traffic than Waterford and Rosslare Harbour. However, there are reminders of its glorious Viking and Norman past in the meandering lanes off Main St – as well as some medieval monuments. It's a pleasant pause if you're looking for an urban break from the coast.

History

The Vikings named it Waesfjord (meaning 'harbour of mud flats') and its handy location near the mouth of the Slaney encouraged landings as early as AD 850. The town was captured by the Normans in 1169; traces of their fort can still be seen in the grounds of the Irish National Heritage Park.

Cromwell included Wexford in his destructive Irish tour from 1649 to 1650. Around 1500 of the town's 2000 inhabitants were killed, including all the Franciscan friars. During the 1798 Rising, rebels made a determined, bloody stand before being defeated.

Sights

Wexford doesn't have any don't-miss museums, but you can sense its deep history on a two-hour stroll. The waterfront has been spiffed up and makes for lazy rambles past docked boats.

★ St Iberius' Church

CHURCH

(North Main St; ☉10am-5pm May-Sep, to 3pm Oct-Apr) South of the Bull Ring, St Iberius' Church was built in 1760 on the site of several previous churches. Oscar Wilde's forebears were rectors here. The Renaissance-style frontage is worth a look, but the real treat is the **Georgian interior** with its finely crafted altar rails and set of 18th-century

monuments in the gallery. The church is also famed for its superb acoustics.

★ Bull Ring

HISTORIC SITE

Originally a beach where provisions were boated into the city, the Bull Ring became a centre for bull baiting in medieval times: the town's butchers gained their guild charter by providing a bull annually for the sport. The **Lone Pikeman statue** commemorates the participants in the 1798 Rising, who used the place as an open-air armaments factory. These days the Bull Ring is the site of the weekly Bull Ring Market (p168).

Westgate

LANDMARK

The only survivor of the six original town gates is the 14th-century Westgate. It was originally a tollgate, and the recesses used by the toll collectors are still intact, as is the lockup used to incarcerate 'runagates' – those who tried to avoid paying.

Selskar Abbey

RUIN

After Henry II murdered his former ally Thomas Becket, he did penance at Selskar Abbey, founded by Alexander de la Roche in 1190. Basilia, the sister of Robert FitzGilbert de Clare (better known as Strongbow), is thought to have married one of Henry II's lieutenants in the abbey. Its present ruinous state is a result of Cromwell's visit in 1649.

Franciscan Friary

HISTORIC BUILDING

(School St; ☉10am-6pm) **FREE** In 1649 Cromwell's forces made a bonfire of the original 13th-century Franciscan Friary, so most of the present building dates from the 19th century. Only two original walls remain. The friary houses a relic and wax effigy of St Adjutor, a boy martyr slain by his own father in ancient Rome.

Keyser's Lane

HISTORIC SITE

Duck your head and dart down Keyser's Lane, a covered passage off North Main St that dates back to Norse times.

Tours

Walking tours (www.wexfordwalkingtours.com; tour €4; ☉11am Mon-Sat Mar-Oct) of Wexford are the best way to understand its complicated past and confusing remains. The 90-minute walks depart from the tourist office.

★ Festivals & Events

Wexford Festival Opera

OPERA

(www.wexfordopera.com; tickets €20-30; ☉late Oct-early Nov) An 18-day extravaganza held at