



# Counties Meath, Louth, Cavan & Monaghan

## Includes ➔

County Meath .....	495
Brú Na Bóinne.....	495
Tara .....	504
Trim .....	506
Loughcrew Cairns.....	510
County Louth .....	511
Drogheda .....	511
Dundalk .....	516
Cooley Peninsula .....	517
County Cavan .....	520
Cavan Town .....	520
County Monaghan .....	524
Monaghan Town.....	524

## Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Courthouse Restaurant (p527)
- ➔ Eno (p517)
- ➔ Conyngham Arms (p501)
- ➔ Olde Post Inn (p521)

## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Castle Leslie (p526)
- ➔ Trim Castle Hotel (p508)
- ➔ Carlingford House (p519)
- ➔ Shirley Arms (p526)
- ➔ Bellinter House (p505)

## Why Go?

The fertile fields of Counties Meath and Louth attracted Ireland's first settlers, making them the birthplace of Irish civilisation. Today, the counties are part of Dublin's commuter belt, but the earliest inhabitants' legacies endure at the mystical tombs at Brú na Bóinne and Loughcrew – which both predate the Egyptian pyramids – and at Tara, the seat of Ireland's high kings and gateway to the other world.

Following St Patrick's arrival, the faithful built abbeys, high crosses and round towers to protect their treasured manuscripts. Magnificent ruins recall a time when Ireland was known as the Land of Saints and Scholars.

To the northwest, Counties Cavan and Monaghan's undulating hills and fish-filled lakes are wilder and more remote. Outdoor activities abound in this little-visited corner of Ireland: boats cruise the Shannon–Erne Waterway, while walking trails take in the rugged scenery and expansive views of the Cuilcagh Mountains.

## When to Go

- ➔ If sightseeing is at the top of your list, try to avoid November to March when many of the region's high-profile historic sites have reduced hours or are closed altogether.
- ➔ April is, unusually, the driest month of the year in this part of the country. The daffodils are in bloom, along with a riot of wildflowers, making it especially scenic (and less soggy) for walkers.
- ➔ Summer time is festive time: Drogheda hosts its annual Arts Festival in May, while Carlingford's party atmosphere peaks in August during its famous Oyster Festival. Horses race on Laytown's beach in late August and Monaghan town hosts its Harvest Blues Festival in early September.

## COUNTY MEATH

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Meath's rich soil, laid down during the last ice age, drew 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 high-yielding land and plentiful water supply make it a vital agriculture centre. Its proximity to Dublin brought about unchecked growth during the Celtic Tiger's peak, however, and the larger towns are surrounded with soulless housing estates with heavy traffic at commuter time.

For visitors, though, there are numerous must-see attractions here, including many tangible reminders of Meath's absorbing history.

### 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 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

#### ★ Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre

INTERPRETATION CENTRE

(☎) 041-988 0300; [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie); Donore; adult/child visitor centre €3/2, visitor centre & Newgrange €6/3, visitor centre & Knowth €5/3, all 3 sites €11/6; ☀ 9am-7pm Jun-mid-Sep, to 6.30pm May & mid-end Sep, to 5pm Nov-Jan, 9.30am-5.30pm Feb-Apr & Oct) Built in a spiral design echoing Newgrange, this superb interpretive centre houses interactive exhibits on prehistoric Ireland and its passage tombs. It has regional tourism info, an excellent cafeteria, plus a book and souvenir shop. Upstairs, a glassed-in observation mezzanine looks out over Newgrange.

All visits to Newgrange and/or Knowth depart from here.

#### ★ Newgrange

HISTORIC SITE

([www.newgrange.com](http://www.newgrange.com)); adult/child incl visitor centre €6/3; ☀ 9am-7pm Jun-mid-Sep, to 6.30pm May & mid-end Sep, to 5pm Nov-Jan, 9.30am-5.30pm Feb-Apr & Oct) A startling 80m in diameter and 13m high, Newgrange's white round stone walls, topped by a grass dome, look eerily futuristic. Underneath lies the finest Stone Age passage tomb in Ireland – one of the most

### BRÚ NA BÓINNE TOP TIPS

- ★ All visits to Brú na Bóinne start at the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre from where there's a shuttle bus to the tombs. If you turn up at either Newgrange or Knowth first, you'll be sent to the visitor centre, 4km from either site. Walking is discouraged, as the lanes are narrow and dangerous due to passing tour buses.
- ★ Allow plenty of time: an hour for the visitor centre alone, two hours to include a trip to Newgrange or Knowth, and half a day to see all three.
- ★ Dowth's tombs are closed to the public but you can freely visit the surrounding site.
- ★ In summer, particularly at weekends, Brú na Bóinne gets very crowded; on peak days more than 2000 people can show up. As there are only 750 tour slots, you may not be guaranteed a visit to either of the passage tombs. Tickets are sold on a first-come, first-served basis (no advance booking). Arrive early in the morning or visit midweek and be prepared to wait. Alternatively, visiting as part of an organised tour (p499) guarantees a spot.
- ★ Tours are primarily outdoors with no shelter so bring rain gear, just in case.