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Christ Church Cathedral (p59)

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Plan Your Trip

Ireland's Top 12

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Dublin

Capital city and the home of Guinness

Ireland's largest city by some stretch is the main gateway into the country, and it has enough distractions to keep visitors engaged for at least a few days. From world-class museums and entertainment, superb dining and top-grade hotels, Dublin (p35) has all the baubles of a major international metropolis. But the real clinchers are Dubliners themselves, who are friendlier, more easygoing and welcoming than the burghers of virtually any other European capital.



Kilkenny City

Arts, crafts and medieval monuments

From its regal castle to its soaring medieval cathedral, Kilkenny (p109) exudes a permanence and culture that makes it an unmissable stop. Its namesake county boasts scores of artisans and craftspeople and you can browse their wares at Kilkenny's boutiques. Chefs eschew Dublin to be close to the source of Kilkenny's wonderful produce and you can enjoy the local brewery's beer at scores of delightful pubs.



MILOSZ MASLANKA/SHUTTERSTOCK © ARCHITECT ERIC KUHNE



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Belfast

Victorian architecture, top museums and lively pubs

Northern Ireland's capital city (p221) is buzzing, having reinvented itself as a major tourist hot spot. Historical attractions range from Titanic Belfast (pictured), a multimedia celebration of the famous ocean liner (built and launched here in 1911), to the fascinating corridors of Crumlin Road Gaol, and tours of West Belfast's political murals, a reminder of the strife that scarred the city. Bottom left: St George's Market (p225); bottom right: *The Big Fish* sculpture



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Brú na Bóinne

Mysterious prehistoric passage tombs

Ancient and yet eerily futuristic, Newgrange's immense, round, white stone walls topped by a grass dome is an extraordinary sight. Part of the vast Neolithic necropolis Brú na Bóinne (Boyne Palace; p100), it contains Ireland's finest Stone Age passage tomb, predating the Pyramids by some six centuries. Most extraordinary of all is the tomb's precise alignment with the sun at the time of the winter solstice.

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Cliffs of Moher

Iconic sea cliffs of jaw-dropping beauty

Bathed in the golden glow of the late afternoon sun, the Cliffs of Moher (p180) are but one of the splendours of County Clare. From a boat bobbing below, the towering stone faces have a dramatic ruggedness that's enlivened by thousands of seabirds, including cute little puffins. Down south in Loop Head, pillars of rock towering above the sea are home to abandoned stone cottages whose very existence is inexplicable.

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