EXCURSIONS

EXCURSIONS

Without even the smallest hint of irony Dubliners will happily tell you that one of the city's best features is how easy it is to get out of it. Whenever they get the chance – come sun, a Bank Holiday or a sneaky 'sick' day off work – Dubliners will stuff their families, picnic hampers, golf clubs or whatever else they need into their cars and head for the hills, the beach, the countryside or anywhere else not hemmed in by grey concrete. Ireland is pretty small, so you can get pretty much anywhere within four or five hours' drive, but you don't have to go to Kerry or Donegal to really get into the heart of the country. A short, non-rush-hour drive will literally transport you into the countryside.

Beachcombers can jump the bus or DART and within half an hour grey concrete gives way to seaside villages with cosy harbours and sandy beaches. If you want to dig a little into the country's remote and recent past, Dublin's neighbouring counties – Wicklow to the south, Kildare to the west and Meath to the north – have ruins, prehistoric sites and stately country piles that rank among the country's most important historical attractions. Or, if you just fancy a rugged walk or gentle gambol in the Irish countryside, then there are plenty of spots to indulge, from the taxing hikes around the mountains surrounding Glendalough in County Wicklow to the gorse-bracketed paths of Howth Head immediately north of Dublin Bay.

If you're on a short visit to Dublin, then obviously timing is all-important. Sure, there's plenty to keep you amused, entertained and interested within the confines of the city centre, but Dublin's environs are as much a part of the Dublin experience as a weekend in Temple Bar; to most Dubliners, in fact, even more so. All of the sights listed in this chapter are worthwhile destinations in their own right and deserving of any effort you make to get to them. But what makes them doubly attractive for the short-term visitor is that they're all a short distance from the city, and travel to and from them is generally hassle-free.

COASTAL BREAKS

You'd never think it while walking around the city centre, but Dublin is a mere stone's throw from a number of lovely seaside towns, most of which have been incorporated into the greater city but have managed to retain that quiet village feel. The traditional fishing village of **Howth** (p214) – that bulbous headland on the northern edge of Dublin Bay – is now one of Dublin's most prestigious addresses, primarily because the residents are fiercely protective of their unspoilt headland, dotted with fancy houses and rising above the beautiful harbour where many of them keep their pleasure boats. Further north along the coast is the ever-elegant village of **Malahide** (p216), fronted by a long, sandy coastal basin and an impressive marina full of shops, restaurants and – naturally – expensive boats.

To the south of Dublin Bay is **Dalkey** (p217), a compact village that is virtually attached to the southern suburbs. You can rent boats at the small harbour and explore the southern reaches of the bay, and after you've hit dry land there are a couple of great restaurants that alone make the journey worthwhile.

Visiting all three is pretty easy. All are connected to the city centre via the DART, which cuts travel time to under 45 minutes in any direction. The obvious itinerary is to visit Howth and Malahide in one day, but each is worth devoting a little more time to if you can. If golf is your thing, Howth's wonderful courses will take up the better part of half a day, leaving you the other half to explore the port and have a seafood dinner in one of the harbour's restaurants. If you feel like a good walk, then an amble across the top of Howth Head to the lighthouse is a thoroughly enjoyable experience, especially in good weather.

As Dalkey lies on the opposite end of Dublin Bay, it is really a trip in itself, but there's plenty to keep you amused for at least half a day. Besides renting a boat and exploring the nearby waters and offshore island, there are some lovely walks in the hills above the town and further south in **Killiney** (p218), which is also home to a fabulous beach.

THE DISTANT PAST

Dublin is old, but it ain't that old. If you really want to get stuck into Ireland's past, you need to get out of the city, but you don't have to go far. The obvious destination for fans of

all things prehistoric is the magnificent Brú na Bóinne (p218), an extensive Neolithic graveyard northeast of Dublin in County Meath. This is, without question, one of the most important prehistoric sites in Europe, a testament to the genius and imagination of the pre-Celts. A fabulous interpretative centre explains the history and use of the passage tombs in a thoroughly satisfying way, but a tour of the two graves themselves (Newgrange and Knowth; a third, Dowth, is under excavation) is the real treat.

To the south of Dublin, and skipping forward a couple of thousand years, is the ancient monastic settlement of Glendalough (p221), once a contemplative paradise for Ireland's first monks and now one of the country's most important sets of early-Christian ruins. Although undoubtedly fascinating in themselves, it is their setting that makes this place so special, around two glacial lakes at the foot of a secluded valley in the middle of the Wicklow Mountains. There are plenty of walking opportunities here, including a couple of mountain hikes.

Although Brú na Bóinne and Glendalough are only 40km and 25km respectively from Dublin, they are not easily accessible by public transport. A private bus company runs buses to and from Glendalough twice a day from the city centre, but Brú na Bóinne is a little harder to get to if you don't have a car and is best visited by organised coach tour – the price of which includes transport and all admission fees. Aside from leaving the hassle of getting there in someone else's hands, tours provide the bonus of a guide, who has all the facts and will answer any questions you may have about the site. There are also organised tours to Glendalough, although the main advantage of joining one is that you can kill a few birds with one stone and get in a visit to Russborough House (p224) as well as a quickie tour of northern Wicklow.

STATELY HOMES

Dublin came of age in the 18th century, when the Protestant Ascendancy committed themselves to making the city one of the most beautiful in Europe. Up went stunning Palladian town houses around handsome, manicured squares and Georgian Dublin was born. But the actual breadth of the Palladian vision – and the full extent of the kind of cash these people had to play with – is only really revealed in the weekend getaways and country retreats they built for themselves far from the city's madding crowds. Here we have included the three finest houses of all. Each is a breathtakingly magnificent example of what vainglorious power and oodles of money can produce.

In County Wicklow, to the south, are two examples of Georgian top-dog Richard Cassels' finest work: the wonderful Powerscourt Estate (p225), built for the Power family and embellished by one of the most beautiful gardens in Europe; and Russborough House (p224), home to an extraordinary art collection built up over the years by Sir Alfred Beit (despite a number of robberies, it remains one of the most important private collections in the world).

West of Dublin, County Kildare is not just home to the most important private stud farms in Ireland, but to the grandest Georgian pile of the lot, Castletown House (p226). The first complete example of the Palladian style that was all the rage between 1720 and 1820, Castletown is simply huge, without a doubt reflecting owner William Conolly's vast wealth (he was, in his day, Ireland's richest man). Not far from the house lies a relatively undiscovered delight, the Larchill Arcadian Gardens (see the boxed text, p227). Here, amid the wonderfully wild garden layout, are a number of follies, proof of the owners' oddities and eccentricities.

The actual houses at Russborough and Castletown are open to visitors, but Powerscourt House is not. Since a massive fire gutted the inside in 1974 a process of restoration has been going on that will eventually restore each room to its original splendour. However, a visit is still more than worthwhile, as the estate itself is a marvellous place to while away an afternoon, with its gardens the main draw. The nearby waterfall is the tallest in Britain and Ireland, and the surrounding countryside is perfect for a good walk.

All three houses are within about an hour and a half of Dublin's city centre, and are served by public bus. Organised tours to Glendalough also take in a visit to Powerscourt.

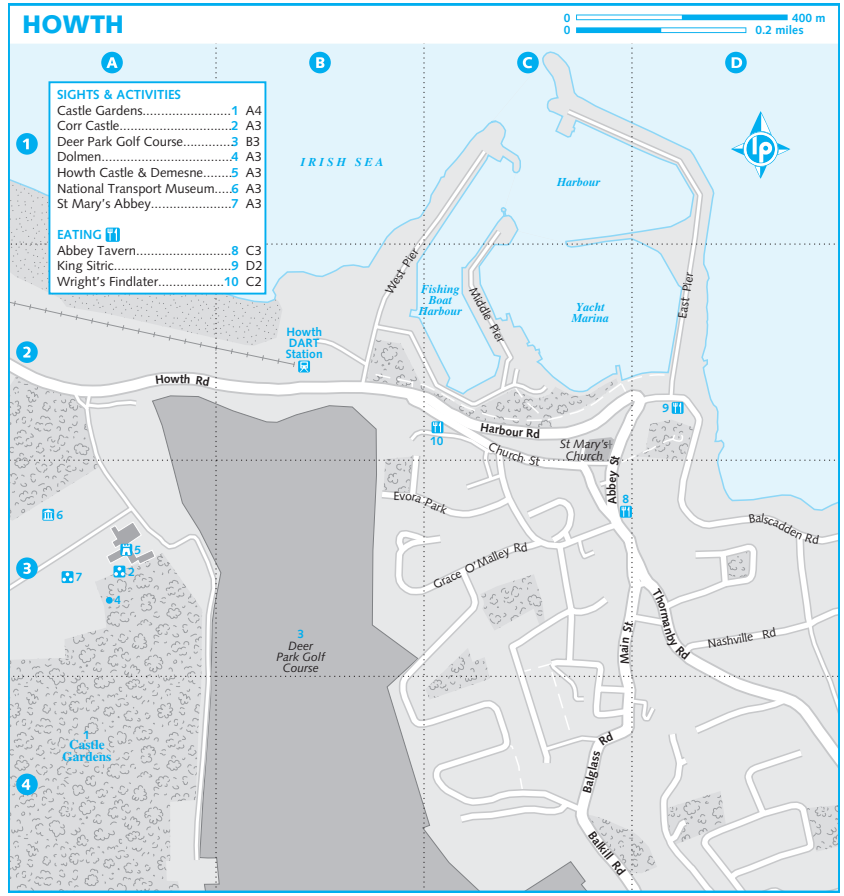
HOWTH

Howth is a popular excursion from Dublin and has developed as a residential suburb. It is a pretty little town built on steep streets running down to the waterfront. Although the harbour's role as a shipping port has long gone, Howth is now a major fishing centre and yachting harbour.

Most of the town backs onto the extensive grounds of Howth Castle (Map p215), originally built in 1564 but much changed over the years, most recently in 1910 when Sir Edwin Lutyens gave it a modernist makeover. Today the castle is divided into four separate – very posh and private – residences. The original estate was acquired in 1177 by the Norman noble Sir Almeric Tristram, who changed his surname to St Lawrence after winning a battle at the behest (or so he believed) of his favourite saint. The family has owned the land ever since, though the unbroken chain of male succession came to an end in 1909.

Also on the grounds are the ruins of the 16th-century Corr Castle and an ancient dolmen (a Neolithic grave memorial built of vertical stones and topped by a table stone) known as Aideen's Grave. Legend has it that Aideen died of a broken heart after her husband was killed at the Battle of Gavra near Tara in AD 184, but the legend is rubbish because the dolmen is at least 300 years older than that.

The Castle Gardens (Map p215; admission free; 24hr) are worth visiting, however, as they're noted for their rhododendrons (which bloom in



TRANSPORT: HOWTH

Distance from Dublin 9km

Direction Northeast

Bus Dublin bus 31, 31A or 31B (€2.10, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes) from Lower Abbey St.

Car Northeast along Clontarf Rd; follow the northern bay shoreline.

Train DART (€2.10, 20 minutes, every 20 minutes) to Howth.

DETOUR: IRELAND'S EYE

A short distance offshore from Howth is Ireland's Eye, a rocky sea-bird sanctuary with the ruins of a 6th-century monastery. There's a Martello tower at the northwestern end of the island, where boats from Howth land, while the eastern end plummets into the sea in a spectacularly sheer rock face. As well as the sea birds overhead, you can see young birds on the ground during the nesting season. Seals can also be spotted around the island.

Doyle & Sons (☎ 01-831 4200; return €12) takes boats out to the island from the East Pier of Howth Harbour during summer, usually on weekend afternoons. Don't wear shorts if you're planning to visit the monastery ruins because they're surrounded by a thicket of stinging nettles. And bring your rubbish back with you – far too many island visitors don't.

May and June), for their azaleas and for the long, 10m-high beech St Mary's Abbey (Map p215; Abbey St, Howth Castle; admission free), originally founded in 1042 by the Viking King Sitric, who also founded the original church on the site of Christ Church Cathedral. In 1235 the abbey was amalgamated with the monastery on Ireland's Eye (a rocky island outcrop, just offshore from Howth, which is now home to a cacophony of sea birds). Some parts of the ruins date from that time, but most are from the 15th and 16th centuries. The tomb of Christopher St Lawrence (Lord Howth), in the southeastern corner, dates from around 1470. See the caretaker or read the instructions on the gate for entry.

A more recent addition is the rather ramshackle National Transport Museum (Map p215; ☎ 01-832 0427; Howth Castle; adult/child or student €3.50/2; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun-Aug, 2-5pm Sat-Sun & bank holidays Sep-May), which has a range of exhibits including double-decker buses, a bakery van, fire engines and trams – most notably a Hill of Howth electric that operated from 1901 to 1959. To reach the museum, go through the castle gates and turn right just before the castle.

The allure of history and public transport aside, most visitors set foot in the demesne armed with golf clubs, as here you'll find Deer Park Golf Course (Map p215; ☎ 01-832 2624; Howth Castle; 18-holes Mon-Fri €17.50, Sat & Sun €25, club rental €16; 🕒 8am-dusk Mon-Fri, 6.30am-dusk Sat & Sun), a public facility attached to a hotel. An 18-hole course, two nine-hole courses and a par-three course, all with splendid views of Dublin Bay and the surrounding countryside, are the big draw.

Howth is essentially a very large hill surrounded by cliffs, and the peak (171m) has excellent views across Dublin Bay right down to Wicklow. From the summit you can walk to the top of the Ben of Howth, which has a cairn said to mark a 2000-year-old Celtic royal grave. The 1814 Baily Lighthouse, at the southeastern corner, is on the site of an old stone fort and can be reached by a dramatic cliff-top walk. There was an earlier hill-top beacon here in 1670.

SLEEPING & EATING

Abbey Tavern (Map p215; ☎ 01-839 0307; Abbey St; s/d €110/220; mains around €24, 3-course dinner €30) Enjoy better-than-average pub grub, with the emphasis on seafood and meat at this 16th-century tavern. Upstairs are eight lovely rooms.

King Sitric (Map p215; ☎ 01-832 5235; www.kingsitric.ie; East Pier; mains €35-48, 5-course dinner €55; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner only Sat) A well-established seafood spot with a big reputation that has been seriously challenged by new arrivals; the wine list, however, is still tops.

Wright's Findlater (Map p215; ☎ 01-832 4488; www.wrightsfindlaterhowth.com; Harbour Rd; mains €10-21) A modern all-in restaurant, bar and lounge, there's the Asian-influenced Lemongrass on the first floor, above a stylish bar that does terrific grub, with the emphasis mostly on fish.

MALAHIDE

Malahide (Mullach Ide) was once a small village with its own harbour, a long way from the urban jungle of Dublin, but the only thing protecting it from the northward expansion of Dublin's suburbs now is Malahide Demesne – 101 well-tended hectares of parkland dominated by a castle once owned by the powerful Talbot family. The handsome village remains relatively intact, but the erstwhile quiet marina has been massively developed and is now a bustling centre with a pleasant promenade and plenty of restaurants and shops.

Despite the vicissitudes of Irish history, the Talbot family managed to keep Malahide Castle (☎ 01-846 2184; www.malahidecastle.com; adult/child/student/family €7/4.40/5.95/20, incl Fry Model Railway €12/7.40/10/34; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun Apr-Oct, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) under its control from 1185 to 1976, apart from the time when Cromwell was in power (1649–60). The castle is now owned by the Dublin County Council. It displays the usual hotchpotch of additions and renovations. The oldest part is a three-storey, 12th-century tower house, and the façade is flanked by circular towers, which were tacked on in 1765.

The castle is packed with furniture and paintings. Highlights include a 16th-century oak room with decorative carvings and the medieval Great Hall with family portraits, a minstrel's gallery and a painting of the Battle of the Boyne. Puck, the Talbot family ghost, is said to have last appeared in 1975.

The country's biggest collection of toy trains is the Fry Model Railway (☎ 01-846 3779; Malahide Castle; adult/child/student/family €7/4.40/5.95/20; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Apr-Sep, 2-5pm Sat, Sun & holidays only rest of year), a 240-sq-metre model that authentically displays much of Ireland's rail and public transport system, including the DART line and Irish Sea ferry services, in O-gauge (32mm track width). There is also a separate room featuring model trains and other memorabilia. Unfortunately, the operators suffer from the overseriousness of some grown men with complicated toys. Rather than let you simply look and admire, they herd you into the control room in groups for demonstrations.

The parkland (admission free; 🕒 10am-9pm Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar) around the castle is a good place for a picnic. If you fancy seeing a bit of Dublin from the sea, Sea Safaris (☎ 01-806 1626; www.seasafari.ie; Malahide Marina; per hr €25) runs speedboats from the marina as far south as Dalkey and back.

TRANSPORT: MALAHIDE

Distance from Dublin 13km

Direction North

Bus Dublin bus 42 (€2, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes) from Lower Abbey St.

Car North along Malahide Rd.

Train DART (€2.35, 35 minutes, every 20 minutes) to Malahide.

SLEEPING & EATING

Grand Hotel (☎ 01-845 0000; www.thegrand.ie; Main St; s/d €230/280; 🅿 🛜) A 19th-century hotel that is a Dublin classic, with beautifully furnished rooms and a tradition of excellent service.

Bon Appétit (☎ 01-845 0314; 9 St James' Tce; mains €23-36; 🕒 7-9.30pm Tue-Sat) The village's best restaurant features a superb menu of fish, meat and vegetarian options.

Gibney's (☎ 01-845 0863; New St; dishes €4-8; 🕒 10.30am-11.30pm Mon-Thu, 10.30am-12.30am Fri-Sat & noon-11pm Sun) Malahide's best and most popular pub does a roaring trade in sandwiches, burgers and salads.

Siam Thai Restaurant (☎ 01-845 4698; Gas Lane, the Marina; dishes €18-22; 🕒 6pm-midnight) Thai classics for local palates means that you can vary the spiciness and be assured no MSG is used.

DALKEY

Dublin's most important medieval port has long since settled into its role as an elegant dormitory village, but there are some revealing vestiges of its illustrious past, most notably the remains of three of the eight castles that once lorded over the area. Facing each other on Castle St are the 15th-century Archibold's Castle and Goat Castle. The latter (aka the Towerhouse), along with the adjoining St Begnet's Church, has been converted into the Dalkey Castle & Heritage Centre (☎ 01-285 8366; www.dalkeycastle.com; Castle St; adult/child/student €6/4/5; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri May-Oct, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun year-round), where models, displays and exhibitions form a pretty interesting demonstration of Dalkey's history and also give an insight into the area during medieval times.

Overlooking Bullock Harbour are the remains of Bulloch Castle, built by the monks of St Mary's Abbey in Dublin around 1150.

A few hundred metres offshore is Dalkey Island, home to St Begnet's Holy Well (admission free; boat from Coliemore Harbour per hr €25), the most important of Dalkey's so-called holy wells. This one is reputed to cure rheumatism, making the island a popular destination for tourists and the faithful alike. The island is easily accessible by boat from Coliemore Harbour; you can't book a boat, so just show up. The waters around the island are popular with scuba divers; qualified divers can rent gear in Dun Laoghaire, further north, from Ocean Divers (☎ 01-280 1083; www.oceandivers.ie; West Pier; half-day dive with full equipment & boat €49).

To the south there are good views from the small park at Sorrento Point and from Killiney Hill. Dalkey Quarry is a popular site for rock climbers, and originally provided most of the granite for the gigantic piers at Dun Laoghaire Harbour. A number of rocky swimming pools are also found along the Dalkey coast.

DETOUR: SANDYCOVE & JAMES JOYCE MUSEUM

About 1km north of Dalkey is Sandycove, with a pretty little beach and the Martello tower – built by British forces to keep an eye out for a Napoleonic invasion. It now houses the James Joyce Museum (☎ 01-280 9265; Sandycove; adult/child/student €6.70/4.20/5.70; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Apr-Oct, by arrangement only Nov-Mar). This is where the action begins in James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses*. The museum was opened in 1962 by Sylvia Beach, the Paris-based publisher who first dared to put *Ulysses* into print, and has photographs, letters, documents, various editions of Joyce's work and two death masks of Joyce on display.

Below the Martello tower is the Forty Foot Pool, an open-air sea-water bathing pool that took its name from the army regiment, the Fortieth Foot, that was stationed at the tower until the regiment was disbanded in 1904. At the close of the 1st chapter of *Ulysses*, Buck Mulligan heads off to the Forty Foot Pool for a morning swim. A morning wake-up here is still a local tradition, winter or summer. In fact, a winter dip isn't much braver than a summer one since the water temperature varies by only about 5°C. Basically, it's always bloody cold.

Pressure from female bathers eventually opened this public stretch of water, originally nudist and for men only, to both sexes despite strong opposition from the 'forty foot gentlemen'. They eventually compromised with the ruling that a 'Togs Must Be Worn' sign would now apply after 9am. Prior to that time, nudity prevails and swimmers are still predominantly male.

About 1km south of Dalkey is the super-affluent seaside suburb of Killiney, home to some of Ireland's wealthiest people and a handful of celebrities, including Bono, Enya and film-maker Neil Jordan. The attraction is self-evident, from the long, curving sandy beach of Killiney Bay (which 19th-century residents felt resembled Naples' Sorrento Bay, hence the Italian names of all the local roads) to the gorse-covered hills behind it, which make for a great walk. Alas, for most of us, Killiney will always remain a place to visit; on the rare occasion that a house comes on the market, it would take a cool €5 million to get the seller to bite.

EATING

Guinea Pig (☎ 01-285 9055; 17 Railway Rd; mains €32-45) Despite the name, is this the best seafood restaurant in Dublin? Many a food critic seems to think so.

Caviston's Seafood Restaurant (☎ 01-280 9245; Glasthule Rd, Sandycove; mains €14-28) All self-respecting crustacean lovers should make the 1km trip to Caviston's for a seafood meal to remember.

TRANSPORT: DALKEY

Distance from Dublin 8km

Direction South

Bus Dublin bus 8 (€2, one hour, every 25 minutes) from Burgh Quay to Dalkey.

Car N11 south to Dalkey.

Train DART (€2.10, 20 minutes, every 10 to 20 minutes) south to Dalkey.

BRÚ NA BÓINNE

One of Ireland's genuine five-star attractions, the extensive Neolithic necropolis known as Brú na Bóinne (the Boyne Palace) is among the most extraordinary sites in Europe. A thousand years older than Stonehenge, this is a powerful and evocative testament to the mind-boggling achievements of prehistoric humans.

This necropolis was built to house the VIP corpses – no ordinary Joes or Janes here. Its tombs were the largest artificial structures in Ireland until the construction of Anglo-Norman castles 4000 years later. The area consists of many different sites, the three principal ones being 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 them is littered with countless other ancient mounds (or tumuli) and standing stones.

To keep visitors from mucking up the ruins at random, all visits to Brú na Bóinne have to start at the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre (☎ 041-988 0300; www.heritageireland.ie; Donore; adult/child €2.90/1.60, visitor centre plus Newgrange & Knowth €10.30/4.50; 🕒 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Apr). Happily, this is a superb interpretive centre with an extraordinary series of interactive exhibits on the passage tombs and prehistoric Ireland in general. The building is a stunner, picking up the spiral design of Newgrange. It has regional tourism info, a good café and a bookstore. It's south of the River Boyne and 2km west of Donore.

Allow plenty of time to visit this unique centre. If you're only planning on taking the guided tour of the interpretative centre, give yourself about an hour. If you plan a visit to Newgrange or Knowth, allow at least two hours. If, however, you want to visit all three in one go, you should plan at least half a day. In summer, particularly at the weekend and during school holidays, the place gets very crowded, and you will not be guaranteed a visit to either of the passage tombs. Call ahead to book a tour and avoid disappointment. In summer, the best time to visit is midweek and/or early in the morning.

Brú na Bóinne is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Ireland, and there are oodles of organised tours transporting busloads of eager tourists to the visitor centre (everybody must access the sites through there) – especially from Dublin. Highly recommended are the Mary Gibbons Tours (☎ 01-283 9973; www.newgrangetours.com; tours €35), which depart from numerous Dublin hotels beginning at 9.30am Monday to Saturday, and take in the whole of the Boyne Valley. The expert guides offer a fascinating insight into Celtic and pre-Celtic life in Ireland and you'll get access to Newgrange even on days when all visiting slots are filled. Bus Éireann (☎ 01-836 6111; www.buseireann.ie; adult/child €29/18; Mon-Thu, Sat & Sun mid-Mar–Sep) runs Newgrange and the Boyne Valley tours, departing from Busáras in Dublin at 10am and returning at approximately 5.45pm.

NEWGRANGE

From the surface, Newgrange (Newgrange & Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre adult/child €5.80/2.90; 🕒 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Apr) is a somewhat disappointing flattened, grass-covered mound, about 80m in diameter and 13m high. Underneath, however, 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 great pyramids of Egypt by some six centuries. The purpose for which it was constructed remains uncertain. It may have been a burial place for kings or a centre for ritual – although the alignment with the sun at the time of the winter solstice also suggests it was designed to act as a calendar.

The name Newgrange derives from 'new granary' (the tomb did in fact serve as a repository for wheat and grain at one stage), although a belief more popular in the area is that it comes from the Irish for 'Cave of Gráinne', a reference to a Celtic myth taught to every Irish schoolchild. The story of 'The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne' tells of the illicit love between Gráinne, the wife of Fionn McCumhaill (or Finn McCool), leader of the Fianna, and 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 legend (for Diarmuid and Gráinne read Lancelot and Guinevere) is undoubtedly untrue, but it's still a pretty good story. Newgrange also plays another role in Celtic mythology, serving as the site where the hero Cúchulainn was conceived.

Over the centuries, Newgrange, like Dowth and Knowth, deteriorated and was even quarried at one stage. There was a standing stone on the summit until the 17th century. 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 and the front façade 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 once encircled the mound, forming a Great Circle about 100m in diameter, but only 12 of these stones remain – with traces of some 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.

The white quartzite stone was originally obtained from Wicklow, 70km to the south –

TRANSPORT: BRÚ NA BÓINNE

Distance from Dublin 40km

Direction Northeast

Bus Bus Éireann (return €12.20, 1½ hours, one daily) to the interpretative centre.

Car Take M1 north to Drogheda and then N51 west to Brú na Bóinne.

in an age before horse and wheel, it was transported by sea and then up the River Boyne – and there is also some granite from the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland. More than 200,000 tonnes of earth and stone also went into the mound.

You can walk down the narrow 19m passage, lined with 43 stone uprights – some of them engraved – which leads into the tomb chamber, about one-third of the way into the colossal mound. The chamber has three recesses, and in these are large basin stones that held cremated human bones. Along with the remains would have been funeral offerings of beads and pendants, but these must have been stolen long before the archaeologists arrived.

Above your head the massive stones support a 6m-high corbel-vaulted roof. A complex drainage system means that not a drop of water has penetrated the interior in 40 centuries.

At 8.20am during the winter solstice (19–23 December), the rising sun's rays shine through the slit above the entrance, creep slowly down the long passage and illuminate the tomb chamber for 17 minutes. There is little doubt that witnessing this is one of the country's most memorable, even mystical, experiences; be sure to add your name to the list that is drawn by lottery every 1 October. Even if you miss out, there is a simulated winter sunrise for every group taken into the mound.

KNOWTH

The burial mound of **Knowth** (Cnóbha; Knowth & Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre adult/child €4.50/1.60; 🕑 9am-7pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Apr), northwest of Newgrange, was built around the same time and seems set to surpass its better-known neighbour, both in the extent and the importance of the discoveries made here. It has been under excavation since 1962, and has the greatest collection of passage-grave art ever uncovered in Western Europe.

Modern excavations at Knowth soon cleared a 34m passage to the central chamber, much longer than the one at Newgrange. In 1968 a second 40m passage was unearthed on the opposite side of the mound. Although the chambers are separate, they're close enough for archaeologists to hear each other at work. Also in the mound are the remains of six early-Christian souterrains (underground chambers) built into the side. Some 300 carved slabs and 17 satellite graves surround the main mound.

Human activity at Knowth continued for thousands of years after its construction, which accounts for the site's complexity. The Beaker folk, so called because they buried their dead with drinking vessels, occupied the site in the Bronze Age (c 1800 BC), as did the Celts in the Iron Age (around 500 BC); remnants of bronze and iron workings from these periods have been discovered. Around AD 800 to 900 it was turned into a *ráth* (earthen ring fort), a stronghold of the very powerful Uí Néill (O'Neill) clan, and in 965 it was the seat of Cormac MacMaelmithic (aka Cormac mac Airt), later Ireland's high king for nine years. The Normans built a motte and bailey here in the 12th century, but around 1400 the site was finally abandoned. Further excavations are likely to continue at least for the next decade, and one of the thrills of visiting Knowth is being allowed to watch archaeologists at work (although given the cramped conditions inside, you won't be jealous).

DOWTH

The circular mound at Dowth (from the Irish 'Dubhadh', meaning 'dark') is a little smaller than Newgrange – about 63m in diameter – but is slightly taller at 14m high. It has suffered badly at the hands of everyone from road builders and treasure hunters to amateur archaeologists, who scooped out the centre of the tumulus in the 19th century. For a time, Dowth even had a teahouse ignobly perched on its summit. Relatively untouched by modern archaeologists, Dowth shows what Newgrange and Knowth looked like for most of their history. Because it's unsafe, Dowth is closed to visitors, though the mound can be viewed from the road. Excavations began in 1998 and will continue for years to come.

There are two entrance passages, which lead to separate chambers (both sealed), and a 24m early-Christian souterrain at either end, which connects up with the western passage. This 8m-long passage leads into a small cruciform chamber, in which a recess acts as an entrance to an additional series of small compartments, a feature unique to Dowth. To the southwest of the mound is the entrance to a shorter passage and another smaller chamber.

North of the tumulus are the ruins of **Dowth Castle** and **Dowth House**.

FIONN & THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the best-known stories in the Fenian Cycle is set around Newgrange and tells of the old druid Finnegan, who struggled for seven years to catch a very slippery salmon that, once consumed, would bestow enormous wisdom on the eater, including the gift of foresight. The young Fionn McCumhaill arrived at his riverside camp one day, looking for instruction, and no sooner did the young hero arrive than Finnegan managed to land the salmon. As befits the inevitable tragedy of all these stories, Finnegan set the fish to cook and went off for a bit, ordering Fionn to keep an eye on it without eating so much as the smallest part. You'd think that after all these years of labour Finnegan could have put off what he went off to do until after dinner, but it wasn't to be. As Fionn turned the fish on the spit a drop of hot oil landed on his thumb, which he quickly put in his mouth to soothe. Finnegan returned, saw what had happened and knew that it was too late: he bade Fionn eat the rest of the fish and so it was that Fionn acquired wisdom and foresight.

DETOUR: NEWGRANGE FARM

One for the kids. Situated a few hundred metres down the hill to the west of Newgrange tomb (or follow the signs on the N51) is a 135-hectare **working farm** (☎ 041-982 4119; www.newgrangefarm.com; Newgrange; adult €8, family €12-30; 🕑 10am-5pm Easter-Aug). The truly hands-on, family-run farm allows visitors to feed the ducks and lambs, and tour the exotic bird aviaries. Amiable Farmer Bill keeps things interesting and demonstrations of threshing, sheepdog work and shoeing a horse are absorbing. Sunday at 3pm is a very special time when the 'sheep derby' is run. Finding jockeys small enough wasn't easy, so teddy bears are tied to the animals' backs. Visiting children are made owners of individual sheep for the race.

SLEEPING & EATING

Newgrange Lodge (☎ 041-988 2478; www.newgrangelodge.com; dm/d €15/50; Ⓟ 💻) A beautiful new place just east of the Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre, the lodge has dorm beds and hotel-standard en-suite rooms with TVs. Reception is open 24 hours and there is a café, outdoor patios, bicycle hire and much more.

Glebe House (☎ 041-983 6101; www.theglebehouse.ie; Dowth; r €120; Ⓟ) This charming 17th-century, wisteria-clad country house has views of Newgrange and Dowth. It has four gorgeous rooms with open, log fires and vibrant purple carpet. It is 7km west of Drogheda; children under 10 are not allowed.

Rossnaree (☎ 041-982 0975; rossnaree@eircom.net; Newgrange; s/d €100/160) A magnificent Palladian-style country house between Donore and Slane, just south of the visitor centre, with exquisite bedrooms and fabulous cuisine (dinner €45). The river at the bottom of the garden is the same one where poor old Finnegan landed the Salmon of Knowledge (see the boxed text, opposite).

Boyle's Licensed Tea Rooms (☎ 041-982 4195; Main St, Slane) About 2km west of Knowth; a wonderful tea shop and café, with a 1940s ambience. The menu, written in 12 languages, is strictly of the tea-and-scones type (around €3).

GLENDALOUGH

If you're looking for the epitome of rugged and romantic Ireland, you won't do much better than Glendalough (Gleann dá Loch, 'Valley of the Two Lakes'), truly one of Ireland's most beautiful corners and a highlight of any trip along the eastern seaboard.

The substantial remains of this important monastic settlement are certainly impressive, but the real draw is the splendid setting, two dark and mysterious lakes tucked into a deep valley covered in forest. It is, despite its immense popularity, a deeply tranquil and spiritual place, and you will have little difficulty in understanding why those solitude-seeking monks came here in the first place. Visit early or late in the day – or out of season – to avoid the big crowds. Remember that a visit here is all about walking, so wear comfortable shoes.

If you don't fancy doing Glendalough on your own steam, there are a couple of tours that will make it fairly effortless. The award-winning **Wild Wicklow Tour** (☎ 01-280 1899; www.discoverdublin.ie; adult/student & child €28/25; 🕑 departs

TRANSPORT: GLENDALOUGH

Distance from Dublin 25km

Direction South

Bus St Kevin's Bus (☎ 01-281 8119, one way/return €9/15, 1½ hours) departs 11.30am and 6pm Monday to Saturday, and 11.30am and 7pm Sunday from outside the Royal College of Surgeons, St Stephen's Green West, returning at 7.15am and 4.15pm Monday to Friday, and 9.45am and 4.15pm Saturday and Sunday.

Car N11 south to Kilmacanogue, then R755 west through Roundwood, Annamoe and Laragh.

9.10am & returns 5.30pm) of Glendalough, Avoca and the Sally Gap never fails to generate rave reviews for atmosphere and all-round fun, but so much craic has made a casualty of informative depth. The first pick-up is at the Dublin Tourism office, but there are a variety of pick-up points throughout Dublin; check the point nearest you when booking. Alternatively, Bus Éireann (☎ 01-836 6111; www.buseireann.ie; Busáras; adult/child/student €28.80/18/25.20; 🕙 10am mid-Mar–Oct) runs good but slightly impersonal whole-day tours of Glendalough and the Powerscourt Estate, which return to Dublin at about 5.45pm.

At the valley entrance, before the Glendalough Hotel, is the Glendalough Visitor Centre (☎ 0404-45325; adult/child & student €5.30/2.10; 🕙 9.30am-6pm mid-Mar–Oct, 9.30am-5pm Nov–mid-Mar). The centre screens a high-quality 17-minute audiovisual presentation, *Ireland of the Monasteries*, which does exactly what it says on the tin.

The original site of St Kevin's settlement, Teampall na Skellig, is at the base of the cliffs towering over the southern side of the Upper Lake, and is accessible only by boat; unfortunately, there's no boat service to the site and you'll have to settle for looking at it across the lake. The terraced shelf has the reconstructed ruins of a church and early graveyard. Rough wattle huts once stood on the raised ground nearby. Scattered around are some early grave slabs and simple stone crosses.

Just east of the lake and 10m above its waters is the 2m-deep artificial cave called St Kevin's Bed, said to be where Kevin lived (for more on St Kevin, see the boxed text, below). The earliest human habitation of the cave was long before St Kevin's era – there's evidence that people lived in the valley for thousands of years before the monks arrived.

In the green area just south of the car park is a large circular wall thought to be the remains of an early-Christian *caher* (stone fort).

Follow the lakeshore path southwest of the car park until you find the considerable remains of Reefert Church above the tiny Poulanass River. This is a small, rather plain, 11th-century Romanesque nave-and-chancel church, with some reassembled arches and walls. Traditionally, Reefert (meaning King's Burial Place) was the burial site of the chiefs of the local O'Toole family. The surrounding graveyard contains a number of rough stone crosses and slabs, most made of shiny mica schist.

Climb the steps at the back of the churchyard and follow the path to the west and you'll find, at the top of a rise overlooking the lake, the scant remains of St Kevin's Cell, a small beehive hut.

While the Upper Lake has the best scenery, the most fascinating buildings lie in the lower part of the valley, east of the Lower Lake.

Around the bend from the Glendalough Hotel is the stone arch of the monastery gatehouse, the only surviving example of a monastic entranceway in the country. Just inside the entrance is a large slab with an incised cross.

Beyond that lies a graveyard, which is still in use. The 10th-century round tower is 33m tall and 16m in circumference at the base. The upper storeys and conical roof were reconstructed in 1876. Near the tower, to the southeast, is the Cathedral of St Peter and St Paul, with a 10th-century nave. The chancel and sacristy date from the 12th century.

At the centre of the graveyard, to the south of the round tower, is the Priest's House. This odd building dates from 1170 but has been heavily reconstructed. It may have been the location of shrines of St Kevin. Later, during the 18th century, it became a burial site for local priests – hence the name. The 10th-century St Mary's Church, 140m southwest of the round tower, probably originally stood outside the walls of the monastery and belonged to local nuns; it has a lovely western doorway. A little to the east are the scant remains of St Kieran's Church, the smallest at Glendalough.

Glendalough's trademark is St Kevin's Church – or Kitchen – at the southern edge of the enclosure. With its miniature round-tower-like belfry, protruding sacristy and steep stone roof, it's a masterpiece. How it came to be known as a kitchen is a mystery as there's no indication that it was ever anything other than a church. The oldest parts of the building date from the 11th century – the structure has been remodelled since but it's still a classic early Irish church.

At the junction with Green Rd, as you cross the river just south of these two churches, is the Deer Stone, in the middle of a group of rocks. Legend claims that when St Kevin needed milk for two orphaned babies, a doe stood here waiting to be milked. The stone is actually a *bullaun*, used as a grinding stone for medicines or food. Many are thought to be prehistoric and they were widely regarded as having supernatural properties; women who bathed their faces with water from the hollow were supposed to keep their looks forever. The early churchmen brought them into their monasteries, perhaps hoping to inherit some of the stones' powers.

The road east leads to St Saviour's Church, with its detailed Romanesque carvings. To the west a nice woodland trail leads up the valley past the Lower Lake to the Upper Lake.

ST KEVIN & GLENDALOUGH

In AD 498 a young monk named Kevin arrived in the valley looking for somewhere to kick back, meditate and be at one with nature. He pitched up in what had been a Bronze Age tomb on the southern side of the Upper Lake and for the next seven years slept on stones, wore animal skins, maintained a near-starvation diet and – according to the legend – became bosom buddies with the birds and animals. Kevin's eco-friendly lifestyle soon attracted a bunch of disciples, all seemingly unaware of the irony that they were flocking to hang out with a hermit who wanted to live as far away from other people as possible. Over the next couple of centuries his one-man operation mushroomed into a proper settlement and by the 9th century Glendalough rivalled Clonmacnoise as the island's premier monastic city. Thousands of students studied and lived in a thriving community that was spread over a considerable area.

Inevitably, Glendalough's success made it a key target of Viking raiders, who sacked the monastery at least four times between 775 and 1071. The final blow came in 1398, when English forces from Dublin almost completely destroyed it. Efforts were made to rebuild and some life lingered on here as late as the 17th century, when, under renewed repression, the monastery finally died.

WALKS AROUND GLENDALOUGH

The easiest and most popular walk is the gentle hour-long walk along the northern shore of the Upper Lake to the lead and zinc mine workings, which date from 1800. The better route is along the lakeshore rather than on the road, which runs 30m from the shore. Continue on up to the head of the valley if you wish.

Alternatively, you can walk the railway sleepers that form the path along the Spink (550m), the steep ridge with vertical cliffs running along the southern flanks of the Upper Lake. You can go part of the way and turn back, or complete a 5km circuit of the Upper Lake by following the top of the cliff, eventually coming down by the mine workings and going back along the northern shore.

The third option is the 7.5km hike up and down Camaderry Mountain (700m), hidden behind the hills that flank the northern side of the valley. The walk starts on the road 50m back towards Glendalough from the entrance to the Upper Lake car park. Head straight up the steep hill to the north and you come out on open mountains with sweeping views in all directions. You can then continue up Camaderry to the northwest, or just follow the ridge west looking over the Upper Lake.

SLEEPING & EATING

Derrybawn Mountain Lodge (☎ 0404-45644; derrybawnlodge@eircom.net; Derrybawn; s/d €50/90; Ⓟ) A handsome eight-room lodge on Derrybawn Mountain (474m), 4km south of Laragh, with spectacular views; the owners are avid hikers and are full of insider tips.

Glendalough Hotel (☎ 0404-45135; www.glendaloughhotel.com; Glendalough; s/d €120/190; Ⓟ) Forty-four luxurious bedrooms right next to the ruins.

Glendalough River House (☎ 0404-45577; www.glendaloughriverhouse.com; Laragh; s/d €58/82; Ⓟ) A 200-year-old restored farmhouse with delightfully large rooms overlooking the river.

SPIRITUAL SLEEPS

Glendalough Cillíns (☎ 0404-45140, bookings ☎ 0404-45777; St Kevin's Parish Church, Glendalough; r per person €45) In an effort to re-create something of the contemplative spirit of Kevin's early years in the valley, St Kevin's Parish Church rents out six hermitages (or *cillíns*) to people looking to take time out from the bustle of daily life and reflect on more spiritual matters. In keeping with more modern needs, however, there are a few more facilities than were present in Kevin's cave. Each hermitage is a bungalow consisting of a bedroom, a bathroom, a small kitchen area and an open fire (supplemented by a storage heating facility). The whole venture is managed by the local parish, and while there is a strong spiritual emphasis here, it is not necessarily a Catholic one. Visitors of all denominations and creeds are welcome, so long as their intentions are reflective and meditative – backpackers looking for a cheap place to bed down are not. The hermitages are in a field next to St Kevin's Parish Church, about 1km east of Glendalough on the R756 to Laragh.

Glendalough Hotel (☎ 0404-45135; 3-course lunch €19, bar mains around €10; 🕒 noon-6pm) The hotel's enormous restaurant serves a very good lunch of unsurprising dishes, usually involving some chicken, beef and fish. The bar menu – burgers, sandwiches, sausages and the like – is also quite filling.

Wicklow Heather Restaurant (☎ 0404-45157; Main St, Laragh; mains €12-18; 🕒 noon-8.30pm) This is the best place for anything substantial. The trout (farmed locally) is excellent. During summer, villagers put out signs and serve tea and scones on the village green.

RUSSBOROUGH HOUSE

Magnificent Russborough House (Map p213; ☎ 045-865 239; Blessington; adult/child/student €6.50/3.50/5; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 10.30am-5.30pm Sun & bank holidays Apr & Oct, closed rest of year) is one of Ireland's finest stately homes, a Palladian pleasure palace built for Joseph Leeson (1705–83), later the first earl of Milltown and, later still, Lord Russborough. It was built from 1741 to 1751 to the design of Richard Cassels, who was at the height of his fame as an architect. Poor old Richard didn't live to see it finished, but the job was well executed by Francis Bindon.

The house has always attracted unwelcome attention, beginning in 1798 when Irish rebels took hold of the place during the Rising (see p22); they were soon turfed out by the British Army who got so used to the comforts of the place that they didn't leave until 1801, and then only after a raging Lord Russborough challenged their commander, Lord Tyrawley, to a duel 'with blunderbusses and slugs in a sawpit'. Miaow.

The house remained in Leeson family hands until 1931. In 1952 it was sold to Sir Alfred Beit, the eponymous nephew of the cofounder of the de Beers diamond mining company. Uncle Alfred was an obsessive art collector, and when he died his impressive haul – which included works by Velázquez, Vermeer, Goya and Rubens – was passed on to his nephew, who brought it to Russborough House. The collection was to attract the interest of more than just art lovers.

The house has been the victim of four major robberies, beginning in 1974 when 19 paintings were stolen by the Irish Republican Army (IRA); all were eventually recovered. Ten years later, despite increased security, notorious Dublin gangster Martin Cahill masterminded another robbery, but this time the clients were Loyalist paramilitaries. Some paintings were recovered, though several were irreparably damaged – a good thief does not a gentle curator make (this series of events features in the film *The General*, see p43). Twice bitten but thrice shy, Beit decided to give the most valuable paintings to the National Gallery in 1988. In return, the National Gallery often lends paintings to the collection as temporary exhibits.

In 2001 a pair of thieves took the direct approach and drove a jeep through the front doors, making off with two paintings worth nearly €4 million, including a Gainsborough that had been stolen – and recovered – twice before. And then, to add abuse to the insult already added to injury, the house was broken into again in 2002, with the thieves taking five more paintings, including two by Rubens. Incredibly, however, both hauls were quickly recovered.

The admission price includes a 45-minute tour of the house and all the important paintings, which, given the history, is a monumental exercise in staying positive; whatever you do, make no sudden moves. You can take an additional 30-minute upstairs tour (adult/child €4/free) of the bedrooms, which contain more silver and furniture. The tour takes place at 2.15pm Monday to Saturday, and hourly on Sunday, when the house is open.

TRANSPORT: RUSSBOROUGH HOUSE

Distance from Dublin 35km

Direction Southwest

Bus Dublin bus 65 (€3.60, 1½ hours, 10 daily) from Eden Quay.

Car N81 southwest via Blessington.

SLEEPING & EATING

Haylands House (☎ 045-865 183; haylands@eircom.net; Dublin Rd, Blessington; s/d €45/70; 🅿) Highly recommended B&B with a warm welcome and lovely rooms.

Rathsallagh House & Country Club (Map p213; ☎ 045-403 112; www.rathsallaghhousehotel.com; Dunlavin; s/d from €135/185) This fabulous country manor off the N81, converted from Queen Anne stables in 1798, has splendidly appointed rooms and a superb golf course. The restaurant offers a five-course meal (€65).

Grangecon Cafe (☎ 045-857 892; Tullow Rd, Blessington; mains €9-16; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) Salads, homebaked dishes and a full menu of Irish cheeses are the staples at this tiny, terrific café located in a converted schoolhouse.

POWERSCOURT ESTATE

About 500m south of the charming village of Enniskerry is the entrance to the 64-sq-km Powerscourt Estate (Map p213; ☎ 01-204 6000; www.powerscourt.ie; adult/child/student €7.50/4.50/6.50; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Feb-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Nov-Jan), Wicklow's grandest country pile. This is one of the most popular day trips from Dublin, and the village – built in 1760 by Richard Wingfield, Earl of Powerscourt, so that his labourers would have somewhere to live – is a terrific spot to while away an afternoon.

If getting there under your own steam is an issue, you can visit it and Glendalough together as part of a Bus Éireann Tour (☎ 01-836 6111; www.buseireann.ie; Busaras; adult/child/student €27/17.55/25.20; 🕒 10.30am-5.45pm daily mid-Mar–Oct), which departs from the Dublin Tourism office.

Powerscourt Estate has existed more or less since 1300 when the LePoer (later anglicised to Power) family built themselves a castle here. The property then changed Anglo-Norman hands a few times before coming into the possession of Richard Wingfield, newly appointed Marshall of Ireland, in 1603; his descendants were to live here for the next 350 years. In 1731 the Georgian wunderkind, Richard Cassels, turned his genius to building the stunning Palladian-style mansion, which he finished in 1743. An extra storey was added to the building in 1787 and other alterations were made in the 19th century. The house was restored after the Wingfields sold up in the 1950s, but the whole building was gutted by fire on the very eve of its reopening in 1974.

The estate has since come into the hands of the sporting goods giants the Slazengers, who have overseen a second restoration, as well as the addition of two golf courses, a café, a huge garden centre and a bunch of cutsey little retail outlets. Basically, it's all intended to draw in the punters and wring as many euros out of their pockets as possible, so as to finish the huge restoration job and make the estate a kind of profitable wonderland. If you can deal with the crowds (summer weekends are the worst) or, better still, avoid them and visit midweek, you're in for a real treat.

Easily the biggest draw is the simply magnificent 20-hectare formal gardens and the breathtaking views that accompany them. Originally laid out in the 1740s, they were redesigned in the 19th century by Daniel Robinson, who had as much a fondness for the booze as he did for horticultural pursuits (see the boxed text, above). Perhaps this influenced his largely informal style, which resulted in a magnificent blend of landscaped gardens, sweeping terraces, statuary, ornamental lakes, secret hollows, rambling walks and walled enclosures replete with over 200 types of trees and shrubs – all beneath the stunning natural backdrop of the Great Sugarloaf Mountain to the southeast. Tickets come with a map laying out 40-minute and hour-long tours of the gardens. Don't miss the exquisite Japanese Gardens or the Pepperpot Tower, modelled on a three-inch actual pepperpot owned by Lady Wingfield. Our own favourite, however, is the animal cemetery, final resting place of the Wingfield pets and even some of their favourite milking cows. Some of the epitaphs are astonishingly personal.

A 7km walk to a separate part of the estate takes you to the 130m Powerscourt Waterfall (☎ 01-204 6000; adult/child/student €5/3.50/4.50; 🕒 9.30am-7pm May-Aug, 10.30am-5.30pm Mar-Apr & Sep-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Jan). This is the highest waterfall in Britain and Ireland, and is most impressive

THE BOOZY GARDENER

Daniel Robertson was not your typical gardener. He supervised the construction of the gardens from a wheelbarrow, in which he would lay prostrate, armed only with a bottle of sherry. To his underlings he would bark orders that, as the day passed, grew more and more incoherent as his bottle became lighter. Work usually went on until 5pm, when the tanked-up Robertson would call an end to the day's work on account of bad light. A perfectly reasonable suggestion, you may think, but considering that the summer day doesn't end until at least 10pm…

TRANSPORT: POWERSCOURT ESTATE

Distance from Dublin 18km

Direction South

Bus Dublin bus 44 (€2.10, 1¼ hours, every 20 minutes) from Hawkins St.

Car Drive south on Ranelagh Rd (R117), right onto Milltown Rd, left onto Dundrum Rd and on through Kilternan and Enniskerry; alternatively, head south to Bray along N11 and west for 3km on R117.

Train DART to Bray (€2.50), bus 185 to Enniskerry (€1.40, 20 minutes, hourly) from station.

lonelyplanet.com

after heavy rain. You can also get to the falls by road, following the signs from the estate. A nature trail has been laid out around the base of the waterfall, which takes you past giant redwoods, ancient oaks, beech, birch and rowan trees. There are plenty of birds in the vicinity, including the chaffinch, cuckoo, chiffchaff, raven and willow warbler.

SLEEPING & EATING

Coolakay House (☎ 01-286 2423; www.coolakayhouse.com; Waterfall Rd, Coolakay; s/d €45/80; Ⓟ) Four comfortable bedrooms and a terrific restaurant (mains around €12).

Summerhill House Hotel (☎ 01-286 7928; www.summerhillhousehotel.com; Enniskerry; s/d from €80/100; Ⓟ) Enniskerry's best hotel is a fabulous country mansion set amid its own woodland and landscaped park. It's off the N11.

Organic Life/Marc Michel (☎ 01-201 1882; Tinna Parc, Kilpedder; mains around €16; ⓥ 10am-5pm, restaurant noon-4pm) Situated just off the N11, past the turn-off for Glendalough, is the east coast's best-kept organic secret: a superb restaurant located in the middle of a lush forest.

Poppies Country Cooking (☎ 01-282 8869; The Square, Enniskerry; mains €9; ⓥ 8.30am-6pm) A pokey little café serving wholesome salads, filling sandwiches and award-winning ice cream…even if the service can be slow.

Powerscourt Terrace Café (☎ 01-204 6070; Powerscourt House; mains €8-13; ⓥ 10am-5pm) The folks at Avoca (p149) have applied all their know-how and turned what could have easily been just another run-of-the-mill tourist attraction café into something of a gourmet experience.

CASTLETOWN HOUSE

In a country full of elegant Palladian mansions, it is no mean feat to be considered the grandest of the lot, but **Castletown House** (Map p213; ☎ 01-628 8252; adult/child €3.70/1.30; ⓥ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat & Sun Easter-Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sun Oct) simply has no peer. It is Ireland's largest and most imposing Georgian estate, and a testament to the vast wealth enjoyed by the Anglo-Irish gentry during the 18th century.

The house was built between the years 1722 and 1732 for William Conolly (1662–1729), speaker of the Irish House of Commons, and, at the time, Ireland's richest man. Born into relatively humble circumstances in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, Conolly made his fortune through land transactions in the uncertain aftermath of the Battle of the Boyne (1690).

The original design of the house was by the Italian architect Alessandro Galilei (1691–1737), who in 1718 designed the façade of the main block so as to resemble a 16th-century Italian *palazzo* (palace). Construction began in 1722 but Galilei didn't bother hanging around to supervise, having left Ireland in 1719. Instead, the project was entrusted to Sir Edward Lovett Pearce (1699–1733), who returned from his grand tour of Italy in 1724 (where he had become friends with Galilei).

Inspired by the work of Andrea Palladio, which he had studied during his visit to Italy, Pearce enlarged the original design of the house and added the colonnades and the terminating pavilions. The interior is as opulent as the exterior suggests, especially the Long Gallery, replete with family portraits and exquisite stucco work by the Francini brothers. Pearce's connection with Conolly was a fortuitous one, as he was commissioned in 1728 to design the House of Commons in Dublin. That building, now the Bank of Ireland (p73) on College Green, is one of the most elegant examples of the Georgian style in Dublin.

As always seems the way with these grand projects, Conolly didn't live to see the completion of his wonder-palace. His widow continued to live at the unfinished house after his death in 1729, instigating many of the improvements made to the house after the main structure was completed in 1732. Her main architectural contribution was the curious 42.6m Obelisk, known locally as the Conolly Folly. Designed to her specifications by Richard Cassels, and visible from both ends of the Long Gallery, it is 3.2km north of the house.

The house remained in the family's hands until 1965, when it was purchased by Desmond Guinness. He spent vast amounts of money on restoring the house to its original splendour, an investment that was continued from 1979 by the Castletown Foundation. In 1994 Castletown House was transferred to state care and today it is managed by the Heritage Service.

TRANSPORT: CASTLETOWN HOUSE

Distance from Dublin 21km

Direction West

Bus Dublin buses 67 and 67A (one way €1.60, about one hour, hourly) depart from D'Olier St for Celbridge and stop at the gates of Castletown House.

Car Take N4 to Celbridge.

Immediately to the east of the grounds of Castletown House, and on private property that never belonged to the house, you will find the even more curious, conical **Wonderful Barn** (☎ 01-624 5448; Leixlip; ⓥ closed to the public). Standing at 21m high, this extraordinary five-storey structure, which is wrapped by a 94-step winding staircase, was commissioned by Lady Conolly in 1743 to give employment to local tenants whose crops were ruined by the severe frosts in the winters of 1741 and 1742. The building was ostensibly a granary, but it was also used as a shooting tower – doves were considered a delicacy in Georgian times. Flanking the main building are two smaller towers, which were also used to store grain. Be warned however: the land surrounding the barn has been zoned for redevelopment and there is a scandalous plan to build 500-odd houses around it, so prepare to trundle through a building site.

SLEEPING & EATING

Kildare Hotel & Golf Club (Map p213; ☎ 01-601 7200; www.kclub.ie; Straffan; r from €250; Ⓟ 🖳 🚌) Better known for the superb golf course that hosted the 2006 Ryder Cup, the estate is home to a palatial Palladian villa that is one of the best hotels in Ireland. It is 6km southwest of Celbridge just off the R403.

DETOUR: LARCHILL ARCADIAN GARDENS

Green thumbs and shrubbery fanatics will not want to miss a detour to the **Larchill Arcadian Gardens** (Map p213; ☎ 01-628 7354; www.larchill.ie; Kilcock; adult/child €7.50/5.50; ⓥ noon-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, noon-6pm Sat & Sun Sep), Europe's only example of a mid-18th-century *ferme ornée* (ornamental farm). A 40-minute walk takes you through beautiful landscaped parklands, passing eccentric follies (including a model of the Gibraltar fortress and a shell-decorated tower), gazebos and a lake. Children will be chuffed with the adventure playground, maze and rare-breed farm animals. The gardens are 12km northwest of Castletown House.

Carton House (Map p213; ☎ 01-505 2000; www.cartonhouse.com; r from €140; Ⓟ 🖳 🚌) It really doesn't get any grander than this vast early-19th-century estate set on lavish grounds, including two outstanding golf courses.

Kehoe's (☎ 01-628 6533; Main St, Maynooth; meals €5-8; ⓥ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) The place for a classic Irish breakfast, Kehoe's offers a warm, trad welcome to its small and cosy quarters. There are numerous daily lunch specials.

Meghna (☎ 01-505 4868; Main St, Maynooth; meals €10-20; ⓥ noon-2.30pm & 5-11pm) Several cuts above the usual curry joint, Meghna has a wide range of excellent South Asian dishes.