

Central South



Derided by some as the 'hole in the donut', the four counties here in the heart of Ireland are a delight to anyone who understands that the donut hole can be the best part.

The four midland counties of Kildare, Carlow, Laois and Offaly combine lush rolling fields, tree-covered hills, expanses of wildlife-filled bog and a history rich in artefacts. From the grand estates of the landlord days, with their Georgian homes, to the ancient and beguiling Clonmacnoise, Ireland's most magnificent monastic site, there's much that will surprise and delight as you explore the little lanes of the region.

And those explorations may yield the region's great pleasure: getting lost. Though you can't ever get really lost, just temporarily uncertain of your location. And who cares? It's hard to find a bad location and best of all, you can use it as an excuse to ask directions. Where else in the world will the way be so jovially explained like this: 'Well you just go up the wee road there until you come to the big tree, not the one big tree mind you but the other big tree, the one where Brigit O'Neill a few years back had quite the time...'

You'll want to record it. And the struggle of finding your way will get you ready for the many magnificent meals found in this centre of Ireland's growing food movement. Those lush lands produce some wonderful delights that will make this hole in the donut the best tasting around.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bogged Down** County Kildare's huge tracks of fecund land at the Bog of Allen (p344)
- **Horsin' Around** Learning the real meaning of the Irish National Stud in Kildare (p346)
- **Gardens Aplenty** Delighting in fine old estates and lush plantings in and around Ballon (p352)
- **Monastic Life** Letting your soul guide you around Ireland's finest monastic site, Clonmacnoise (p362)
- **Pearl Necklace** Exploring the ring of sights old and natural around Portlaoise (p354)



■ POPULATION: 333,000

■ AREA: 6301 SQ KM

GRAND & ROYAL CANALS

Starting in the late 1700s, a web of canals were dug extending west from Dublin (the starting point was the Guinness brewery). The goal was to link burgeoning industrial centres with ocean ports. Two of the most ambitious were the Grand and Royal Canals, which revolutionised transport in Ireland in the early 19th century, but their heyday was short-lived and the railways soon superseded them. Today they're favoured for cruising and fishing, and for their walking and cycling. Many waterfront villages can be found along their waters. Recent restorations have made them appealing recreational destinations.

For history, canal maps, coarse fishing, and ecology information, try the *Guide to the Grand Canal of Ireland* and the *Guide to the Royal Canal of Ireland*, both sold in tourist offices and bookshops in the region. **Waterways Ireland** (www.waterwaysireland.org) is charged with developing the waterways and has a wealth of info and publishes *Ireland's Waterways, Map and Directory*.

GRAND CANAL

The Grand Canal threads its way from Dublin to Robertstown in County Kildare, where one branch continues west through Tullamore before joining the River Shannon at Shannonbridge (p362), part of a region in County Offaly with many waterway diversions. The

other turns south to join the River Barrow at the cute town of Athy (p347); a total of 130km in all.

The canal passes through relatively unpopulated countryside. Flowers, fens, picturesque villages and 36 finely crafted locks line the journey; if you're lucky you'll see otters. Near the village of Sallins, the graceful seven-arched **Leinster Aqueduct** carries the canal across the River Liffey, while further south sections of the River Barrow are particularly delightful.

Huge engineering difficulties, including the riddle of how to cross the Bog of Allen, meant that the canal took 23 years to build, finally opening in 1779. Passenger services continued until the 1850s. A trickle of commercial traffic carried turf, porter, coal and grain until 1960; the last shipment was a bareful of Guinness!

For detailed information on the section of the canal between Robertstown and Lullymore, see p344.

ROYAL CANAL

Fourteen years behind the Grand Canal and duplicating its purpose, the 145km Royal Canal was always a loss-maker. It follows Kildare's northern border, passing an impressive backdrop of historical landmarks and stately homes, including St Patrick's College in Maynooth and Castletown House. There's a massive **aqueduct** near Leixlip, before it joins the River Shannon at Clondara (or Clondra) in County Longford.

The canal has become a popular amenity for thousands of residents along the north Kildare commuter belt. Consequently, bus and rail services are good, and a leisurely walk between Leixlip and Maynooth is an easy day trip from Dublin. Although the towpaths are open all the way to the Shannon, the canal itself is navigable only as far as Ballymahon in County Longford. But restoration continues (in 2007 an important stretch at Abbeyshrule in County Longford reopened) and the entire waterway should be navigable when the final 18km to Clondra reopens in 2008.

BARGES & BOATS

The canals offer a relaxing way to drift across the country in warmer months; you can hire narrow boats at several locations. Two-/eight-berth boats cost from €800/1600 in September and about €1200/1800 in July and August but rates vary widely.

Barrowline Cruisers (☎ 0502-25189; www.barrowline.ie; Vicarstown Inn, Vicarstown, Co Laois) Grand Canal and River Barrow.

Canalways (☎ 045-524 646; www.canalways.ie; Spencer Bridge, Rathangan, Co Kildare) Grand Canal and River Barrow.

Tranquil Holidays (☎ +44-1788 824 664; www.tranquilholidays.org; Twelfth Lock, Dublin 15) One of the few companies servicing the Royal Canal.

Banagher (p361) is also a good place for Grand Canal rentals.

WALKING THE TOWPATHS

Canal towpaths are ideal for leisurely walkers and there are numerous access points along both canals. Robertstown is a good starting point for long-distance rambles. The village is the hub of the Kildare Way and River Barrow towpath trails, the latter stretching all the way to St Mullin's, 95km south in County Carlow. From there it's possible to connect with the South Leinster Way (p700) at Graiguenamanagh, or the southern end of the Wicklow Way (p701) at Clonegal, north of Mt Leinster.

A variety of leaflets detailing the paths can be picked up at most regional tourist offices. Waterways Ireland is also a good source.

COUNTY KILDARE

Once a backwater from Dublin, County Kildare (Cill Dara) is now prime suburbia. Charming towns like Maynooth and Kildare city are becoming bedrooms for commuters and it seems the continuous road construction is always one step behind the latest surge in traffic.

Kildare is one of the most prosperous counties in Ireland and it has some of the most lucrative thoroughbred stud farms in the world. The multimillion-pound industry thrives in the county – partly because Irish law levies no taxes on stud fees (thanks to former prime minister and horse owner Charles J Haughey). There are many ties to the horse-breeding centre of Kentucky in the US.

Geographically, the county has some of the best farmland in Ireland, as well as a vast swathe of bog to the northwest and the sweeping grasslands of the Curragh to the south.

Although not over-stuffed with must-see attractions, Kildare does have a number of



diversions for a day-trip out of Dublin or a stop on your way west.

MAYNOOTH

☎ 01 / pop 10,300

The university gives the town of Maynooth (Maigh Nuad) a lively feel. The pretty tree-lined main street has stone-fronted houses and shops, there's easy access to the Royal Canal and good transport thanks to the legions of barristers and other swells hurrying to the city.

Orientation & Information

Main St and Leinster St join and run east-west, while Parson St runs south to the canal and the train station (accessed via a couple of footbridges), and Straffen Rd runs south to the M4.

Tech Store (☎ 629 1747; www.techstore.ie; Unit 5, Glenroyal Shopping Centre; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, noon-8pm Sat & Sun) Full line of services, including internet access (per hr €6); just off Straffen Rd.

Sights

ST PATRICK'S COLLEGE

Turning out Catholic priests since 1795, **St Patrick's College & Seminary** (☎ 628 5222; Main St) was ironically founded by the English in an attempt to steer Irish priests away from the dangerous ideals of revolution and republicanism being taught in France. The college joined the National University in 1910 and currently has about 5500 students. However, the number of young men studying for the priesthood continues to dwindle and there's just a few dozen now.

The college buildings are impressive – Pugin had a hand in designing them – and well worth an hour's ramble. You enter the college via Georgian Stoyte House, where the **accommodation office** (☎ 708 3576; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm & 8-11pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-11pm Sat & Sun) sells booklets (€4) for guiding yourself around. In summer there's also a **visitor centre** (☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun May-Sep) and a small **science museum** (admission by donation; ☎ 2-4pm Tue & Thu, 2-6pm Sun May-Sep). The college grounds contain a number of lofty Georgian and neo-Gothic buildings, gardens and squares, but the highlight of the tour has to be the **College Chapel**. Pull open the squeaky door and you enter the world's largest choir chapel, with stalls for more than 450 choristers and some magnificent ornamentation.

MAYNOOTH CASTLE

Near the entrance to St Patrick's College you can see the ruined gatehouse, keep and great hall of 13th-century **Maynooth Castle** (☎ 628 6744; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 1-5pm Sun Oct), home of the Fitzgerald family. The castle was dismantled in Cromwellian times, when the Fitzgeralds moved to Kilkea Castle (p348). Entry is by a 45-minute guided tour only; there's a small exhibition on the castle's history in the keep.

Activities

Leixlip, on the River Liffey between Maynooth and Dublin, is an important canoeing centre and the starting point of the annual 28km **International Liffey Descent Race** (www.liffeydescent.com). Usually held in early September, the race attracts more than 1000 competitors. For more information on canoeing in Ireland, try **Canoeing Ireland** (www.canoe.ie).

Sleeping

Maynooth has limited choices for lodging.

NUI Maynooth (☎ 708 6200; www.maynoothcampus.com; dm/s/d from €23/57/70; P) The university campus can accommodate 1000 guests in a wide variety of rooms. Most are in the mid-1970s North Campus, but rooms are better in the South Campus, where the accommodation office is. These are strewn around the courts and gardens of atmospheric St Patrick's College. Availability is best in the summer months.

Glenroyal Hotel & Leisure Club (☎ 629 0909; www.glenroyal.ie; Straffen Rd; r from €85-130; P) This modern 113-room hotel is tailored to business travellers and weddings. The design is bog standard but the rooms are spacious and spotless, have high-speed internet, and there are two swimming pools.

Carton House (☎ 505 2000; www.cartonhouse.com; r from €140; P) It really doesn't get any grander than this vast, early-19th-century estate set on lavish grounds. Although its history was a chequered mix of owners, Carton House was recently fully rebuilt into a spacious 147-room hotel. The interiors belie the exterior and are stylishly minimalist. Rooms have wi-fi, lavish baths and modern accoutrements like flat-screen TVs. To reach the hotel, follow the R148 east towards Leixlip along the Royal Canal.

Eating

Kehoe's (☎ 628 6533; Main St; 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 (☎ 505 4868; Main St; 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. The dining room has a gracious air and it's a floor above the street. For a kick in the old massalla, try the chicken chilli version.

Getting There & Away

Dublin Bus (☎ 873 4222; www.dublinbus.ie) runs a service to Maynooth (€3.10, one hour) leaving several times an hour from Pearse St in Dublin.

Maynooth is on the main Dublin-Sligo line, with regular trains in each direction: to Dublin (€2.70, 35 minutes, one to four per hour); to Sligo (€35, two hours 40 minutes, four per day).

AROUND MAYNOOTH Celbridge

After the flowery excess of the Baroque era, the architectural pendulum swung far with Palladianism, a neoclassical style that favoured balance, austerity and porticos – lots of porticos. In the early 18th century, Italian architects brought an especially pure form to Ireland and **Castletown House** (☎ 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), a massive country house, is one of Ireland's finest examples. A lengthy tree-lined avenue leads up to the imposing façade, and the exquisite interior has been completely restored. Entry is by one-hour guided tour only.

The house was built between 1722 and 1732 for William Conolly, a humble publican's son who became speaker of the Irish House of Commons and the richest man in Ireland. It was designed by Alessandro Galilei, and his avant-garde building (a central block flanked by curved curtain walls) soon became the model for many of Ireland's country houses. In the US, Thomas Jefferson became a Palladian acolyte and much of official Washington DC is in this style.

There are two follies in the grounds commissioned by Conolly's widow, Katherine, to give employment to the poor after the 1739

famine. The **obelisk** can be seen from the Long Gallery at the back of the house, while the Heath-Robinsonesque **Wonderful Barn**, six teetering storeys wrapped by an exterior spiral staircase, is on private property just outside Leixlip. Those fins you see circling are developer sharks hoping to surround the barn with houses.

Buses 120 and 123 run from Dublin to Celbridge (€3, 30 minutes, every half-hour Monday to Friday, hourly Saturday, six buses Sunday).

Larchill Arcadian Gardens

These **gardens** (☎ 628 7354; www.larchill.ie; Killock; adult/child €7.50/5.50; ☎ noon-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, noon-6pm Sat & Sun Sep) are 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, classic 18th-century formal plantings, gazebos and a lake. Children will be chuffed with the adventure playground, maze and winsome farm animals.

The gardens are 5km north of Killock on Dunsoughlin Rd (R125).

STRAFFAN

☎ 01 / pop 400

Teeny Straffan has a few attractions for the young and one huge one for the old.

Located in an old church, mechanical fanatics worship at the **Steam Museum & Lodge Park Walled Garden** (☎ 627 3155; www.steam-museum.ie; adult/concession €7.50/5; ☎ 2-6pm Wed-Sun Jun-Aug), which traces the history of steam power and the Industrial Revolution. The collection includes working steam engines from breweries, distilleries, factories and ships. Next door, the 18th-century walled garden has traditional fruits, flowers and formal plantings.

Just down the road at the **Straffan Butterfly Farm** (☎ 627 1109; www.straffanbutterflyfarm.com; Ovidstown; adult/child €7/4.50; ☎ noon-5.30pm Jun-Aug), you can wander through a tropical greenhouse full of enormous exotic butterflies, or commune with critters like Larry, the leopard gecko.

Two of Ireland's best-known golf courses can be found at the **K Club** (Kildare Hotel & Country Club; ☎ 601 7200; www.kclub.ie; Straffan; r from €250; P) a Georgian estate and golfers' paradise. Inside there are 92 well-appointed rooms and lots of public spaces for having a drink and lying about your exploits outside.

There are two golf courses: one, with Arnold Palmer's design imprimatur, is one of the best in Ireland and has been the home of the European Open since 1995; the second course opened in 2003. Green fees are stiff (from €250) but reserve in advance. In 2006, this is where the European team won its third Ryder Cup in a row.

Bus Éireann (☎ 836 6111; www.buseireann.ie) runs buses from Dublin (€3.30, 30 minutes, every half hour, six buses Sunday).

ALONG THE GRAND CANAL

Heading west from Straffan, there are some interesting sites as you follow the banks of the Grand Canal. Just past Clane it's worth making the short detour to tiny, tranquil **Robertstown**. This picturesque village has remained largely untouched and is dominated by the now-dilapidated Grand Canal Hotel, built in 1801. It's a good place to start a canal walk (see p341).

Just southwest of Robertstown and at the centre of the Kildare flatlands, the **Hill of Allen** (206m) was a strategic spot through the centuries due to its 360-degree view. Today the top is marked by a 19th-century folly and the ruins of some Iron Age fortifications said to mark the home of Fionn McCumhaill.

Further west you'll find the wonderfully interpretive **Bog of Allen Nature Centre** (☎ 045-860 133; www.ipcc.ie; R414, Lullymore; adult/child €5/free; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri), a fascinating institution run by the nonprofit Irish Peatland Conservation Council. The centre traces the history of bogs and peat production, and has the largest carnivorous plant collection in Ireland, including sundews, butterwort and other bog-native protein-eaters. Much funding comes from the Netherlands, where the historic bogs are all gone. It's common to find dew-eyed Dutch volunteers assisting in the ongoing renovations. A nearby boardwalk extends into the Bog of Allen.

A rather mangy rabbit mascot greets visitors to the cheerful **Lullymore Heritage & Discovery Park** (☎ 045-870 238; Lullymore; adult/child €9/8; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun Easter-Oct, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun Nov-Easter), about 1km south of the Bog of Allen Nature Centre. Aimed right at kids, a woodland trail leads you past various dwellings (including Neolithic huts, a not-so-festive Famine-era house and an enchanting fairy village), and there's crazy golf and a road train. Should the unthinkable

happen and it rains, the Funky Forest is a vast indoor playground.

For information on hiring narrow boats on the canal, see p341.

NEWBRIDGE & THE CURRAGH

☎ 045 / pop 15,900

The fairly unremarkable town of Newbridge (Droichead Nua) is near the junction of the M7 and M9. Many tourists flock to the **Newbridge Silverware Showroom** (☎ 431 301; www.newbridgecutlery.com), a purely commercial venture that trades on the area's metalwork heritage as it peddles vast quantities of silver-plated spoons, forks and whatnots. Remarkably rude staff took the shine off our visit the day we were there.

Silverware aside, the town is more famous as the gateway to the Curragh, one of the country's largest pieces of unfenced fertile land and the centre of the Irish horse industry. It's renowned for its **racecourse** (☎ 441 205; www.curragh.ie; admission €15-50; ☎ mid-Apr-Oct), the oldest and most prestigious in the country. Even if you're not a horsey type, it's well worth experiencing the passion, atmosphere and general craic of a day at the races, which can verge on mass hysteria. If you miss the chance to hear the hooves, you can still see some action: if you get up early or pass by in the late evening, you'll see the thoroughbreds exercising on the wide-open spaces surrounding the racecourse.

BOG OF ALLEN

Stretching like a brown, moist desert through nine counties, including Kildare, Laois and Offaly, the Bog of Allen is Ireland's best-known raised bog, and once covered much of the midlands. Unfortunately, in a pattern repeated across Ireland, the peat is rapidly being turned into potting compost and fuel. Once Ireland had almost 17% of its land covered in bogs; today it's less than 2%. Bogs are home to a wide range of plants and animals, including cranberries, insect-eating sundews, all manner of frogs and butterflies.

There are various ways to discover this rich land. For details of the Clonmacnoise & West Offaly Railway Bog Tour see p362. The Bog of Allen Nature Centre is right along the Grand Canal.

CHRISTY MOORE: A NEW TRADITION FOR TRADITIONAL MUSIC

A native of Newbridge, County Kildare, Christy Moore is one of Ireland's best-known, and certainly best-loved, traditional singers. Combining a ready wit and puckish charm, he has produced more than 23 solo albums of songs that are easy on the ear if not the mind.

The causes he has championed – travellers, antinuclear protests, South Africa, Northern Ireland – might give one the wrong impression: Christy is equally at home singing tender love songs (Nancy Spain), haunting ballads (Ride On), comic ditties (Lisdoovarna) and bizarre flights of lyrical fancy (Reel in the Flickering Light). He was also influential as a member of Planxty and Moving Hearts, as Ireland experimented during the 1970s and 1980s with its traditional musical forms to combine folk, rock and jazz in a heady and vibrant fusion.

Born in 1945, Moore grew up the son of a grocer and was influenced early in his musical career by a Traveller, John Riley. He was denied the musical opportunities he craved in Ireland and left in 1966 for England, where he quickly became popular on the British folk scene in Manchester and West Yorkshire.

Moore's first big break came with *Prosperous* (named after the Kildare town), on which he teamed up with the legendary Donal Lunny, Andy Irvine and Liam O'Flynn. They went on to form Planxty and recorded three ground-breaking albums.

Moore has done much to breathe life into traditional music. His work is always entertaining but like any good pub ballad, there's far more to his lyrics than you might first suspect. He's passionate, provocative and distinctive; you'll hear the influences of others as diverse as Jackson Browne and Van Morrison.

Certainly, even as he curtails his live performances to write, he is an iconic figure among Irish trad musicians and fans. He has built an international reputation as a writer and interpreter of a living tradition, at the head of the table of Irish traditional music.

Recommended listening: *The Christy Moore Collection, 1981-1991*.

The M7 runs through the Curragh (exit 12) and Newbridge from Dublin. There is frequent Bus Éireann service between Dublin's Busáras bus station and Newbridge (€6.80, 90 minutes). From Newbridge, buses continue on to the Curragh racecourse (€1.30, 10 minutes) and Kildare city. There are extra buses on race days.

The Dublin-Kildare **train** (☎ 01-836 6222) runs from Heuston train station and stops in Newbridge (€11.30, 30 minutes, hourly).

DETOUR: BALLYMORE EUSTACE

The village of Ballymore Eustace is home to one of Ireland's best modern pubs, the **Ballymore Inn** (☎ 045-864 585; www.ballymoreinn.com; meals €10-30). The richly tiled interior is warmed by small fireplaces, which flicker against the wicker and leather seating. The food ranges from pizza to amazing steaks. You can opt for a more formal experience in the dining room at lunch or dinner or settle back in the large pub, where pub food is served all day. Food is sourced from a stellar cast of local suppliers.

Check the timetable for trains that stop at the racecourse.

South Kildare Community Transport (☎ 871 916; www.skct.ie) runs a local bus service on two routes that serve Athy, Ballitore, Castledermot, Kildare city and Moone and Newbridge among others (one way €3.50; up to five times daily).

KILDARE CITY

☎ 045 / pop 5800

Unassuming Kildare is a small cathedral and market town, strongly associated with one of Ireland's high-profile saints, St Brigid. Its busy, compact triangular square is a pleasant place outside rush hour.

Information

The **Tourist Office & Heritage Centre** (☎ 521 240; www.kildare.ie; Market House, Market Sq; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) has an exhibition (admission €1) outlining Kildare's history. There's local art for sale.

Sights

ST BRIGID'S CATHEDRAL

The solid presence of 13th-century **St Brigid's Cathedral** (☎ 521 229; Market Sq; admission by donation;

☞ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun May-Sep) looms over Kildare Sq. Look out for a fine stained-glass window inside that depicts the three main saints of Ireland: Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille. The church also contains the restored tomb of Walter Wellesley, Bishop of Kildare, which disappeared soon after his death in 1539 and was only found again in 1971. One of its carved figures has been variously interpreted as an acrobat or a sheila-na-gig.

The 10th-century **round tower** (admission €4) in the grounds is Ireland's second highest at 32.9m, and one of the few that you can climb, provided the guardian is around. Its original conical roof has been replaced with an unusual Norman battlement. Near the tower is a **wishing stone** – put your arm through the hole and touch your shoulder and your wish will be granted. On the north side of the cathedral are the heavily restored foundations of an ancient **fire temple** (see the boxed text, below).

IRISH NATIONAL STUD & GARDENS

With highlights like the 'Teasing Shed', you shouldn't miss the **Irish National Stud** (☎ 521 617; www.irish-national-stud.ie; Tully; adult/child €10/5; ☞ 9.30am-6pm mid-Feb-Dec, last admission 5pm), about 3km south of Kildare, which was founded by Colonel Hall Walker (of Johnnie Walker whiskey fame) in 1900. He was remarkably successful with his horses, but his eccentric

breeding technique relied heavily on astrology: the fate of a foal was decided by its horoscope and the roofs of the stallion boxes opened on auspicious occasions to reveal the heavens and duly influence the horses' fortunes. Today the immaculately kept centre is owned and managed by the Irish government. It breeds high-quality stallions to mate with mares from all over the world.

There are **guided tours** (many of the guides have a real palaver) of the stud every hour on the hour, with access to the intensive-care unit for newborn foals. If you visit between February and June, you might even see a foal being born. Alternatively, the foaling unit shows a 10-minute video with all the action. You can wander the stalls and go eye-to-eye with famous stallions. Less vigorous are the retirees like Vintage Crop, who won the Melbourne Cup in 1993. Given that most are now geldings, they probably have dim memories of their time in the aforementioned Teasing Shed, the place where stallions are stimulated for mating, while dozens look on. The cost: tens of thousands of euros for a top horse.

The revamped **Irish Horse Museum** celebrates championship horses and more mundane examples such as farmhouse nags.

The delightful **Japanese Gardens** (part of the complex) are considered to be the best of their kind in Europe. Created between 1906 and 1910, they trace the journey from birth to

death through 20 landmarks, including the Tunnel of Ignorance, the Hill of Ambition and the Chair of Old Age.

St Fiachra's Garden is another bucolic feature, with a mixture of bog oak, gushing water, replica monastic cells and an underground crystal garden of dubious distinction. Both gardens are great for a relaxing stroll.

The large **visitor centre** houses an excellent café, shop and children's play area. A tour of the stud and gardens takes about two hours.

Lying outside the site, behind the museum, are the ruins of a 12th-century **Black Abbey**. Just off the road back to Kildare is **St Brigid's Well**, where five stones represent different aspects of Brigid's life.

Sleeping

Silken Thomas (☎ 522 232; www.silkenstomas.com; Market Sq; s/d from €45/70; ☐) This local institution includes clubs, bars and an 18-room hotel. There's a modern wing and an 18th-century town house. Rooms are unfriendly but comfortable; try for one away from the action.

Derby House Hotel (☎ 522 144; www.derbyhousehotel.ie; s/d from €60/100; ☐) This old hotel has 20 decent rooms right in the centre of town. It's an easy walk from here to bars, restaurants and all the St Brigid lore you could hope for. There's wi-fi throughout.

Martinstown House (☎ 441 269; www.martinstownhouse.com; the Curragh; s/d €145/220; ☞ mid-Jan-mid-Dec; ☐) This beautiful 18th-century country manor is built in the frilly 'strawberry hill' Gothic style and set in a 170-acre estate and farm surrounded by trees. The house has four rooms filled with antiques; children are banned – darn. You can arrange for memorable dinners in advance (€55); ingredients are drawn from the kitchen garden.

Eating

Fittingly enough there's a market on Market Sq every Thursday, although the selection can vary; when we asked what was grown locally we got this response: 'potatoes'.

Agape (☎ 533 711; Station Rd; meals €5-10; ☞ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Just off Market Sq, this trendy little café has a fine range of homemade food. There's a full coffee bar and a menu of salads, soups, sandwiches and tasty hot specials.

Chapter 16 (☎ 522 232; Market Sq; mains €12-25; ☞ 6-10pm) Part of the Silken Thomas empire, this ambitious restaurant serves steaks, seafood and modern Irish fare in an attrac-

tive setting. The vast pub has a popular carvery lunch.

Getting There & Away

There is frequent Bus Éireann service between Dublin Busáras and Kildare city (€8.80, 1¼ hours). Buses continue on to Limerick (€11.30, 2½ hours, four daily). Some Dublin buses also service the Stud.

The Dublin-Kildare **train** (☎ 01-836 6222) runs from Heuston train station and stops in Kildare (€12.80, 35 minutes, one to four per hour). This is a major junction and trains continue on to numerous places including Ballina, Galway, Limerick and Waterford.

South Kildare Community Transport (☎ 045-871 916; www.skct.ie) runs a local bus service on two routes that serve Athy, Ballitore, Castledermot, Kildare city, Moone and Newbridge among others (one way €3.50, up to five times daily).

ATHY

☎ 059 / pop 6200

Strategically placed at the junction of the River Barrow and the Grand Canal, the Anglo-Norman settlement of Athy (Ath I; *a-thigh*) shows little of its long history.

Athy was founded in the 12th century and later became an important defence post. Many of the town's older buildings remain, including the impressive **White's Castle**, a tower built in 1417 to house the garrison. The castle is next to Crom-a-boo Bridge, named after what must be the world's worst battle cry, hollered by the local Geraldine family.

The **Tourist Office & Heritage Centre** (☎ 863 3075; Emily Sq; admission Heritage Centre adult/child €3/2; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-4pm Sat & Sun May-Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Apr) gives good walking recommendations. The heritage centre traces the history of Athy and has a fascinating exhibit on Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922), who was born in nearby Kilkea. On display is one of Shackleton's sledges, acquired from New Zealand where he sold it to pay off his debts.

Activities

Athy is a popular place for pike, salmon and trout fishing. For equipment and information try **Griffin Hawe Hardware** (☎ 863 1221; www.griffinhawe.ie; 22 Duke St). There's a wide range of fly rods and gear.

ST BRIGID

St Brigid is one of Ireland's best-known saints, hailed as an early feminist but also known for her compassion, generosity and special ways with barnyard animals. Stories about her are both many and mythical. All agree that she was a strong-willed character: according to one legend, when her father chose her an unwanted suitor, she pulled out her own eye to prove her resolve never to wed. After she had taken her vows, and was mistakenly ordained a bishop rather than nun, her beauty was restored. Another has her being shipped off to a convent after she compulsively gave away the family's wealth to the poor. (One tale even has Brigid being spirited to Ireland from Portugal by pirates.)

Brigid founded a monastery in Kildare in the 5th century for both nuns and monks, which was unusual at the time. One lurid account says it had a perpetual fire tended by 20 virgins that burned continuously until 1220 when the Bishop of Dublin stopped the tradition, citing it as 'un-Christian'. The supposed fire pit can be seen in the grounds of St Brigid's Cathedral where a fire is lit on 1 February, St Brigid's feast day. Nonvirgins are welcome.

Brigid was a tireless traveller, and as word of her many miracles spread, her influence stretched across Europe. Yet another legend claims that the medieval Knights of Chivalry chose St Brigid as their patron, and that it was they who first chose to call their wives 'brides'.

Brigid is remembered by a simple reed cross first woven by her to explain the redemption to a dying chief. The cross, said to protect and bless a household, is still found in many rural homes. She is also the patron of travellers, chicken farms and seamen, among others.

Sleeping & Eating

Coursestown House (☎ 863 1101; fax 863 2740; Stradbally Rd; s/d €75/120; (P)) This 200-year-old farmhouse is just east of Athy off the R428. It's set among gorgeous gardens, which provide a lot of the produce that makes the breakfasts here so bountiful in season. The five rooms exude country charm and have powerful showers for washing the grime off after a long walk in the countryside.

Carlton Abbey Hotel (☎ 863 0100; www.carltonabbeyhotel.com; town centre; r from €80; (P) (Q) (A)) Once as stolid as the morals of its residents, this old convent has been converted into a most inviting boutique hotel. There are 40 rooms with dark woods and light linens and mod cons such as high-speed internet. There's a popular pub, a good restaurant and a 21m pool.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann (☎ 01-836 6111; www.buseireann.ie) has six buses to/from Dublin (€9.30, 1½ hours) and Clonmel (€11.70, two hours).

South Kildare Community Transport (☎ 045-871 916; www.skct.ie) runs a local bus service on two routes that serve Athy, Ballitore, Castledermot, Kildare city, Moone and Newbridge among others (one way €3.50, up to five times daily).

DONNELLY'S HOLLOW TO CASTLEDERMOT

This 25km stretch south towards Carlow contains some interesting detours to tiny towns bypassed by the speedy but unlively N9.

South Kildare Community Transport (☎ 045-871 916; www.skct.ie) runs a local bus service on two routes that serve Athy, Ballitore, Castledermot, Kildare city, Moone and Newbridge among others (one way €3.50; up to five times daily).

Donnelly's Hollow

Dan Donnelly (1788–1820) is revered as Ireland's greatest bare-knuckle fighter of the 19th century. He's also the stuff of legend – his arms were so long, he could supposedly tie his shoelaces without having to bend down. This spot, 4km west of Kilcullen on the R413, was his favourite battleground, and the obelisk at the centre of the hollow details his glorious career.

Ballitore

☎ 059 / pop 750

Low-key Ballitore is the only planned and permanent Quaker settlement in Ireland. It was founded by incomers from Yorkshire in the early 18th century. A small **Quaker Museum** (☎ 862 3344; ballitoretlib@kildarecoco.ie; Mary Leadbeater House, Main St; admission by donation; ☎ noon-5pm Tue-Sat year-round, 2-6pm Sun Jun-Sep), in a tiny restored house, documents the lives of the community (including the namesake former owner who was known for her aversion to war). There's a Quaker cemetery and Meeting House, and a modern **Shaker Store** (☎ 862 3372; www.shakerstore.ie; Main St; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun), which sells delightfully humble wooden toys and furniture. It has a tearoom.

About 2km west is **Rath of Mullaghmast**, an Iron Age hill fort and standing stone where Daniel O'Connell, champion of Catholic emancipation, held one of his 'monster rallies' in 1843.

Moone

☎ 059 / pop 380

Just south of Ballitore, the unassuming village of Moone is home to one of Ireland's most magnificent high crosses. The unusually tall and slender **Moone High Cross** is an 8th- or 9th-century masterpiece, which displays its carved biblical scenes with the confidence and exuberance of a comic strip. The cross can be found 1km west of Moone village and the N9 in an atmospheric early Christian churchyard. Old stone ruins add to the mood of the drive.

The solid and stone 18th-century **Moone High Cross Inn** (☎ 862 4112; Bolton Hill; s/d from €50/80; (P)), 2km south of Moone, has five rooms decorated in quaint country-house style. The delightful bar downstairs serves good pub lunches and there's a proper restaurant (open 6pm to 8.30pm, mains €12 to €35), which uses local and organic ingredients. The inn revolves around a Celtic theme, celebrating pagan festivals and hoarding healing stones, lucky charms and even a 'love stone' in the outside courtyards.

Kilkea Castle

Built in the 12th century, **Kilkea Castle Hotel** (☎ 059-914 5156; www.kilkeacastle.ie; Castledermot; r from €160; (P) (Q)) is Ireland's oldest continuously inhabited castle. It's the kind of place where you'll find a suit of armour in a nook

in the hall and looks like a castle right out of central casting. It was once the second home of the Maynooth Fitzgeralds, and the grounds are supposedly haunted by Gerald the Wizard Earl, who rises every seven years from the Rath of Mullaghmast to free Ireland from its enemies – a pretty good trick considering he was buried in London.

The castle was completely restored in the 19th century and is now an exclusive hotel and golf club. Among its exterior oddities is an **Evil Eye Stone**, high up at the back of the castle. Thought to date from the 14th or 15th century, it depicts some very weird goings-on between nightmarish creatures that may be a woman, wolf and cock. Another carving depicts a monkey in bondage; definitely fertile grounds for voyeurs.

De Lacy's (set dinner from €50), the restaurant, serves complex and formal meals in elegant surroundings.

The castle is 5km northwest of Castledermot on the Athy road (R418).

Castledermot

☎ 059 / pop 1160

Castledermot was once home to a vast ecclesiastical settlement, but all that remains of St Diarmuid's 9th-century **monastery** is a 20m round tower topped with a medieval battlement. Nearby are two well-preserved, carved 10th-century granite high crosses, a 12th-century Romanesque doorway and a medieval Scandinavian 'hogback' gravestone, the only one in Ireland. Reach the ruins by entering the rusty gate on all-too-busy Main St (N9), then walking up the tree-lined avenue to St James' church. At the southern end of town, the ruins of an early 14th-century **Franciscan friary** can be seen by the road.

Schoolhouse Restaurant (☎ 914 4098; Main St; ☎ 6-9pm Tue-Sat, noon-2pm & 6-9pm Sun) is, as you might guess, based in a 1920s school. The dining room is elegant, with cream-coloured walls and dark wood. The food is modern Irish and makes full use of regional ingredients. At times, simple B&B rooms may be available.

COUNTY CARLOW

Carlow (Ceatharlach), Ireland's second-smallest county, has a beauty all of its own. Dotted around are strings of quietly picturesque villages such as Rathvilly, Leigh-

linbridge and Borris, which have scarcely changed in the past hundred years. The most dramatic chunk of history in these parts is Europe's biggest dolmen, just outside Carlow town. From history to gardens, you'll find much to delay your exit from this county.

The scenic Blackstairs Mountains dominate the southeast: the highest, Mt Leinster (796m), is one of Ireland's premier hang-gliding sites, with stunning views from the summit. The website (www.carlowtourism.com) has scads of local info.

CARLOW TOWN

☎ 059 / pop 13,400

The winding streets and lanes of Carlow give it just a bit of a 'Kilkenny Lite' feel. Or maybe it's just Kilkenny cheap. There's enough heritage to keep you wandering for an afternoon, and a ripple of trendy cafés and solid nightlife may keep you in town past dusk. But you're unlikely to feel besieged by the tour bus hordes.

Orientation & Information

Dublin St is the city's principal north-south axis, with Tullow St, the main shopping street, running off it at a right angle.

Post office (cnr Kennedy Ave & Dublin St)

Tourist office (☎ 913 1554; cnr Tullow & College Sts; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri year-round, 10am-5.30pm Sat Jun-Aug) A useful source of information. A county museum (www.carlowcountymuseum.com) is in the works for an adjoining space.

Webtalk (☎ 913 9721; 44 Tullow St; per hr €6; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Full internet services.

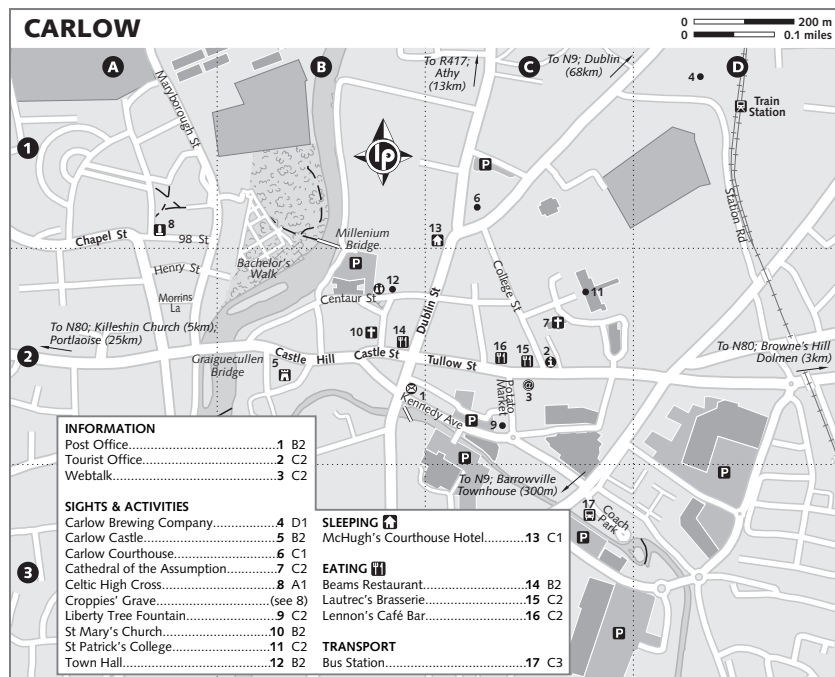
Sights

Follow the walking tour (p350) to hit Carlow's highlights.

If you're feeling more thirsty than energetic, visit the **Carlow Brewing Company** (☎ 913 4356; www.carlowbrewing.com; the Goods Store, Station Rd; admission €7). This small microbrewery has been hugely successful since it opened in 1998; its award-winning O'Hara's Celtic Stout bursts with flavour and blows away that *other* Irish stout. Arrange tours in advance.

Activities

The River Barrow is popular with canoeists, kayakers and rowers. **Adventure Canoeing Days** (☎ 087-252 9700; www.gowiththeflow.ie) does



weekend trips that tackle the rather tame white-water (from €50) and rents out canoes (from €50 per day). Book in advance.

Walking Tour

Start your walk at the tourist office on College St. Just to the right is the elegant Regency Gothic **Cathedral of the Assumption (1)**, which dates from 1833. The cathedral was the brainchild of Bishop Doyle, a staunch supporter of Catholic emancipation. His statue inside includes a woman said to represent Ireland rising up against her oppressors. The church also has an elaborate pulpit and some fine stained-glass windows.

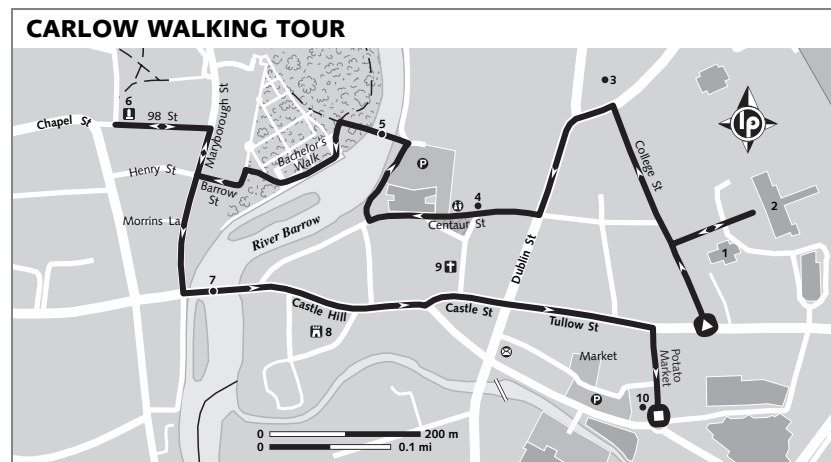
Next door is **St Patrick's College (2)**, Ireland's first post-penal seminary. Opened in 1793 (but now closed to the public), it is thought to have been in use for longer than any other seminary in the world.

Walking north along College St then turning left on Dublin St, you'll come to the impressive **Carlow Courthouse (3)**, at the northern end of Dublin St. Designed by William Morrison in 1830, this elegant building is modelled on the Parthenon and is considered to

be one of the most impressive courthouses in the country. Carlow got it through an administrative mix-up – the building was originally intended for Cork.

Walk down Dublin St and turn right into Centaur St and past the **Town Hall (4)**, dating from 1884. When you reach the river, cross the **Millennium Bridge (5)** and walk across the park to 98 St where you'll find the **Celtic high cross (6)** that marks the mass Croppies' Grave. Here 640 United Irish rebels were buried following the bloodiest fighting of the 1798 Rising. The name 'croppie' came from the rebels' habit of cropping their hair to indicate their allegiance.

From here turn back into Maryborough St and walk south to the five-arched **Graiguecullen Bridge (7)**, thought to be the oldest and lowest bridge over the River Barrow. Cross the bridge and continue east to the ruins of 13th-century **Carlow Castle (8)**, built by William de Marshall on the site of an earlier Norman motte-and-bailey fort. The castle survived Cromwell's attentions but succumbed to the grand plans of a certain Dr Middleton, who decided to convert it into



WALK FACTS

Start Tourist office
Finish Liberty Tree fountain
Distance 2.5km
Duration One hour

a lunatic asylum. Proving the cliché about the lunatics running the asylum, he blew up much of the castle in 1814 in order to 'remodel' it. All that is left is a single wall flanked by two towers.

Continue up Castle Hill and take the fork to your left onto Castle St. On your left you will see **St Mary's Church (9)**, built in 1727 (the tower and spire were added later, in 1834), with a number of statues by Richard Morrison.

Walk on up Tullow St, the town's principal shopping thoroughfare, and take the second right into Potato Market. At the end of the lane is a small square. The bronze statue in the middle of the fountain is the **Liberty Tree (10)**, designed by John Behan to commemorate the 1798 Rising.

Festivals & Events

Every summer (usually in mid-June) Carlow town celebrates the 10-day **Éigse Carlow Arts Festival** (☎ 914 0491; www.eigsecarlow.ie), when musicians, writers, actors and street performers take over the town. Artists and groups come not just from Ireland but also countries as far away as South Korea and India.

Sleeping

Diminutive County Carlow has many charming inns, making it easy to stay out in the lovely countryside, popping into town for food and culture.

McHugh's Courthouse Hotel (☎ 913 3243; www.mchughscourthousehotel.com; 38-39 Dublin St; s/d from €50/90; P) The look is sort of pseudo-old but the interior of the rooms is very much modern-nondescript. The pub is large and woody, the bathrooms large and tile-y while the singles are tiny.

Barrowville Townhouse (☎ 914 3324; www.barrowvillehouse.com; Kilkenny Rd; s/d from €60/110; P) This attractive 18th-century town house has been meticulously restored and converted into a classy B&B, under five minutes' walk south of town. The seven rooms vary in size but are all perfectly atmospheric for curling up with a book or... Enjoy breakfast in the open and airy conservatory.

Eating & Drinking

Watch for new cafés opening in the centre. This is the nightlife hub for those stuck out in the sticks; ask around to find out what the clubs of the moment are. There's usually something on along Tullow St and Thursday night is popular for live music. Carlow's **farmers market** (☎ Sat) is fittingly on the Potato Market.

Lennon's Café Bar (☎ 913 1575; 121 Tullow St; meals €5-15; ☎ food served 9am-4pm Mon-Sat, 6-10pm Thu & Fri) Trendy and stylish, Lennon's is a sure sign that the times may be a-changin' in Carlow.

Liam and Sinéad Byrne run a pub that's really an excuse to serve healthy fresh food at great prices. Sandwiches, salads, hot mains and the creative dinners avoid the predictable.

Lautrec's Brasserie (☎ 914 3455; 115 Tullow St; meals €10-25; ☎ noon-9pm) The Carlow branch of the Kilkenny original, Lautrec's is named after the artist and has suitably creative French bistro fare. During the day the sidewalk café tables are the place for lunch. At night, cosy up for a romantic meal at the candle-lit tables within.

Beams Restaurant (☎ 913 1824; 59 Dublin St; set dinner €40; ☎ 7.30-9.30pm Sat) Housed in an 18th-century coach house replete with massive wooden beams, this one-day-a-week charmer is undoubtedly the county's best source for finely crafted exquisite French cuisine, albeit with an Irish accent. The extensive wine list draws on the stock of the subsidiary wine shop.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Bus Éireann runs buses to Dublin (€9.30, two hours, 10 daily), to Cork (€14.90, 3½ hours, one daily) via Kilkenny (€6.30, 35 minutes) and to Waterford (€9.30, 1½ hours, seven daily).

JJ Kavanagh & Sons (☎ 914 3081; www.jjkavanagh.ie) has several buses per day to Dublin (€11, two hours) and Dublin Airport (€16, three hours). There are two buses per day Monday to Saturday to Kilkenny (€5, 50 minutes) and Portlaoise (€6, one hour).

Buses for both companies leave from the bus station located at the eastern end of Kennedy Ave.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 913 1633; Station Rd) is to the northeast of town. Carlow is located on the Dublin-Waterford line with five trains daily in each direction Monday to Saturday (four Sunday). One way to Dublin or Waterford (both 1¼ hours) costs €12.80.

AROUND CARLOW TOWN

Browne's Hill Dolmen

This 5000-year-old granite monster is Europe's largest **portal dolmen** and one of Ireland's most famous. The capstone alone weighs well over 100 tonnes and would originally have been covered with a mound of earth. The dolmen is 3km east of town on the R726 Hacketstown road; a path leads round the field to the dolmen. There's no public transport.

A cab will charge about €15 to €20 from Carlow, including a 20-minute wait.

Killeshin Church

Once the site of an important monastery with one of the finest round towers in the country, this medieval marvel was destroyed early in the 18th century by a Philistine farmer worried that it might collapse and kill his cows. The ruins of a 12th-century church remain, including a remarkable doorway said to date from the 5th century. Look out for the wonderful bearded face on the capstone. Killeshin Church is 5km west of Carlow on the R430. There's no public transport. A cab will charge about €15 to €20 from Carlow, including a 20-minute wait.

BALLON

☎ 059 / pop 400

Out among the best of Carlow's rolling countryside, there are numerous estates and gardens near the small village of Ballon, located on the N80.

Altamont Gardens (☎ 915 9444; www.heritageireland.ie; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-5.30pm Sat & Sun; 📍) is one of Ireland's most magnificent old walled formal gardens. Run by the Heritage Service, the 40-acre garden has a design dating to Victorian times. From the car park, just follow your nose to what's in bloom. There's a small nursery selling plants found inside. The gardens are 5km east of Ballon.

Only 600m south of Altamont Gardens, **Sherwood Park House** (☎ 915 9117; www.sherwoodparkhouse.ie; s/d from €60/100; 📍) is a Greystone Georgian manor dating from 1730. The five rooms are huge and boast such period niceties as four-poster beds. This can make arrangements for dinner. This is prime walking country.

The **Ballykealey Manor Hotel** (☎ 915 9288; www.ballykealeymanorhotel.com; Ballon; s/d from €90/140; 📍) is an early 19th-century pastiche of Tudor and Gothic details. Inside this elegant stone manor are 12 luxurious rooms (with more coming). It's all on a fine country estate and there's a popular restaurant, the **Oak Room** (meals €15-30; ☎ noon-2.30pm Sun, 6-9pm Wed-Sun) with high-end cuisine.

BORRIS

☎ 059 / pop 590

This seemingly untouched Georgian village on a hill has a dramatic mountain backdrop and

traditional main street. A huge stone railway viaduct on the edge of town has been disused since the idiotic line closures of the 1950s.

Borris is full of character, with plenty of atmospheric bars known for summertime trad music.

Sights & Activities

At the opposite end of the village from the graceful 16-arch railway viaduct is the dramatic **Borris House** (☎ 977 3105), a beautiful Tudor-style residence and one of Ireland's most majestic stately homes. Tours by appointment only.

At the bottom of the hill, **Mill Gardens** (☎ 977 3132; admission €5; ☎ call for arrangements) mixes Victorian formality with orchards and modern ornamental plants.

Borris is a starting point for the 13km **Mt Leinster Scenic Drive** (it can also be walked) and is also on the South Leinster Way (see p700). Alternatively, there's a lovely 10km walk along the **River Barrow towpath** to picturesque Grauguenamanagh, just inside County Kilkenny.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several magnificent and memorable places to stay in and around Borris.

Step House (☎ 977 3209; www.thestephouse.com; 66 Main St; s/d from €55/90; 📍) This Georgian home right in the centre of town is a vision in cheery yellow, even on a grey day. Inside, antiques abound in the common spaces and in all 20 bedrooms. It's a dream both for dysfunctional collectors and adults looking to lose the kids (they're not allowed). Many rooms have views of the large gardens out back framed by Mt Leinster.

Lorum Old Rectory (☎ 977 5282; www.lorum.com; s/d from €95/150; ☎ Mar-Nov; 📍) Halfway between Borris and Bagenalstown off the R705, this historic manor house sits on a prominent knoll east of the road. The gardens stretch in all directions, offering good views from each of the five rooms. The cooking here is renowned (much of it organic); ask about arrangements when you book.

our pick **Kilgraney Country House** (☎ 0503-75283; http://indigo.ie/~kilgraney; s/d from €100/130; ☎ Mar-Nov; 📍) The River Barrow burbles away down the shallow valley from this six-room Georgian manor. The owners, veteran travellers, have created a fabulous interior that's a refuge for those who have OD'd on chintz.

DETOUR: CLONEGAL

Located off winding local roads some 5km east of Kildavin and the N80, the minute village of Clonegal is all moody atmosphere. Expect a headless horseman to gallop by as you explore the paths around **Huntington Castle** (☎ 054-77552) in the heart of the moors. It's open sporadically but you're really here for an atmospheric – if hair-raising – wander, before retreating to one of the cute village pubs.

They've decorated using goods collected from places as far as the Philippines. There's a spa, a herb garden and six-course meals (from €48). This is the classic Dublin escape; it's off the R705 halfway between Borris and Bagenalstown, north of the Lorum Old Rectory.

M O'Shea (☎ 977 3106; Main St) This place is a mix of general store, modern grocery and pub. Spare parts hang from the ceiling, while you can pick up bananas next door. Surprises abound in the warren of rooms; should you get peckish you can strap on a feedbag of horse chow that's for sale not far from the stout tap (or be dull and order the tasty pub grub). There are tables out the back on sunny days.

Getting There & Away

Borris is on the east-west R702, which links the N9 with the N11 in County Wexford. Heading north, the R705 follows the scenic River Barrow Valley 12km to Bagenalstown.

MT LEINSTER

At 796m, Mt Leinster offers some of Ireland's finest **hang-gilding**. It's also worth the hike up for the panoramic views over Counties Carlow, Wexford and Wicklow. To get there from Borris, follow the Mt Leinster Scenic Drive signposts 13km towards Bunclody in County Wexford. It takes a good two hours on foot or 20 minutes by car.

SOUTH LEINSTER WAY

Southwest of Clonegal, on the northern slopes of Mt Leinster, is the tiny village of **Kildavin**, the starting point of the South Leinster Way. For details see p700.

COUNTY LAOIS

Most people see Laois (pronounced 'leash') as a green blur outside the car window as they zoom along the N7 or N8 to sexier sites west. But get off the main roads, and you'll discover the hidden corners of Ireland's heartland: surprising heritage towns, the unspoiled Slieve Bloom Mountains and a lace-work of rivers and walkways.

For all you need to know about the county, check out www.laoistourism.ie. Look for the excellent booklet *Laois Heritage Trail* at tourist offices, which does a good job of tying the county's heritage together.

PORTLAOISE

☎ 057 / pop 3600

Portlaoise's two main edifices could be called 'nuts and bolts' – the large mental asylum and maximum-security prison. Unless you're planning to lose the plot or commit murder, there's very little to keep you here as a visitor. However, the Slieve Bloom Mountains (p356) to the west and the impressive Rock of Dunamais (opposite) to the east are well worth a visit.

Information

Dunamais Arts Centre (☎ 866 3355; Church St; per hr €5; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Has Internet access.
Tourist office (☎ 862 1178; James Fintan Lawlor Ave; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-May, Mon-Sat Jun-Sep) In the shopping-centre car park beside the bypass; delightful staff.

Sleeping & Eating

Portlaoise can fill your plate; there's a good selection of lunch spots. Many are on the characterful Main St. To get there, cut through Lyster's Lane from the charmless strip mall and parking lot with the tourist office off the bypass.

O'Loughlin's Hotel (☎ 862 1305; www.oloughlins.com; 30 Main St; s/d from €60/100; (P) (Q)) This heritage building is home to a simple but comfortable hotel. The 20 rooms have wi-fi and past the little fireplace in the lobby is a large pub popular at lunch.

Egan's Hostel (☎ 862 1106; Main St; meals €7-12; ☎ 9am-9.30pm) This pub is always busy thanks to its good-value buffet line. There are numerous tasty and traditional hot choices

daily and all come with an array of sides that overwhelm the plate.

Kitchen & Foodhall (☎ 866 2061; Hyand's Sq; mains €7-12; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Choose from a bountiful array of fresh salads on the buffet at this renowned purveyor of creative and healthy foods. There are daily hot specials and items like chutney and jam are all house-made. Bright, cheery and child-friendly, it's just off Main St and is a good spot for picnic stock-ups.

Entertainment

Dunamais Arts Centre (☎ 866 3355; www.dunamais.ie; Church St) The county's purpose-built theatre and arts centre presents a varied programme of national and international performances and visual arts, comedy and films.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Portlaoise is at the busy junctions of the M7, N7 and N8.

Bus Éireann runs frequent buses on three main routes: to Cork (€9.50, three hours) via Abbeyleix, Cashel and Cahir; to Dublin (€9.30, 1¾ hours) via Kildare city; and along the N7 to Limerick (€11.30, three hours) via Mountrath, Borris-in-Ossory and Roscrea.

JJ Kavanagh & Sons (☎ 056-883 1106; www.jjkavanagh.ie) runs two buses per day Monday to Saturday to Carlow (€6, one hour) and Kilkenny (€7, 1½ hours).

TRAIN

Portlaoise, just 70 minutes from Dublin (€18.50, 14 daily), is on the lines to Cork, Limerick and Tralee. The small **train station** (☎ 862 1303; Railway St) is a five-minute walk north of the town centre.

AROUND PORTLAOISE

Within a 20km radius of Portlaoise are a range of towns, attractions and features that date as far back as the 2nd century, often include gorgeous gardens and attest to the local influence of the Vikings, French and others. Running roughly in a circle from the north clockwise to the south, you can easily enjoy the variety of sights by car in a day. It would also be a not-horribly-difficult bike ride; by public transport you can only reach a few towns easily.

Mountmellick

☎ 057 / pop 2600

Incorrectly called the 'Manchester of Ireland' (it's smaller and nicer), Mountmellick is a quiet Georgian town on the River Owenass. It was renowned for its linen production in the 19th century and owes much of its history to its Quaker settlers.

A 4km looped and signed **heritage trail**, beginning in the square, leads you on a walking tour of the most important landmarks. There's a display of superbly subtle Mountmellick embroidery at the **Mountmellick Museum** (☎ 862 4525; www.mountmellickdevelopment.com; Mountmellick Development Association, Irishtown; admission €3; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri year-round, 2-4.30pm Jun-Sep). Be sure to pick up the excellent *Mountmellick Heritage Trail* booklet. Various linens and quilts still being made by locals are for sale here.

Mountmellick is on the N80, 10km north of Portlaoise.

Portarlington

pop 3300

Portarlington (Cúil an tSúdaire) grew up under the influence of French Huguenot and German settlers and has some fine 18th-century buildings along French and Patrick Sts, although many have been neglected. The 1851 **St Paul's Church** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm), on the site of the original 17th-century French church, was built for the Huguenots, some of whose tombstones stand in a corner of the churchyard. It's about 18km northwest of Portlaoise.

About 4km east of town are the impressive ivy-covered ruins of 13th-century **Lea Castle** on the banks of the River Barrow, once the stronghold of Maurice Fitzgerald, second baron of Offaly. The castle consists of a fairly intact towered keep with two outer walls and a twin-towered gatehouse. Access is through a farmyard 500m to the north off the main Monasterevin road (R420).

Emo Court

The unusual, green-domed **Emo Court** (☎ 086-810 7916; www.heritageireland.ie; Emo; adult/child €2.90/1.30, grounds free; ☎ 10.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep, last admission 5.45pm, grounds open daylight hr year-round) is an impressive house, designed by James Gandon (architect of Dublin's Custom House) in 1790. It was originally the country seat of the first earl of Portarlington. After many years as a Jesuit novitiate,

the house, with its elaborate central rotunda, was impressively restored.

The extensive grounds contain over 1000 different trees (including huge sequoias) and shrubs from all over the world, and are littered with Greek statues. You'll say 'mother!' when you see 'The Clucker', an impressive ornamental garden. Enjoy a picnic or a long walk through the woodlands to Emo Lake.

Emo is about 13km northeast of Portlaoise, just off the R422, 2km west of the M7.

Rock of Dunamais

The **Rock of Dunamais** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr; (P)) is an arresting sight, dramatically perched on a craggy limestone outcrop. It was first recorded on Ptolemy's map of AD 140 and suffered successive waves of Viking, Norman, Irish and English invasion and occupation. Cromwell's henchmen finally destroyed the site in 1650.

Stabilisation of the ruins is ongoing and, for now, require a dose of imagination. However, the views from the summit are sweeping on a clear day; bring a picnic. If you're lucky you'll be able to see Timahoe round tower to the south, the Slieve Blooms to the west and the Wicklow Mountains to the east.

The rock is situated 6km east of Portlaoise along the Stradbally road (N80). **Portlaoise Taxi Service** (☎ 057-866 2270) will take you out there for about €20 return.

Stradbally

☎ 057 / pop 1200

Strung out along the N80, the pretty village of Stradbally, 10km southeast of Portlaoise, is home to the annual **Electric Picnic** (www.electricpicnic.ie), an open-air music concert over three days that bills itself as 'boutique' because admission is limited to 32,000 (three-day pass: €220). Rocking the grounds of Stradbally Estate are the likes of Björk, Jarvis Cocker, Primal Scream and Josh Wink.

Appealing to a rather different crowd, the **Stradbally Steam Museum** (☎ 864 1878; www.stradballysteammuseum.com; admission €5; ☎ 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) is a haven for steam enthusiasts, with a collection of lovingly restored fire engines, steam tractors and steamrollers. During the August bank-holiday weekend the museum hosts a two-day rally where the 40-hectare estate of Stradbally Hall is taken over by steam-operated machinery and vintage cars.

The 1895 Guinness Brewery steam locomotive in the village is closely associated with the museum and is used for trips on a short stretch of volunteer-built **narrow-gauge railway** (www.irishsteam.ie; admission varies; ☎ 2.30-5pm Sun & Mon bank holiday weekends Easter-Oct).

JJ Kavanagh & Sons (☎ 056-883 1106; www.jjkavanagh.ie) runs Portlaoise–Kilkenny buses that pass through Stradbally (from Portlaoise €3.50, 15 minutes, two daily Monday to Saturday).

Stradbally is also on the Bus Éireann Waterford–Longford service (two buses daily Monday to Saturday, one Sunday), which also passes through Kilkenny, Carlow, Portlaoise (€3.20, 15 minutes) and Athlone.

Timahoe pop 500

Tiny Timahoe casts a real charm, even if the village is nothing more than a handful of houses fronting a grassy triangle. Screened by a babbling stream, and straight out of a fairytale, is a tilting 30m-tall, 12th-century **round tower** – all it needs is Rapunzel to complete the picture. The tower, with its unusual carved Romanesque doorway high up on the side is part of an ancient site that includes the ruins of a 15th-century church. The entire place has a certain magical quality, enhanced by a dearth of visitors most times.

Timahoe is 13km southeast of Portlaoise on the R426.

MOUNTRATH

☎ 057 / pop 1400

Another once-prosperous 18th-century linen centre, Mountrath is a low-key village where the highlight is a regular cattle market. Both St Patrick and St Brigid are supposed to have established religious houses here, although no trace of either remains.

Today, the local place of pilgrimage is the 6th-century monastery of St Fintan at Clonenagh, 3km east on the Portlaoise road. Its claim to fame is **St Fintan's Tree**, a large sycamore with a groove filled with water in one of its lower branches and said to have healing properties.

Ballyfin House (8km north of Mountrath) is an architectural treasure, designed by Richard Morrison in 1850. It's closed to visitors as it undergoes the fate of many a historic Irish mansion: conversion to upscale hotel.

our pick **Roundwood House** (☎ 873 2120; www.roundwoodhouse.com; Slieve Blooms Rd; s/d from €100/150,

weekly rates available; ☎ Feb-Dec) is the country estate you wish your rich friends owned. It's a superb 17th-century Palladian villa set on verdant grounds at the end of a tree-lined drive. Ten rooms are scattered between the period-piece of a main house and a slightly more modern adjoining structure. Books abound and you can relax and read by a fire in the lounge. Kids love the grounds and cheery dogs. Dinner (per person €30 to €50) is a country treat of local foods; the cheese board is a delight. After dinner, your host Frank Kennan (wife Rosemary handles the cuisine) is ready to share tales while enjoying a few from the well-stocked bar; just be careful how you say 'Bush'.

Mountrath is on the main Bus Éireann Dublin–Limerick route, with up to 14 buses daily in each direction.

SLIEVE BLOOM MOUNTAINS

One of the best reasons for visiting Laois is to explore the Slieve (shlee-ve) Bloom Mountains. Although not as spectacular as some Irish ranges, their sudden rise from a great plain, and the absence of visitors, make them highly attractive. You'll get a real sense of being away from it all as you tread the deserted mountaintop blanket bogs, moorland, pine forests and isolated valleys.

The highest point is Mt Arderin (528m), south of the Glendine Gap on the Offaly border, from where, on a clear day, it's possible to see the highest points of all four of the ancient provinces of Ireland. East is Lugnaquilla in Leinster, west is Nephin in Connaught, north is Slieve Donard in Ulster and southwest is Carrantuohil in Munster.

If you're planning a walking tour, Mountrath to the south and Kinnitty to the north, are good bases. For leisurely walking, **Glenbarrow**, southwest of Rosenallis, has an interesting trail by the cascading River Barrow. Other spots to check out are **Glendine Park**, near the Glendine Gap, and the **Cut mountain pass**.

You can pick up a **Laois Walks Pack** (€2), which has information on more than 30 way-marked walks around the county, from the tourist office in Portlaoise.

The **Slieve Bloom Way** (p700) is a 77km sign-posted trail that does a complete circuit of the mountains, taking in most major points of interest. You can walk alone, or from May to October you could join a guided group

walk organised by the **Slieve Bloom Walking Club** (☎ 0509-37299; www.slievebloom.ie; per person €5-20; ☎ Sun Jun-Nov). Lengths range from 10km to 20km.

WESTERN LAOIS

About 3km west of Borris-in-Ossory, and once a major coaching stop, is **Ballaghmore Castle** (☎ 0505-21453; www.castleballaghmore.com; Ballaghmore; adult/child €5/3; ☎ 10am-5pm). This square tower fortress from 1480 is soaked in atmosphere, with heavy, creaking wooden doors, cold stone walls and a mysterious sheila-na-gig. It's all colourfully restored and available to rent for €2000 per weekend. If that's out of your budget, you could stay in the grounds at **Manor Guest House** (per person €60) and self-catering **Rose Cottage** (per week €500).

ABBEYLEIX

☎ 057 / pop 2400

Abbeyleix (abbey-leeks), 15km south of Portlaoise, is a pretty tree-lined heritage town with neat houses and a lot of traffic. The original settlement, which grew up around a 12th-century Cistercian monastery, wasn't here at all: local 18th-century landowner Viscount de Vesci levelled the village and moved it to its present location owing to frequent floods in the old location. During the Famine, de Vesci proved a kinder landlord than many, and the fountain obelisk in the square was erected as a thank you from his tenants.

Sights

In an old school building at the northern end of Main St is **Heritage House** (☎ 873 1653; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun Mar-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Feb; ☎), a museum and tourist office that details the town's colourful history. It contains some examples of the Turkish-influenced carpets woven in Abbeyleix from 1904 to 1913 – they even created some for the *Titanic*.

De Vesci's mansion, **Abbeyleix House**, was designed by James Wyatt in 1773. It's 2km southwest of town on the Rathdowney road, but is not open to the public.

Much more ore accommodating are the lavish **Heywood Gardens** (☎ 087-667 5291; www.heritageireland.ie; admission free; ☎ 8am-9pm May-Aug, to 7pm Apr & Sep, to 5.30pm Oct-Mar; ☎), a Heritage Service-managed property 4.5km southeast of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Farren House Farm Hostel (☎ 873 4032; www.farrenhouse.com; dm €20; ☎) In a restored limestone grain loft on a working family farm (tours available), this quirky independent hostel has 45 beds in 14 en-suite rooms. When you call, a) ask about meals, and b) ask about directions. It's about 6km west of Abbeyleix in rural farm country.

Fountain House B&B (☎ 873 1231; Main St; s/d €30/60; ☎) For more than 40 years this friendly little B&B has offered clean lodging right in the centre.

Abbeyleix Manor Hotel (☎ 873 0111; www.abbeyleixmanorhotel.com; s/d €75/130; ☎) The charmless generic exterior here hides 46 spacious, modern rooms with wi-fi inside. Get one in the back, away from the road.

Morrissey's (☎ 873 1281; Main St) This half-pub, half-shop and former travel agency and undertaker is a past winner of the Pub of the Year award. In the half-light you can cradle a pint at the sloping counter while you soak up the atmosphere in the ancient pew seats in front of the potbelly stove. Soak up the pints with a sandwich or other pub snack.

Getting There & Away

Abbeyleix is on the Bus Éireann route to Dublin (€9.30, 1¼ hours) via Portlaoise and Cork (€9.50, 2¼ hours) via Cashel and Cahir. There are six buses each way daily.

DURROW

☎ 057 / pop 1200

Neat rows of houses, pubs and cafés surround Durrow's manicured green. On the western side stands the unmissably imposing gateway to 18th-century **Castle Durrow**, a large Palladian villa. It's now an upmarket 98-room **hotel** (☎ 873 6555; www.castledurrow.com; s/d from €140/200; ☎) and even if you can't stay here, it's well worth nipping into this elegantly restored greystone edifice for a snack on the terrace or a walk through the 30 acres of gardens and woodland. The excellent restaurant (set menu €50, open 7pm to 8.45pm) is supplied by the castle's organic kitchen garden. Rooms vary greatly in style; ask to see a few.

Durrow is 10km south of Abbeyleix, and is accessible by bus (Dublin–Cork route) from the town (€3.10, 10 minutes, six buses daily in each direction).

DETOUR: POVERTY'S LAST STOP AT DONAGHMORE

The otherwise easily overlooked farm village of Donaghmore is home to a grim survivor of the famine. The **Donaghmore Workhouse** (☎ 086-829 6685; www.donaghmoremuseum.com; adult/child €5/3; 🕒 11am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, plus 2-5pm Sat & Sun Jul-Sep) opened as a workhouse for the poor in 1853 – those that is who hadn't starved to death or fled the country. Conditions were grim: meals were taken in silence, toilets were crude at best and bedding was limited. The idea was that if things were especially bad, the poor wouldn't stick around – maybe they'd just die. Today a small museum recalls this horrible time. Even if the complex isn't open, the facility's forbidding presence is chilling. It's just off the R435, 20km west of Durrow.

COUNTY OFFALY

Even if the green and watery county of Offaly seems to slip your itinerary, it won't be for long once you realise it's the home of the ecclesiastical city of Clonmacnoise, one of Ireland's most famous sights. But beyond this must-see attraction, Offaly has much to offer: its lowlands are dotted with monastic ruins, its towns are steeped in history and it has a burgeoning foodie culture.

Geographically, Offaly is dominated by the low-lying bogs. Enormous expanses like the Bog of Allen and the Boora Bog, where peat is extracted on an industrial scale, are horribly scarred. However, in the northeast corner of the county, 665-hectare Clara Bog is remarkably untouched and recognised internationally for its plant and animal life. It's under consideration for Unesco recognition.

To the east the rugged Slieve Bloom Mountains (p356) provide excellent walking, while fishing and water sports are popular on the River Shannon and the Grand Canal. Access www.offaly.ie and www.ireland.ie/offaly for more information.

BIRR

☎ 057 / pop 3650

The warm welcome in Birr belies its name and will make you go 'ahhh'. Two- and three-storey pastel Georgian buildings line its streets. You'll find good accommodation, eating and drinking options and some interesting shops. You'll also find Birr Castle, with its surrounding craggy walls and many attractions, right in the centre.

History

Birr started life as a 6th-century monastic site founded by St Brendan. By 1208 the

town had acquired an Anglo-Norman castle, home of the O'Carroll clan who reigned over the surrounding territory.

During the Plantation of 1620, the castle and estate were given to Sir Laurence Parsons, who changed the town's fate by carefully laying out streets, establishing a glass factory and issuing a decree that anyone who 'cast dunge rubbish filth or sweepings in the forestreet' would be fined four pennies. He also banned barmaids, sentencing any woman caught serving beer to the stocks (obviously he was a Philistine). The castle has remained in the family for 14 generations, and the present earl and his wife still live on the estate.

Orientation

All the main roads converge on Emmet Sq, with its erect column honouring martyred Irish patriot Robert Emmet. In one corner, Dooly's Hotel, dating from 1747, was once a coaching inn on the busy route to the west.

Information

The post office is in the northeastern corner of Emmet Sq.

Tourist office (☎ 932 0110; Castle St; 🕒 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Sat May-Sep) Has good regional info as well as that for Birr.

Sights

BIRR CASTLE DEMESNE

It's easy to spend half a day exploring the attractions and gardens of **Birr Castle Demesne** (☎ 932 0336; www.birrcastle.com; adult/child €9/5.50; 🕒 9am-6pm). The 'castle' (all those windows mean 'mansion') itself, however, is a private home and cannot be visited. Most of the present building dates from around 1620, with additional alterations made in the early 19th century.

The 50-hectare castle surroundings are famous for their magnificent **gardens** set around

a large artificial lake. They hold over 1000 species of plants in all sizes from all over the world; something always seems to be in bloom. Look for the world's tallest box hedges, planted in the 1780s and now standing 12m high, and the romantic Hornbeam cloister.

The Parsons were a remarkable family of pioneering Irish scientists, and their work is documented in the **historic science centre**. Exhibits include the massive **telescope** built by William Parsons in 1845. The 'leviathan of Parsonstown', as it was known, was the largest telescope in the world for 75 years and attracted a wide variety of scientists and astronomers. It was used to map the moon's surface, and made innumerable discoveries, including the spiral galaxies. After the death of William's son, the telescope, unloved and untended, slowly fell to bits. A huge restoration scheme in the 1990s rebuilt the telescope: it's now fully operational, and demonstrations are held three times daily in high season.

OTHER BUILDINGS & MONUMENTS

Birr has no shortage of first-class Georgian houses; just stroll down tree-lined **Oxmantown Mall**, which connects Rosse Row and Emmet St, or **John's Mall**, to see some of the best examples.

The tourist office hands out a walking map that details the most important landmarks, including a **statue** of the third earl of Rosse, the megalithic **Seffin Stone** (said to have marked the centre of Ireland) and **St Brendan's Old Churchyard**, reputedly the site of the saint's 6th-century settlement.

Activities

A beautiful tree-lined **riverside walk** runs east along the River Camcor from Oxmantown Bridge to Elmgrove Bridge.

If you're feeling more energetic, **Birr Outdoor Education Centre** (☎ 912 0029; www.oec.ie; Roscrea Rd) offers hill walking, rock climbing and abseiling in the nearby Slieve Blooms, as well as canoeing and kayaking on local rivers.

Birr Equestrian Centre (☎ 912 1961; www.birr.equestrian.ie; Kingsborough House; treks per hr €25), 3km outside Birr on the Clareen road, runs treks in the surrounding farmland and forests.

Sleeping

Birr has a good range of central accommodation at moderate prices.

Maltings Guesthouse (☎ 912 1345; themaltingsbirr@eircom.net; Castle St; s/d from €50/80; 📍) Based in an 1810 malt storehouse once used by Guinness, this place has a serene location right by the castle and the River Camcor. The 13 tastefully decorated rooms are fine value and there's a popular restaurant downstairs.

Stables Guesthouse (☎ 912 0263; www.thestablesrestaurant.com; 6 Oxmantown Mall; s/d from €50/80) Located on one of Birr's finest streets, this graceful, greystone Georgian town house is full of character. The six rooms are nicely decorated and if your luggage is light, there's a well-regarded boutique.

Walcot B&B (☎ 912 1247; walcot@hotmail.com; cnr Oxmantown Mall & Ross Row; s/d from €50/90; 📍) Right across from the castle, this solid B&B has a simple elegance, exemplified by the formal dining room for breakfast. The six plush rooms overlook a tranquil private garden.

Dooly's Hotel (☎ 912 0032; www.doolyshotel.com; Emmet Sq; r from €65-150; 📍) This local landmark couldn't be more central. Few vestiges of its coach-house past remain and its 18 modern rooms have broadband internet access.

Eating & Drinking

You can eat and drink well in Birr at interesting restaurants and in often-music-filled pubs.

Emma's Café & Deli (☎ 912 5678; 31 Main St; meals €4-8; 🕒 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat year-round, 12.30-5.30pm Sun Jun-Aug) Good smells waft out onto Birr's main shopping street from this simple yet stylish café. Huddle around wooden tables inside or out front to enjoy organic soup, paninis and warm, homemade scones.

Riverbank (☎ 912 1528; Riverstown; meals €8-28; 🕒 12.30-2.30pm & 5.30-10pm Tue-Sun) As the name implies, this casually elegant place is right on a stretch of the pretty River Brosna, 1.5km south of the centre off the N52. Tables outside let you hear the flowing water over a drink. The food changes seasonally and is a creative take on modern Irish.

Spinnors (☎ 912 1673; Castle St; meals €12-30; 🕒 4-9pm Wed-Mon, 12.30-2.30pm Sun) Hidden behind the thick walls of this beautifully restored woolen mill is a fine restaurant with a varied and seasonal menu with many dishes sourced locally. Solid meaty fare mingles with seafood and veggie options. The courtyard terrace is a summertime delight.

Thatch (☎ 912 0682; Crinkill; set dinner €40; 🕒 Tue-Sat) Some 2km southeast of Birr off the N62, this gorgeous 200-year-old eponymously

DETOUR: GHOSTS AT LEAP CASTLE

Ireland's most haunted castle, **Leap Castle** (☎ 057-913 1115; seanfryan@oceanfree.net; R421; admission €6; ☎ call for opening times) originally kept guard over a crucial route between Munster and Leinster. The castle was the scene of many dreadful deeds, and has quaint features like dank dungeons and a 'Bloody Chapel'. It's famous for its eerie apparitions – the most renowned inhabitant is the 'smelly ghost', a spirit that leaves a horrible stench behind after sightings.

Renovations are ongoing but you can visit. It lies about 12km southeast of Birr between Kinnitty and Roscrea (in Tipperary) off the R421. If it looks familiar, it's because an especially creepy image of Leap Castle was used on the cover of several editions of Tim Winton's *The Riders*.

roofed pub is a country delight. Enjoy a perfectly poured pint at picnic tables or inside at the bar, which defines the phrase 'Irish pub'. The food lives up to the surroundings: lots of simply prepared meats and seafood with the seasons. Pub grub is also available; book.

Craughwell's (☎ 21839; Castle St) Stop for a snootful at Craughwell's, renowned for its rollicking traditional session on Friday night and impromptu sing-along sessions on Saturday.

Chestnut (☎ 912 2011; Green St) Easily the most appealing pub in the centre, the Chestnut dates to 1823. The current incarnation mixes style with hops, both on full display in the hidden garden. Summer sees regular barbecue nights.

Entertainment

Besides the places listed above, you'll find many more humble boozers about Birr.

Melba's Nite Club (☎ 912 0032; Emmet Sq; ☎ Fri-Sun) In the basement of Dooly's Hotel, this dance place gives fine insight into the potato- and stout-fuelled mating habits of rural Ireland.

Birr Theatre & Arts Centre (☎ 912 2911; www.birrtheatre.com; Oxmantown Hall) A vibrant place with a regular line-up of films, local drama, well-known musicians and more.

Getting There & Away

Bus Éireann runs buses on three main routes: to Dublin (€13.20, 3½ hours, one daily) via Tullamore, to Limerick (€14.20, 1¼ hours, five daily) and to Athlone (€8.20, one hour, five daily).

Kearns Transport (☎ 0509-22244; www.kearnstransport.com) has three to four buses daily to Tullamore and Portumna plus a weekend service to Galway.

All buses depart from Emmet Sq; look for signs with the latest schedules.

KINNITTY

☎ 057 / pop 500

Kinnitty is a quaint little village that makes a good base for the Slieve Bloom Mountains (p356). Driving out of Kinnitty, the roads across the mountains to Mountrath and Mountmellick, both in County Laois, are particularly scenic.

Look out for the bizarre 10m-high **stone pyramid** in the village graveyard behind the Church of Ireland. In the 1830s, Richard Bernard commissioned this scale replica of the Cheops pyramid in Egypt for the family crypt.

The shaft of the 9th-century **Kinnitty High Cross** was nabbed by Kinnitty Castle in the 19th century and is now displayed on the hotel's terrace. Adam and Eve and the Crucifixion are clearly visible on either face.

Sleeping & Eating

Ardmore House (☎ 913 7009; www.kinnitty.net; the Walk; s/d from €45/70; ☎ ☎) Fresh air, turf fires and home-made brown bread are the order of the day at this lovely Victorian stone farmhouse with five simple guest rooms. Numbers two and five have views of the weird pyramid and the heathery mountains. If you're a rambler, ask about their walking packages. The B&B is set off the R440, about 200m east of Kinnitty.

Kinnitty Castle Demesne (☎ 913 7318; www.kinnittycastle.com; r from €215; ☎ ☎) This former O'Carroll residence, rebuilt in neo-Gothic style in the 19th century, is one of Ireland's most renowned mansions. Set on a vast estate, it is now a luxury hotel much in demand for weddings of those who have accountants to ponder the bill. You can act the lord and try your hand at falconry or archery, walk the mannered grounds or just relax in one of the 37 luxurious rooms (all with wi-fi). The Georgian-style restaurant (mains €20 to €30) is a formal feast; there's traditional music in

the Dungeon Bar Friday nights. The castle is 3km southeast of town off the R440.

BANAGHER & AROUND

☎ 057 / pop 1800

Pastel-fronted vintage buildings march down Banagher's long main street to the banks of the River Shannon. It's popular with boaters, thanks to the modern marina. The town is pretty laid-back but has some impressive fortifications on the west bank of the river and some bits of literary history.

Charlotte Brontë had her honeymoon in Banagher in 1854 – no one links her untimely death nine months later to the place. Thirteen years earlier, Anthony Trollope, fresh from inventing the pillarbox, took up a job as a post-office clerk in the village; in his spare time he managed to complete his first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*.

Information

Tourist office (☎ 915 2155; offalwest@hotmail.com; Crank House, Main St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Inside an unusual bow-fronted Georgian town house, this office provides information about Banagher and the surrounding region. Internet access is available for €1 per 15 minutes.

Sights

Sited at a crossing point over the River Shannon, Banagher was a place of enormous strategic importance during turbulent times. **Cromwell's Castle** was built in the 1650s, but modified during the Napoleonic Wars, when **Fort Eliza** (a five-sided gun battery whose guardhouse, moat and retaining walls can still be seen), a **military barracks** and **Martello Tower** were also built.

St Paul's Church at the top of Main St contains a resplendent stained-glass window originally intended for Westminster Abbey.

Many while away an afternoon on the trails and roads along the marshy banks of the Rivers Shannon and Little Brosna.

About 3km south of Banagher off the R439 in Lusmagh is **Cloghan Castle** (☎ 915 1650; Lusmagh; per person €10; ☎ by prior arrangement), in use for nearly 800 years. The castle has seen more than its fair share of bloodshed, beginning life as a McCoghlan stronghold and later becoming home to the mighty O'Carroll clan. Today the castle consists of a well-preserved Norman keep and an adjoining 19th-century house full of interest-

ing antiques and armaments. The tour takes about an hour.

About 8km south of Banagher, along tiny tracks on the County Galway side of the border, is the 15th-century **Meelick Church**, one of the oldest churches still in use in Ireland.

Activities

In mild months, look for canoes for rent down by the marina. On calm summer days the waters here are perfect for a paddle.

A number of companies rent out beefier cruisers that you can use to navigate Ireland's waterways, including the Royal and Grand Canals (see p340); prices shown are for high season:

Carrick Craft (☎ 01-278 1666; www.cruise-ireland.com; the Marina) Four- to eight-person berths ranging from €1000 to €2500 per week.

Silverline Cruisers (☎ 915 1112; www.silverlinecruisers.com; the Marina) Two- to eight-person berths from €900 to €2700 per week.

Sleeping & Eating

Unless you're making like Seaman Staines and bedding down in your own berth, choices locally are limited.

Crank House Hostel (☎ 915 1458; abguinan@eircom.net; Crank House, Main St; dm €14; ☎) This Independent Holiday Hostels of Ireland (IHH) facility is Offaly's only hostel. It has 40 beds in a variety of decent two- and four-bed rooms, a laundry, a kitchen and a pottery studio ('dude, nice pot').

Charlotte's Way (☎ 915 3864; charlottesway@hotmail.com; the Hill; s/d €40/70; ☎) This nicely restored former rectory offers four comfy good-value rooms. Breakfasts star eggs fresh from the hens outside. A honeymooning Charlotte Brontë was a frequent visitor and, after her death, her husband Arthur lived here as the rector.

Brosna Lodge Hotel (☎ 915 1350; www.brosnalodge.com; Main St; s/d from €50/90; ☎) This family-run hotel in the centre of town has 14 decent-sized rooms decorated in nautical colours, and offers good value for money. The restaurant (mains €9 to €16) and pub enjoy limited competition; there's a beer garden.

Heidi's Irish Coffee Shop (☎ 956 2680; mains €4-10; ☎ 9am-6pm) Around the corner from the tourist office, Heidi's name may refer to the time when a daring sandwich ingredient was margarine. Popular with locals; conversation stops when a visitor enters.

DETOUR: SHANNON HARBOUR

Just 1km east of where the Grand Canal joins the River Shannon, **Shannonbridge** is a tiny town that is fun for a stop or a stay. Locks regulate the waters and you can see far across the marshy plains. Walking paths stretch in all directions.

High above it all, the 1806 **Harbour Master's House** (☎ 057-915 1480; gkinwan@iol.ie; s/d from €50/80; ☹ Mar-Dec; 📍) overlooks the canal. It is run by the daughter of an actual harbour master and has five nice rooms of varying sizes. Nearby are two pubs whose appeal varies by season: Gleeson's has a beer garden while the Harbour has a fireplace and food.

The village is about 10km east of Banagher off the R356. Nearby, 16th-century **Clonony Castle** is enclosed by an overgrown castellated wall. Tales that Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, was born here are unlikely to be true, but her cousins Elizabeth and Mary Boleyn are buried beside the ruins.

Entertainment

JJ Hough (☎ 915 1893; Main St) Rivalling the river as Banagher's most appealing feature, Hough's is a 250-year-old pub with vines of that vintage covering the front. Renowned for music, there are trad sessions most nights in summer and on weekends in winter. Or entertain yourself absorbing the artefact-covered walls or counting stars in the beer garden.

Getting There & Away

Kearns Transport (☎ 0509-22244; www.kearnstransport.com) links Banagher to Birr one time daily.

SHANNONBRIDGE

☎ 090 / pop 380

Perfectly picturesque, Shannonbridge gets its name from a narrow 16-span, 18th-century bridge that crosses the river into County Roscommon. It's a small, sleepy village with just one main street and two pubs (the Village Tavern is great for trad music). A sometime tourist office operates at the east end of the bridge.

You can't miss the massive 19th-century **fortifications** on the western bank, where heavy artillery was installed to bombard Napoleon in case he was cheeky enough to try to invade by the river. The fort has been reincarnated as the **Old Fort Restaurant** (☎ 967 4973; mains €15-28; ☹ 5-9.30pm Wed-Sat, 12.30-2.30pm Sun year-round), which serves pricey versions of Irish standards. Tables outside have bridge views.

Clonmacnoise & West Offaly Railway Bog Tour

Ride a train into the heart of the Blackwater Bog on this **tour** (Bord Na Móna; ☎ 967 4450; www

.bnm.ie; adult/child €7/5; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Apr, May & Sep, daily Jun-Aug; 📍), which runs on a narrow-gauge railway line once used to transport peat. The diesel locomotive moves at around 10km/h – slow enough to take in the landscape and its special flora, which has remained unchanged for thousands of years. Stops let you try peat cutting.

To get there from Shannonbridge, follow the R357 east towards Cloghan for about 5km, then take the signposted turn north and follow the road for another 3km.

CLONMACNOISE

☎ 090 / pop 320

Gloriously placed overlooking the River Shannon, **Clonmacnoise** (☎ 967 4195; www.heritageireland.ie; adult/child €5.30/2.10; ☹ 9am-7pm Jun–mid-Sep, 10am-6pm mid-Sep–Oct & mid-Mar–May, 10am-5pm Nov–mid-Mar, last admission 45min before closing; 📍) is one of Ireland's most important ancient monastic cities. The site is enclosed in a walled field and contains numerous early churches, high crosses, round towers and graves in astonishingly good condition. The surrounding marshy area is known as the Shannon Callows, home to many wild plants and one of the last refuges of the seriously endangered corncrake (a pastel-coloured relative of the coot).

History

Roughly translated, Clonmacnoise (Cluain Mhic Nóis) means 'Meadow of the Sons of Nóis'. The marshy land would have been impassable for early traders, who instead chose to travel by water or on *eskers* (raised ridges formed by glaciers). When St Ciarán founded a monastery here in AD 548 it was the most important crossroads in the country, the intersection of the north-south River

Shannon, and the east-west Esker Riada (Highway of the Kings).

The giant ecclesiastical city had a humble beginning and Ciarán died just seven months after building his first church. Over the years Clonmacnoise grew to become an unrivalled bastion of Irish religion, literature and art and attracted a large lay population. Between the 7th and 12th centuries, monks from all over Europe came to study and pray here, helping to earn Ireland the title of the 'land of saints and scholars'. Even the high kings of Connaught and Tara were brought here for burial.

Most of what you can see today dates from the 10th to 12th centuries. The monks would have lived in small huts scattered in and around the monastery, which would probably have been surrounded by a ditch or rampart of earth.

The site was burned and pillaged on numerous occasions by both the Vikings and the Irish. After the 12th century it fell into decline, and by the 15th century it was home only to an impoverished bishop. In 1552 the English garrison from Athlone reduced the site to a ruin: 'Not a bell, large or small, or an image, or an altar, or a book, or a gem, or even glass in a window, was left which was not carried away,' was reported at the time.

Among the treasures that survived the continued onslaughts are the crosier of the abbots of Clonmacnoise in the National Museum, Dublin, and the 12th-century *Leabhar*

na hUidhre (The Book of the Dun Cow), now in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin.

Information

There's an excellent on-site museum and café; a regional **tourist office** (☎ 967 4134; ☹ 10am-5.45pm Easter-Oct) is near the entrance. If you want to avoid summer crowds it's a good idea to visit early or late; the tiny country lanes nearby can clog with coaches. Plan on a visit of at least a couple of hours.

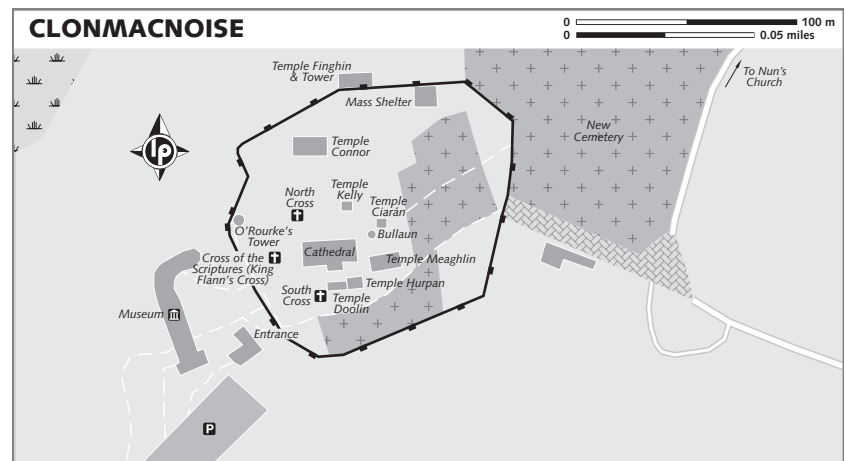
Sights MUSEUM

Three connected conical huts near the entrance house the museum and echo the design of early monastic dwellings. The centre's 20-minute audiovisual show is an excellent introduction to the site.

The exhibition area contains the original high crosses (replicas have been put in their former locations outside), and various artefacts uncovered during excavation, including silver pins, beaded glass and an ogham stone. It also contains the largest collection of early Christian grave slabs in Europe. Many are in remarkable condition, with inscriptions clearly visible, often starting with *oroi* *do* or *ar* (a prayer for).

HIGH CROSSES

Well done to the museum for their moody display: there's a real sense of drama as you descend to the foot of the imposing sandstone **Cross of the Scriptures**, one of Ireland's finest. It's



very distinctive, with unique upward-tilting arms and richly decorated panels depicting the Crucifixion, the last judgement, the arrest of Jesus and Christ in the tomb. A couple of figures with natty beards have been interpreted as Abbot Cólman and King Flann, who erected the 4m-high cross.

Only the shaft of the **North Cross**, which dates from around AD 800, remains. It is adorned by lions, convoluted spirals and a single figure, thought to be the Celtic god Cerrunos, or Carnunas, who sits in a Buddha like position. The richly decorated **South Cross** has mostly abstract carvings – swirls, spirals and fretwork – and, on the western face, the Crucifixion plus a few odd critters cavorting.

CATHEDRAL

The biggest building at Clonmacnoise, the cathedral was originally built in AD 909, but was significantly altered and remodelled over the centuries. Its most interesting feature is the intricate 15th-century Gothic doorway with carvings of Sts Francis, Patrick and Dominic. A whisper carries from one side of the door to the other, and this feature was supposedly used by lepers to confess their sins without infecting the priests.

The last high kings of Tara – Turlough Mór O'Connor (died 1156) and his son Ruairí, or Rory (died 1198) – are said to be buried near the altar.

TEMPLES

The small churches are called temples, a derivation of the Irish word *teampall* (church). The little, roofed church is **Temple Connor**, still used by Church of Ireland parishioners on the last Sunday of the summer months. Walking towards the cathedral, you pass the scant foundations of **Temple Kelly** (1167) before reaching tiny **Temple Ciarán**, reputed to be the burial place of St Ciarán, the site's founder.

The floor level in Temple Ciarán is lower than outside because for centuries local farmers have been taking clay from the church to protect their crops and cattle. The floor has been covered in slabs, but handfuls of clay are still removed from outside the church in the early spring.

Near the temple's southwestern corner is a *bulllaun* (ancient grinding stone), supposedly used for making medicines for the monastery's hospital. Today the rainwater that collects in it is said to cure warts.

Continuing round the compound you come to 12th-century **Temple Melaghlin**, with its attractive windows, and the twin structures of **Temple Hurpan** and **Temple Doolin**.

ROUND TOWERS

Overlooking the River Shannon is the 20m-high **O'Rourke's Tower**. Lightning blasted the top off the tower in 1135, but the remaining structure was used for another 400 years.

Temple Finghin and its round tower are on the northern boundary of the site, also overlooking the Shannon. The building dates from around 1160 and has some fine Romanesque carvings. The herringbone-patterned tower roof is the only one in Ireland that has never been altered. Most round towers became shelters when the monasteries were attacked, but this one was probably just used as a bell tower since the doorway is at ground level.

OTHER REMAINS

Beyond the site's boundary wall, about 500m east through the modern graveyard, is the secluded **Nun's Church**. From here the main site, including the towers, is invisible. The church has wonderful Romanesque arches with minute carvings; one has been interpreted as Ireland's earliest sheila-na-gig, but is more probably an acrobat.

To the west of the site, on the ridge near the car park, is a motte with the oddly shaped ruins of a 13th-century **castle**, where the walls need team-effort to stay erect.

Sleeping

Options near the ruins are limited.

Glebe Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 643 0277; www.glebecaravanpark.ie; Clonfanlough; camp sites €14; ☹ Easter–mid-Oct) This caravan park, 5km east of Clonmacnoise, is on a pretty three-hectare site with 35 vehicle and tent sites. Amenities include modern bathrooms, TV and games room, laundry, kitchen and playground.

Kajon House (☎ 967 4191; www.kajonhouse.ie; Creevagh; d from €67; ☹ Feb–Oct; ♀) This is one of the closest places to stay to Clonmacnoise: just 1.5km from the ruins on the road signposted to Tullamore. The hosts extend a warm welcome; the motto here is: 'Be comfortable'. There's a spacious yard with a picnic table and you can arrange for simple, multicourse dinners. Tired of eggs? Here you can have pancakes for breakfast.

Getting There & Away

Clonmacnoise is 7km northeast of Shannon-bridge on the R444 and about 24km south of Athlone in County Westmeath. By car you can explore this interesting and evocative area at leisure.

Paddy Kavanagh (☎ 087-240 7706; pkmail@eircom.net) in Athlone runs private tours to Clonmacnoise and the Clonmacnoise & West Offaly Railway bog tour. Prices are subject to variation depending on the number of people and how long you want to be at the site.

There are river cruises to Clonmacnoise from Athlone in County Westmeath (see p500).

A **taxi** (☎ 090-647 4400) from Athlone will cost roughly €50, including an hour's wait.

TULLAMORE

☎ 057 / pop 10,400

Tullamore (Tulach Mór), Offaly's county town, is a busy place with a burgeoning population of fortune-seekers from Eastern Europe. This is the place to get a *perogi* with your pint.

The town suffered two strange setbacks in its history. In 1764, the earl drowned in a freak accident. As his son was only six months old at the time, and unable to grant new building leases until he was of legal age, the town did a Rip Van Winkle for the next 21 years. It was rudely awakened by a second freak accident, when a hot-air balloon crashed in 1785 and burnt down most of the town.

In the long run, the effect was negligible: Tullamore is prosperous and famous for smooth Tullamore Dew whiskey. Despite one minor detail (production has moved to County Tipperary), you can still visit the old distillery on the banks of the Grand Canal and have a snifter of the amber liquid.

Information

Post office (O'Connor Sq)

Tourist office (☎ 932 5015; tullamoredhc@eircom.net; Bury Quay; ☹ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat & noon–5pm Sun May–Sep, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat & noon–5pm Sun Oct–Apr) Somewhat inconveniently located away from parking inside the Tullamore Dew Heritage Centre.

Tullamore Internet Cafe (☎ 936 0387; 5 Kilbridge St; per 15min €1; ☹ 10am–11pm) Near the tourist office.

Sights

TULLAMORE DEW HERITAGE CENTRE

Located in an 1897 canalside whiskey warehouse, the **heritage centre** (☎ 932 5015; www.tullamore-dew.org; Bury Quay; adult/child €6/3.20; ☹ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat & noon–5pm Sun May–Sep, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat & noon–5pm Sun Oct–Apr) mixes intriguing local history with booze propaganda. Fortunately the emphasis is on the former, and engaging exhibits show the local role of the Grand Canal, which passes out the front. This is the place to first get the lowdown on the 1785 balloon conflagration, then down a shot of whiskey.

CHARLEVILLE FOREST CASTLE

Spires, turrets, clinging ivy and creaking trees combine to give this hulking structure a haunted feel. **Charleville Forest Castle** (☎ 932 3040; www.charlevillecastle.com; 1- to 2-person admission €16, per additional person €8; ☹ regular tours Jul & Aug, by appointment Sep–Jun) was the family seat of the Burys, who commissioned the design in 1798 from Francis Johnston, one of Ireland's most famous architects. The interior is spectacular, with stunning ceilings and one of the most striking Gothic-revival galleries in Ireland. The kitchen block was built to resemble a country church.

Admission is by 35-minute tour only. If you'd like to help restore this pile, you can join groups of international volunteers; contact the castle for details (and also to confirm opening hours). The entrance is off the N52, south of Tullamore. Frustration ensues if you go too far and reach Blue Ball, a village with hairy traffic.

Activities

For information on hiring narrow boats on the canal, see p341.

DETOUR: LOUGH BOORA

Much of County Offaly's once extensive bogs were stripped of peat for electricity generation during the 20th century. One area, **Lough Boora** (www.loughbooraparklands.com), is now the focus of a scheme to restore its environment. Located 5km east of Blue Ball off the N357, the lough comprises 2000 hectares. Over 50km of trails have been built and there are bird-watching spots and other places where you can pause and see nature reclaiming this land. Numerous large environmental sculptures by noted artists are scattered about.

Sleeping

Ask at the tourist office for a list of simple B&Bs.

Moorhill Hotel (☎ 932 1395; www.moorhill.ie; Clara Rd; s/d from €80/100; P) This Victorian retreat has 42 rooms in a complex of two-storey wings. Furnishings are a mix of modern and antique; there's wi-fi throughout. The hotel is set amid chestnut trees about 3km north of town on the N80. Guests enjoy the Irish-French restaurant (mains from €18).

Tullamore Court Hotel (☎ 934 6666; www.tullamorecourthotel.ie; O'Moore St; r €80-200; P) This modern hotel on the edge of the centre brings a dash of style to workman-like Tullamore. The 104 rooms are spacious and well-equipped for business with features such as wi-fi. Best are luxurious suites in a new wing that overlook the town.

Eating & Drinking

There's a good farmers market every Saturday on Millennium Sq and Main St.

Mezzo (☎ 932 9333; Patrick St; mains €10-16; ☎ 5-9pm) Not vastly authentic (note the fajitas and the Thai chicken this and that), but the mostly Italian menu at this attractive little bistro is good and portions are huge. Pasta is garlicky, pizzas crispy and the seafood better than average. Bring your own booze.

Brewery Tap (☎ 932 1131; O'Connor Sq) One of several atmospheric boozers in the centre, this one gets gregarious, has live music many nights and pours an honest pint.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Bus Éireann stops at the train station, located south of town. From Tullamore there are buses to Dublin (€12.60, two hours, three daily), to Portumna (€4.20, 40 minutes, one

daily) via Birr and to Waterford (€16.70, 3¼ hours, two daily) via Portlaoise, Carlow and Kilkenny.

Kearns Transport (☎ 912 0124; www.kearnstransport.com) also serves Birr and Dublin with several buses daily.

TRAIN

There are fast trains east to Dublin (€16.50, 1¼ hours, 10 daily) and west to Galway (€17.50, 1½ hours, six daily) as well as Westport and Sligo. The station is on the southwest edge of the centre on Cormac St.

DURROW ABBEY

Founded by St Colmille (also known as St Columba) in the 6th century, Durrow Abbey is most famous for producing the illustrated *Book of Durrow*. The 7th-century text is the earliest of the great manuscripts to have survived – a remarkable feat considering it was recovered from a farm where it was dipped in the cattle's drinking water to cure illnesses. It can be seen today at Trinity College, Dublin.

The site contains five early-Christian gravestones and Durrow's splendid 10th-century **high cross**, whose complex, high relief carvings depict the sacrifice of Isaac, the Last Judgement and the Crucifixion; it was possibly created by the same stonemason who carved the Cross of the Scripture at Clonmacnoise. In 2003 the government bought the site and has begun a laborious process of restoration. Various areas may be closed to visitors.

The path north past the church leads to **St Colmille's Well**, a place of pilgrimage marked by a small cairn of stones.

Durrow Abbey is 7km north of Tullamore down a long lane west off the N52.