

Counties Down & Armagh



Seen from the hilltop viewpoint of Scrabo Tower, the treasures of County Down lie scattered around you like jewels on a table. The sparkling, island-fringed waters of Strangford Lough stretch to the south, with the bird-haunted mudflats of Castle Espie and Nendrum's ancient monastery on one shore, and the elegant country house of Mount Stewart and the picturesque Ards Peninsula on the other.

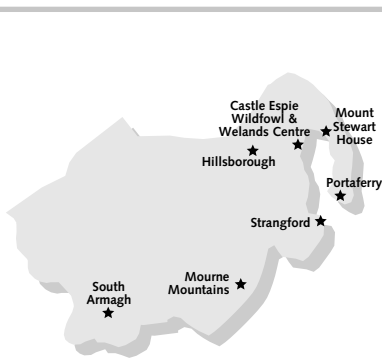
On a clear day you can see the Mourne Mountains in the distance, their velvet curves sweeping down to the sea, above the Victorian seaside resort of Newcastle. This compact range of granite and heather peaks offers the best hill-walking in the North, with expansive views of mountain, crag and sea. Nearby are Downpatrick and Lecale, the old stamping grounds of Ireland's patron saint.

Down is a region of lush fields and fertile farmland, a rich landscape in more ways than one – this is Belfast's wealthy hinterland, studded with expensive villas and endowed with more than its fair share of top golf courses and gourmet restaurants. It's easily reached from the capital, and at weekends you'll find city folks browsing the antique shops in Saintfield and Greyabbey, or slurping down fresh oysters in Dundrum and Portaferry.

Down's neighbour County Armagh is largely rural, from the low, rugged hills of the south to the lush apple orchards and strawberry fields of the north, with Ireland's ecclesiastical capital, the neat little city of Armagh, in the middle. With the army watch-towers gone, south Armagh is once again a peaceful backwater where you can wander back and forth across the border with the Republic without even noticing.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Head for the Hills** The granite peaks of the Mourne Mountains (p627)
- A Taste of Ulster** Top-notch restaurants in Hillsborough (opposite), Portaferry (p617) and Strangford (p624)
- To the Manor Born** The stately halls and exquisite gardens of Mount Stewart House (p618)
- Wildlife Encounter** Bird-watching at Castle Espie (p620) or seal-spotting near Portaferry (p617)
- Rural Retreat** Off the beaten track in the back roads of South Armagh (p632)



TELEPHONE AREA CODE: 028 FROM BRITAIN AND REST OF WORLD, 048 FROM REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

POPULATION: 652,000

AREA: 4696 SQ KM

COUNTY DOWN

CENTRAL COUNTY DOWN

Rich farmland spreads to the south of Belfast with only the rough moorland of Slieve Croob, southwest of Ballynahinch, breaking the flatness of the terrain. The attractive towns of Hillsborough and Banbridge lie on the main A1 road from Belfast to Newry.

Hillsborough

pop 2400

Hillsborough is a name familiar to British ears as the official residence of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland – Hillsborough Castle is used to entertain visiting heads of state (US presidents George W Bush and Bill Clinton have both enjoyed its hospitality). It's also the Queen's official residence when she is in Northern Ireland.

The elegant little town of Hillsborough (Cromghlinn) was founded in the 1640s by Colonel Arthur Hill, who built a fort here to quell Irish insurgents. Fine Georgian architecture rings the square and lines Main St.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 9268 9717; tic.hillsborough@lisburn.gov.uk; the Square; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat year-round, 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug) is in the Georgian courthouse in the centre of the village.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The town's main attraction is **Hillsborough Castle** (☎ 9268 2244; Main St; guided tour adult/child £5/3.50, grounds only £2.50; ☎ 11am-4.30pm Sat May & Jun), a rambling, two-storey, late-Georgian mansion built in 1797 for Wills Hill, the first marquess of Downshire, and extensively remodelled in the 1830s and 1840s. The guided tour takes in the state drawing room and dining rooms, and the Lady Grey Room where UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W Bush had talks on Iraq in 2003.

Hillsborough Courthouse (☎ 9268 9717; tic.hillsborough@lisburn.gov.uk; the Square; admission free; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat year-round, 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug), a fine old Georgian building, houses various displays describing the working of the courts in the 18th and 19th centuries.

At the bottom of Main St is a statue of Arthur Hill, fourth marquess of Downshire, opposite a tree-lined avenue leading to **St Malachy's Parish Church** (Main St; admission free;

☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat), one of Ireland's most splendid 18th-century churches, with twin towers at the ends of the transepts and a graceful spire at the western end.

Close to the church is **Hillsborough Fort** (☎ 9268 3285; Main St; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Tue-Sat, 2-4pm Sun Oct-Mar). It was built as an artillery fort by Colonel Hill in 1650 and remodelled as a Gothic-style tower house in 1758.

FESTIVALS

Each year in late August/early September, around 10,000 people – plus 6000 oysters from Dundrum Bay – converge on the small village for a three-day **Oyster Festival** (www.hillsboroughoysterfestival.com), a celebration of local food, drink and general good fun, which includes an international oyster-eating competition.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hillsborough is a bit of a culinary hot spot, with several excellent restaurants. These are popular places, so book a table at weekends to avoid disappointment.

Fortwilliam Country House (☎ 9268 2255; www.fortwilliamcountryhouse.com; 210 Ballynahinch Rd; s/d £40/65; (P)) The Fortwilliam offers B&B in four luxurious rooms stuffed with period furniture – our favourite is the Victorian room, with its rose wallpaper, huge antique mahogany wardrobe and view over the garden. Breakfast includes eggs from the chickens in the yard, with the smell of home-baked wheaten bread wafting from the Aga. Book well in advance.

Hillside Bar & Restaurant (☎ 9268 2765; 21 Main St; bar meals £7-11, 3-course dinner £28; ☎ bar meals noon-2.30pm & 4.30-9pm, restaurant 7.30-9.30pm Fri & Sat) This is a homely pub serving real ale (and mulled wine beside the fireplace in winter), with live jazz Sunday evenings and a dinky wee beer garden in a cobbled courtyard out the back. The upstairs restaurant offers formal dining, with crisp white table linen and sparkling crystal, and a menu offering dishes such as lobster tart, roast quail, venison and steak.

our pick Plough Inn (☎ 9268 2985; 3 the Square; mains bar £8-9, restaurant £13-17; ☎ bar lunches noon-2.30pm, restaurant 6-9.30pm) This fine old pub, with its maze of dark wood-panelled nooks and crannies, has been offering 'beer and banter' since 1758, and also offers fine dining in the restaurant around the back. Stone walls, low ceilings and a roaring fireplace make a cosy

setting for an adventurous menu that ranges from sushi to steak.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Goldline Express bus 238 from Belfast's Europa BusCentre to Newry stops at Hillsborough (£3, 25 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday).

Banbridge & Around

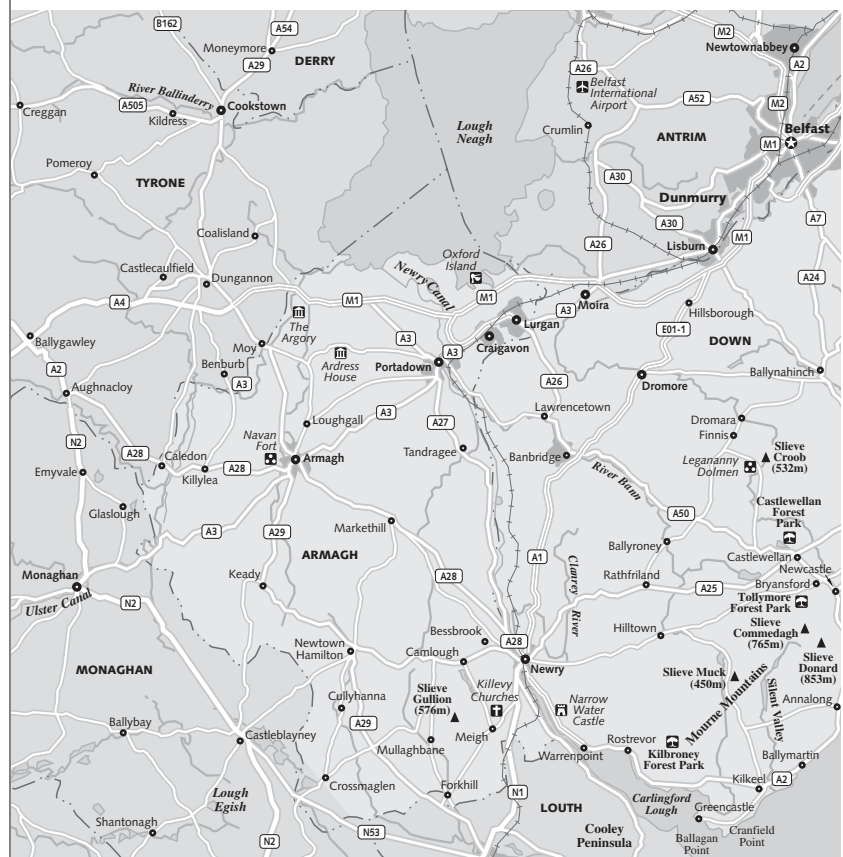
Banbridge (Droichead na Banna) is another handsome 18th-century town, whose fortunes were founded on the linen trade.

The town's broad main drag, Bridge St, climbs a steep hill from the bridge across the River Bann (from which the town takes its

name) to the unusual **Downshire Bridge** at the top of the hill. A cutting was made in the middle of the street in the 19th century to lower the crest of the hill and make the climb easier for the Royal Mail coaches, who had threatened to boycott the town because of the difficulty of scaling the incline.

On the opposite side of the river stands the **Crozier Monument**, which is adorned with four idiosyncratically sculpted polar bears. Captain Francis Crozier (1796-1848), a native of Banbridge, was commander of HMS *Terror* and froze to death in the Arctic during Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition in search of the Northwest Passage. Crozier lived in the fine blue and grey Georgian house across the road from the statue.

COUNTIES DOWN & ARMAGH



Banbridge is the starting point for the **Brontë Homeland Drive**, a signposted route along the Bann valley to Rathfriland, 16km to the southeast. Patrick Brontë, father of the famous literary sisters, was born and brought up here, and the locals like to think that her father's tales of the Mourne Mountains inspired the bleak setting for Emily's classic *Wuthering Heights*.

Milking this tenuous connection for all it's worth is the **Brontë Homeland Interpretive Centre** (☎ 4062 3322; Drumballyrone; adult/child £3/2; ☹ noon-4.30pm Fri-Sun Apr-Sep) in the former Drumballyrone School and Church, off the B10 road 13km southeast of Banbridge, where Patrick taught and preached. His birthplace is at



Emdale, 6km west of here, near the B3 road between Rathfriland and Loughbrickland.

Goldline Express bus 238 from Belfast's Europa BusCentre to Newry stops at Banbridge (£5, 45 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday).

Saintfield & Around

pop 3000
Saintfield is a pretty and prosperous little town, a popular weekend destination for visitors from Belfast who come to browse its dozen or so antique shops and tearooms.

Rowallane Garden (☎ 9751 0131; Crossgar Rd, Saintfield; adult/child £4.50/2; ☹ 10am-8pm mid Apr-mid Sep, to 4pm mid Sep-mid Apr, closed 24 Dec-1 Jan), 2km south of Saintfield, is renowned for its spectacular spring displays of rhododendrons and azaleas, which thrive behind a windbreak of Australian laurels, hollies, pines and beech trees. The walled gardens feature rare primulas, blue Himalayan poppies, plantain lilies, roses, magnolias and delicate autumn crocuses.

For lunch, try the **March Hare** (☎ 9751 9248; 2 Fairview; mains £3-5; ☹ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) at the west end of the main street, a cosy little tearoom serving hearty, home-made soups, sandwiches and cakes.

Saintfield is 16km south of Belfast, and is a stop on the Goldline Express bus 215 service from Belfast to Downpatrick.

Legananny Dolmen

Ulster's most famous Stone Age monument is a strangely elegant tripod dolmen, looking as if some giant's hand has placed the capstone delicately atop the three slim uprights. Its elevated position on the western slopes of Slieve Croob (532m) gives it an impressive view to the Mourne Mountains.

Legananny is a challenge to find without the aid of a 1:50,000 scale map. Heading south from Ballynahinch along the B7 to Rathfriland, go through the hamlets of Dromara and Finnis, then look out for a minor road on the left (signposted Legananny Dolmen). Continue for a further 3km, through a crossroads, and look for another road on the left (a signpost is there, but difficult to spot). Continue over the hill for 2km, then turn left again at a farm. There's a parking place 50m along, and the dolmen is 50m uphill on the adjacent farm track.

BELFAST TO BANGOR

The coastal region stretching east from Belfast to Bangor and beyond is commuter territory for the capital, and home to many of the North's wealthiest citizens – it's known locally as the 'Gold Coast'. The attractive **North Down Coastal Path** follows the shore from Holywood train station to Bangor Marina (15km), and continues east to Orlock Point.

For the Ulster Folk and Transport Museums, see p609.

Crawfordsburn

pop 500

The pretty little conservation village of Crawfordsburn lies just over 3km west of Bangor on the B20. The picturesque **our pick Old Inn** (☎ 9185 3255; www.theoldinn.com; 15 Main St, Crawfordsburn; r £85-130; 📍) here was once a resting place on the coach route between Belfast and Donaghadee (formerly the main ferry port for mainland Britain), and as a result has been patronised by many famous names, including the young Peter the Great (tsar of Russia), Dick Turpin (highwayman), former US president George Bush Sr, and a veritable roll call of literary figures including Swift, Tennyson, Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope and CS Lewis. Established in 1614, the Old Inn claims to be Ireland's oldest hotel, the original thatched cottage (now the bar) flanked by 18th-century additions. The atmosphere is cosy and welcoming, with log fires, low ceilings and wood panelling, and there's a lovely garden terrace at the back. The rooms, dressed up with Arts and Crafts-style wallpaper and mahogany woodwork, have bags of character, and the inn's oak-panelled **Restaurant 1614** (3-course dinner £30; 🕒 7-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-2.30pm Sun) is one of Northern Ireland's best.

The scenic glen behind the Old Inn runs through **Crawfordsburn Country Park** (☎ 9185 3621; South Bridge Rd, Helen's Bay; admission free; 🕒 9am-8pm Apr-Sep, to 4.45pm Oct-Mar) to reach the coast at one of County Down's best beaches; the park offers a number of good woodland and coastal walks. To the west lies **Grey Point Fort** (☎ 9185 3621; admission free; 🕒 2-5pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, 2-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar), an early-20th-century gun emplacement with command post and lookout station. The 30-tonne six-inch coastal defence gun has been trained on Belfast Lough since 1904, though never fired in anger.

The B2 Belfast-Bangor bus stops at Crawfordsburn village (hourly); alternatively, you

can take the train to Helen's Bay Station, a wonderful little Victorian halt dating from 1865 and built by the Marquess of Dufferin, who owned the surrounding estate.

BANGOR

pop 76,800

Bangor is to Belfast what Brighton is to London – a Victorian seaside resort that is undergoing a renaissance as an out-of-town base for city commuters. The Belfast-Bangor train line was built in the late 19th century to connect the capital with the then flourishing resort. The opening of a huge marina and a surge in property prices have boosted the town's fortunes in recent years, though the kitsch tradition of British seaside towns survives in the Pickie Family Fun Park.

Orientation & Information

The bus and train stations are together on Abbey St, at the uphill end of Main St. At the bottom of Main St is the marina with B&Bs clustered to the east and west on Queen's Pde and Seacliff Rd. Bangor has both a Main St and a High St, which converge on Bridge St at the marina.

Bangor Library (☎ 9127 0591; 80 Hamilton Rd; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Wed & Sat, to 9pm Thu & Fri) Internet access £1.50 for 30 minutes. Closed for building work till September 2008.

Post Office (☎ 9145 0150; 143 Main St)

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 9127 0069; www.northdown.gov.uk; 34 Quay St; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-6pm Wed, 10am-5pm Sat & 1-5pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-5pm Wed, 10am-4pm Sat, closed Sunday Sep-Jun) Housed in a tower built in 1637 as a fortified customs post.

Sights & Activities

Apart from strolling along the seafront, Bangor's main attraction is the **Pickie Family Fun Park** (☎ 9185 7030; Marine Gardens; 🕒 10am-10pm daily Easter-Oct, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun Nov-Easter), an old-fashioned seaside entertainment complex famous for its swan-shaped pedal boats, complete with kids adventure playground, go-karts and miniature steam train.

The **Blue Aquarius** (☎ 07779-600607; www.bangorboat.com; 🕒 departures from 2pm daily Jul & Aug, Sat & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep) offers **pleasure cruises** (adult/child £5/2) around Bangor Bay, departing from the marina pontoon next to the Pickie Family Fun Park. In July and August there are family-friendly **fishing trips** (incl tackle and bait per adult/child

£12/10) departing at 9.30am and 7pm daily from the Eisenhower Pier (the right-hand side of the harbour, looking out to sea).

Housed in the converted laundry, stables and stores of Bangor Castle, the **North Down Heritage Centre** (☎ 9127 1200; Castle Park Ave; admission free; 🕒 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun year-round, 10am-4.30pm Mon Jul & Aug) displays, among other historical curiosities, a facsimile of *The Antiphonary of Bangor*, a small 7th-century prayer book and the oldest surviving Irish manuscript (the original is housed in Milan's Ambrosian Library). There's also an interesting section on the life of William Percy French (1854-1920), the famous entertainer and songwriter (Bangor is also home to the Percy French Society; http://www.percy french.org/pfindex.htm). The centre is in Castle Park, west of the train and bus stations.

The fishing village of Groomsport on the eastern edge of town has a picturesque harbour, overlooked by **Cockle Row Cottages** (☎ 9145 8882; admission free; 🕒 11.30am-5.30pm Jun-Aug), one of which has been restored as a typical fisherman's home of 1910.

Sleeping

Ennislare House (☎ 9127 0858; www.ennislarehouse.com; 7-9 Princetown Rd; s/d £30/55; 📍 📍) Set in a lovely Victorian town house just 300m north of the train station, the Ennislare has big, bright rooms, stylish décor, and a friendly owner who can't do enough to make you feel welcome.

our pick Cairn Bay Lodge (☎ 9146 7636; www.cairnbaylodge.com; 278 Seacliff Rd; s/d from £40/70; 📍 📍) This lovely seaside villa overlooking Ballyholme Bay, 1km east of the town centre, oozes Edwardian elegance with its oak-panelled lounge and dining room. There are five en-suite bedrooms that blend antique charm with contemporary style, beautiful gardens, gourmet breakfasts and sea views.

Bangor Bay Inn (☎ 9127 0696; www.bangorbayinn.com; 10-12 Seacliff Rd; s/d from £50/70; 📍 📍) This cosy 15-room hotel overlooking the marina combines business-class comfort with a homely atmosphere, a friendly bar and a good restaurant. The more expensive rooms have sunset views across the harbour.

Clandeboyde Lodge Hotel (☎ 9185 2500; www.clandeboydelodge.com; 10 Estate Rd, Clandeboyde; s/d from £85/95; 📍 📍) Looking a little like a modern, red-brick church set amid landscaped gardens on the southwest edge of town, the recently upgraded Clandeboyde offers informal luxury –

big rooms, bathrobes, champagne and chocolates – plus a log fire in winter and a drinks terrace in summer.

Eating

Café Paul Rankin (☎ 9145 5400; 101 High St; mains £3-5; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) This bright and funky café is seriously family friendly, with a kids menu, high-chairs, play area and free parking at the back. It serves breakfasts (from bagels to Ulster fries) till 11.30am, and has daily lunch specials.

our pick Jeffers by the Marina (☎ 9185 9555; 7 Gray's Hill; mains £8-12; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon, 9am-10pm Tue-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) A chic little café-restaurant with a view of the harbour, Jeffers serves coffee, cakes and snacks all day but also has a fresh and interesting dinner menu that includes everything from a platter of hummus, feta and olive tapenade, to slow-cooked lamb with tomato, fennel and saffron rice.

Rioja (☎ 9147 0774; 119 High St; mains £9-13; 🕒 noon-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, to 9.30pm Fri & Sat, closed Mon Oct-mid Apr) Rioja is a relaxed bistro with terracotta tiles and candle-lit tables offering a range of Iberian, French and Italian dishes including *cataplana*, a Portuguese seafood casserole. It's unlicensed, so if you want a bottle of the eponymous wine, BYOB (corkage £1).

Coyle's Bistro (☎ 9127 0362; 44 High St; mains £13-17; 🕒 5-9pm Tue-Sat, 5-8pm Sun) Despite being upstairs from a busy bar, this place is surprisingly intimate and inviting with wood panelling, mirrored walls and subdued lighting. The menu is resolutely modern with dishes such as cod tempura with wasabi, and shellfish and saffron risotto.

Entertainment

Jenny Watts (☎ 9127 0401; 41 High St) A traditional pub with a beer garden out back, Jenny's pulls in a mixed-age crowd, offering folk music on Tuesday nights, easy listening on Thursday, clubbing (upstairs) on Friday and Saturday, and jazz and blues on Sunday afternoon and evening. It also serves good pub grub, and kids are welcome at meal times.

Café Ceol (☎ 9146 8830; www.cafecoolbangor.com; 17-21 High St; admission free-£5; 🕒 7pm-1am Wed-Fri, 7pm-1.45am Sat) Bangor's biggest and busiest nightclub has a sleek bar, an intimate lounge and a stylish club venue, Mint, which features student night on Wednesday, '80s music on Thursday and dance, house, funk and R&B on Saturday.

Getting There & Away

Ulsterbus (☎ 9066 6630; www.translink.co.uk) service B2 or 502 runs from Belfast's Laganside Bus-Centre to Bangor (£3, 50 minutes, every 30 minutes Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday). From Bangor, bus 3 goes to Donaghadee (£2.50, 25 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday, four Sunday), and bus 6 goes to Newtownards (£2, 20 minutes, half-hourly).

There's also a regular train service from Belfast's Great Victoria St and Central stations to Bangor (£4, 30 minutes, half-hourly Monday to Saturday, hourly Sunday).

ARDS PENINSULA

The low-lying Ards Peninsula (An Aird) is the finger of land that encloses Strangford Lough, pinching against the thumb of the Lecale Peninsula at the Portaferry Narrows. The northern half of the peninsula has some of Ireland's most fertile farmland, with large expanses of wheat and barley, while the south is a landscape of neat fields, white cottages and narrow, winding roads. The eastern coast has some good sandy beaches.

Donaghadee

pop 6500

Donaghadee (Domhnach Daoi) was the main ferry port for Scotland until 1874, when the 34km sea crossing to Portpatrick was superseded by the Stranraer-Larne route. Now it's a pleasant harbour town that's fast becoming part of Belfast's commuter belt.

The town is home to **Grace Neill's**, which dates from 1611 and claims to be Ireland's oldest pub. Among its 17th-century guests was Peter the Great, tsar of Russia, who stopped for lunch in 1697 on his grand tour of Europe. In the 19th century, John Keats found the place 'charming and clean' but was 'treated to ridicule, scorn and violent abuse by the local people who objected to my mode of dress and thought I was some strange foreigner'.

From June to September **MV The Brothers** (☎ 9188 3403; www.nelsonsboats.co.uk) runs boat trips to Copeland Island (adult/child £3/2, departs 2pm daily, weather permitting), which was abandoned to the seabirds at the turn of the 20th century. There are also sea-angling trips (£7 per person, departs at 10am and 7pm), with all tackle and bait provided.

SLEEPING & EATING

Pier 36 (☎ 9188 4466; 36 the Parade; s/d £50/70; mains £8-18; ☎ food 12.30-2.30pm & 5-9.30pm Wed-Sun) An excellent pub with a red-brick and terracotta-tiled restaurant at the back, dominated by a yellow Raeburn stove that turns out home-baked bread and the daily roast. The hearty menu includes soups, stews, sausage and champ, mussels, seafood, steaks and a good range of veggie dishes, and there are a couple of comfortable B&B rooms upstairs.

ourpick Grace Neill's (☎ 9188 4595; 33 High St; mains £8-15; ☎ food noon-2.30pm & 5.30-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-8pm Sun) At the back of Ireland's oldest pub is one of the North's best modern bistros, its sea-green, khaki and red-brick walls decked with arty photos of old Donaghadee. The menu can best be described as upmarket comfort food, from beer-battered fish with chunky, hand-cut chips, and beef-and-Guinness pie, to wicked desserts such as Toblerone and Malteser cheesecake. There's live music on Sunday afternoons, too.

East Coast

The A2 runs along the east coast of the peninsula through the seaside villages and caravan parks of Millisle (Oileán an Mhuilinn), Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert, and the ugly fishing harbour of Portavogie. The best **beaches** are the Long Sand, immediately south of Ballywalter, and the seawater lagoon (enclosed by a stone dike for safe bathing) at Millisle.

Approximately 1.5km northwest of Millisle is **Ballycopeland Windmill** (☎ 9054 6552; Moss Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat & 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug), a late-18th-century corn mill that remained in commercial use until 1915 and has been restored to full working order.

Portaferry

pop 3300

Portaferry (Port an Pheire), a neat huddle of streets around a medieval tower house, enjoys the most attractive setting on the Ards Peninsula, looking across the turbulent Narrows to a matching tower house in Strangford. A renowned marine biology station on the waterfront uses the lough as an outdoor laboratory, and you can investigate the local marine life yourself at the nearby Exploris aquarium. There are some good coastal walks, and in fine weather you can sit outside the pubs on the waterfront and watch the comings and goings of yachts and ferries.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 4272 9882; tourism.portaferry@ards-council.gov.uk; Castle St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Easter-Sep) is in a restored stable near the tower house.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

You can take a look around **Portaferry Castle** (admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Easter-Sep), a small 16th-century tower house beside the tourist information centre, which together with the tower house in Strangford used to control sea traffic through the Narrows.

Next to the tower house is the outstanding state-of-the-art aquarium, **Exploris** (☎ 4272 8062; www.exploris.org.uk; Castle St; adult/child £6.90/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun Apr-Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat, 1-5pm Sun Sep-Mar), with displays of marine life from Strangford Lough and the Irish Sea. Touch tanks allow visitors to stroke and hold rays, starfish, sea anemones and other sea creatures. Exploris also has a seal sanctuary where orphaned, sick and injured seals are nursed back to health before being released into the wild.

Walk up to **Windmill Hill** above the town, topped by an old windmill tower, for a good view over the Narrows to Strangford. The Vikings named this stretch of water Strangfjörth, meaning 'powerful fjord', because when the tide turns, as it does four times a day, 400,000 tonnes of water per minute churn through the gap at speeds of up to eight knots (15km/h). You get some idea of the tide's remarkable strength when you see the ferry being whipped sideways by the current.

There are pleasant walks on the minor roads along the shore, north for 2.5km to Ballyhenry Island (accessible at low tide), and south for 6km to the National Trust nature reserve of Ballyquintin Point, both good for bird-watching, seal-spotting, or just admiring the view of the Mourne Mountains.

From May to September **Des Rogers** (☎ 4272 8297) and **John Murray** (☎ 4272 8414) organise fishing and bird-watching trips, as well as pleasure cruises on the lough (per half-/full day around £75/150) for up to six people. Book in advance.

SLEEPING & EATING

Locally caught seafood is a feature of the menus at a handful of top restaurants clustered here and across the water in Strangford.

Barholm (☎ 4272 9598; www.barholmportaferry.co.uk; 11 the Strand; dm/s/d £13/18/35; ☎ year-round;

☎) Barholm offers hostel-style and B&B accommodation in a Victorian villa in a superb seafront location opposite the ferry slipway, with a spacious kitchen, laundry facilities and a big, sunny conservatory for breakfast (£3.75 extra). It's popular with groups, so be sure to book ahead.

Adair's B&B (☎ 4272 8412; 22 the Square; s/d £20/38, f per person £19) Mrs Adair's friendly and good-value B&B is an anonymous-looking house right on the main square (there's no sign outside; look for No 22), with three spacious rooms – a single, a double, and a family room (for up to four people).

Fiddler's Green (☎ 4272 8393; www.fiddlersgreenportaferry.com; 10-12 Church St; s/d £30/50; ☎) This popular pub and restaurant provides B&B in four homely rooms – one has a four-poster bed (per night £75) – neatly decorated with pine furniture and paintings, and serves up a stonking cooked breakfast. The pub has traditional music sessions every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night.

ourpick Narrows (☎ 4272 8148; www.narrows.co.uk; 8 Shore Rd; s/d £70/100; ☎) One of our favourite places to stay in the whole of Northern Ireland, the Narrows has stylish but unfussy, not-quite-minimalist bedrooms, all sunny and west-facing and every one of them with a sea view. The restaurant (lunch mains £7 to £11, dinner £14 to £17; open noon to 8.30pm Sunday to Thursday, to 9pm Friday and Saturday) is as relaxed and informal as the accommodation, with top-quality, simply prepared, local produce, home-baked bread and a good wine list. Dishes include seafood chowder, Strangford Lough mussels with a champagne-and-chive sauce, and seared scallops with Clonakilty black pudding.

Portaferry Hotel (☎ 4272 8231; www.portaferryhotel.com; 10 the Strand; s/d from £75/110; ☎) Converted from a row of 18th-century terrace houses, this charming seafront hotel has an elegant, Georgian look to its rooms – ask for one with a sea view (£10 extra) – and has a good, family-friendly restaurant with a French-influenced menu.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ulsterbus buses 9, 509, 10 and 510 travel from Belfast to Portaferry (£6, 1¼ hours, 12 daily Monday to Saturday, four Sunday) via Newtownards, Mount Stewart and Greyabbey. More frequent services begin from Newtownards (some buses go via Carrowdore and

don't stop at Mount Stewart and Greyabbey; check first).

The **ferry** (☎ 4488 1637) between Portaferry and Strangford sails every half-hour between 7.30am and 10.30pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 11pm Saturday and 9.30am to 10.30pm Sunday; the journey time is about 10 minutes. The one-way/same-day return fares are £5.30/8.50 for a car and driver; £3.40/5.30 for motorcyclists and their bikes; and £1.10/1.80 for car passengers and pedestrians.

Greyabbey

pop 1000

The village of Greyabbey is home to the splendid ruins of **Grey Abbey** (☎ 9054 6552; Church Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Sat, 2-4pm Sun Oct-Mar). The Cistercian abbey was founded in 1193 by Affreca, wife of the Norman aristocrat John de Courcy (the builder of Carrickfergus Castle), in thanks for surviving a stormy sea-crossing from the Isle of Man. The small visitor centre explains Cistercian life with paintings and panels.

The abbey church, which remained in use as late as the 18th century, was the first in Ireland to be built in the Gothic style. At the east end is a carved tomb possibly depicting Affreca; the effigy in the north transept may be her husband. The grounds, overlooked by 18th-century Rosemount House, are awash with trees and flowers on spreading lawns, making this an ideal picnic spot.

Hoops Courtyard, off Main St in the village centre, has a cluster of 18 little shops selling antiques and collectables; opening times vary, but all are open on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday afternoons. **Hoops Coffee Shop** (☎ 4278 8541; Hoops Courtyard, Main St; mains £4-5; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed, Fri & Sat year-round, daily in Jul & Aug) is a traditional tearoom, with outdoor tables in the courtyard in fine weather, serving good lunches and wicked cream teas.

Mount Stewart House & Gardens

The magnificent 18th-century **Mount Stewart** (☎ 4278 8387; house tour & gardens adult/child £6.50/3, gardens only £5/2; ☎ house noon-6pm daily Jul & Aug, noon-6pm Wed-Mon Sep, 1-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, noon-6pm Sat & Sun May & Jun, noon-6pm Sat, Sun & public hols mid-Mar-Apr & Oct) is one of Northern Ireland's grandest stately homes. It was built for the marquess of Londonderry and is decorated with lavish plasterwork, marble nudes and priceless artworks – the portrait of the racehorse Hamble-

tonian by George Stubbs is one of the most important paintings in Ireland.

Much of the landscaping of the beautiful **gardens** (☎ 10am-8pm May-Sep, to 6pm Apr & Oct, to 4pm mid-Mar-Apr; ☎) was supervised in the early 20th century by Lady Edith, wife of the seventh marquess, for the benefit of her children – the Dodo Terrace at the front of the house is populated with unusual creatures from history (dinosaurs and dodos) and myth (griffins and mermaids), accompanied by giant frogs and duck-billed platypuses. The 18th-century **Temple of the Winds** (☎ 2-5pm Sun Apr-Oct) is a folly in the classical Greek style built on a high point above the lough.

Mount Stewart is on the A20, 3km north-west of Greyabbey and 8km southeast of Newtownards. Buses from Belfast and Newtownards to Portaferry stop at the gate. The ground floor of the house and most of the gardens are wheelchair accessible. Last admission one hour before closing time.

NEWTOWNARDS & AROUND

pop 27,800

Founded in the 17th century on the site of the 6th-century Movilla monastery, Newtownards (Baile Nua na hArda) today is a busy but unexceptional commercial centre. The **tourist information centre** (☎ 9182 6846; tourism@ards-council.gov.uk; 31 Regent St; ☎ 9.15am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat) is next to the bus station.

There's some fine 18th- and 19th-century architecture in the town, especially along Church St. Most striking of all is the 18th-century **Market House**, which once housed the town's prison – you can ask to see an original cell – and is now home to the **Ards Arts Centre** (☎ 9181 0803; Conway Sq; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4.30pm Fri, 10am-4pm Sat), which hosts changing art exhibitions. The square in front of the Market House hosts a lively **market** every Saturday, and a traditional harvest fair in September.

The remains of **Movilla Abbey** and its 13th-century church have been almost swallowed up by the forest of gravestones in Movilla Cemetery (on Old Movilla Rd, on the B172 towards Millisle). There are some interesting 12th- and 13th-century grave slabs (thought by some to be those of Knights Templar) amid the abbey ruins.

The bus station is on Regent St, near the tourist office. Bus 5 goes to Belfast (£2.30,

35 minutes, around hourly Monday to Saturday, two Sunday).

Scрабо Country Park

Newtownards is overlooked by the prominent landmark of Scрабо Hill, located 2km southwest of town. It was once the site of extensive prehistoric earthworks, which were largely removed during construction of the 41m **1857 Memorial Tower** (☎ 9181 1491; admission free; ☎ 10.30am-6pm Sat-Thu Apr-Sep) in honour of the third marquess of Londonderry. Inside there's a slide show on Strangford Lough and a 122-step climb to the superb viewpoint at the top of the tower – on a clear day you can see Scotland, the Isle of Man, and even Snowdon in Wales. The disused sandstone quarries nearby provided material for many famous buildings, including Belfast's Albert Memorial Clock Tower.

Somme Heritage Centre

The grimly fascinating **Somme Heritage Centre** (☎ 9182 3202; www.irishsoldier.org; 233 Bangor Rd; adult/child £3.75/2.75; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, noon-5pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-4pm Mon-Thu, noon-4pm Sat

Apr-Jun & Sep, 10am-4pm Mon-Thu, noon-4pm 1st Sat of month Oct-Mar) vividly illustrates the horrors of the WWI Somme campaign of 1916 from the perspective of men of the 10th (Irish), 16th (Irish) and 36th (Ulster) divisions. It's a high-tech show with short films and nothing celebratory about the exhibits, intended as a memorial to the men and women who died. A photographic display commemorates the suffragette movement and the part that women played in WWI.

The centre is 3km north of Newtownards on the A21 towards Bangor. The No 6 Bangor to Newtownards bus passes the entrance every half-hour or so.

Ark Open Farm

Opposite the Somme Heritage Centre, on the other side of the dual carriageway, is the **Ark Open Farm** (☎ 9182 0445; www.thearkopenfarm.co.uk; 296 Bangor Rd; adult/child £3.90/3.20; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun, closes 5pm daily Oct-Feb). Hugely popular with families, the farm has displays of rare breeds of sheep, cattle, poultry, llamas and donkeys. Kids get to stroke and hand-feed the lambs, piglets and ducklings.

LORD CASTLEREAGH

As you wander around Mount Stewart, spare a thought for Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh (1769-1822), who spent his childhood here. Despite going down in history as one of Britain's most accomplished foreign secretaries, during his lifetime he was enormously unpopular with the public who saw him as the spokesman for a violently repressive government. He was savagely attacked in print by liberal reformers, including Daniel O'Connell – who denounced him as 'the assassin of his country' – and the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. The latter's notorious *Epitaph for Lord Castlereagh* could hardly be bettered for withering contempt:

Posterity will ne'er survey
A nobler scene than this:
Here lie the bones of Castlereagh;
Stop, traveller, and piss!

Castlereagh's father, the first marquess of Londonderry, primed his son's political career in 1790 by buying him a place in the Irish parliament as member for County Down. The campaign cost a cool £60,000, leaving the marquess unable to afford various planned improvements to Mount Stewart.

As Chief Secretary for Ireland in the government of William Pitt, Castlereagh was responsible for quelling the 1798 Rising and for passing the 1801 Act of Union. Later he served as foreign secretary during the Napoleonic wars, and represented Britain at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (the 22 chairs on which European leaders sat during the congress are on show in Mount Stewart House). Political success did not bring happiness however; while still in office, Castlereagh succumbed to paranoia and depression, and committed suicide by slitting his own throat with a letter knife.

STRANGFORD LOUGH

Almost landlocked, Strangford Lough (Loch Cuan; www.strangfordlough.org) is connected to the open sea only by a 700m-wide strait (the Narrows) at Portaferry. Its western shore is fringed by humpbacked islands – half-drowned mounds of boulder clay (called drumlins) left behind by ice sheets at the end of the last Ice Age. On the eastern shore, the drumlins have been broken down by the waves into heaps of boulders that form shallow tidal reefs (known locally as ‘pladdies’).

Large colonies of grey seals frequent the lough, especially at the southern tip of the Ards Peninsula where the exit channel opens out into the sea. Birds abound on the shores and tidal mudflats, including brent geese wintering from Arctic Canada, eider ducks and many species of wader. Strangford Lough oysters are a local delicacy.

Castle Espie Wildfowl & Wetlands Centre

About 2km southeast of Comber, off the Downpatrick road (A22), is the **Castle Espie Wildfowl & Wetlands Centre** (☎ 9187 4146; www.wwt.org.uk; Ballydrain Rd, Comber; adult/child £5.50/2.75; ☎ 10.30am–5pm Mon–Fri, 11am–5.30pm Sat & Sun Mar–Oct, 11am–4pm Mon–Fri, 11am–4.30pm Sat & Sun Nov–Feb). It’s a haven for large gatherings of geese, ducks and swans – around 75% of the world’s population of light-bellied brent geese spend the winter here – and a paradise for fledgling ornithologists. The best time to visit is in May and June, when the grounds are overrun with goslings, ducklings and cygnets.

SLEEPING & EATING

Our pick Anna’s House B&B (☎ 9754 1566; www.annas-house.com; Tullynagee, 35 Lisbarnett Rd, Lisbane; s/d from £45/70; ☎) Just west of Lisbane, Anna’s is an ecofriendly country house set in a superb garden with views over a little lake (free angling for residents). The hospitality is second to none, the food is almost all organic and the bread is home-baked, with a breakfast menu that ranges from an Ulster fry through smoked salmon omelette to fresh fruit salad.

Old Schoolhouse Inn (☎ 9754 1182; www.oldschoolhouseinn.com; Ballydrain Rd, Comber; s/d £50/70; ☎) Just south of Castle Espie on the road to Nendrum, the characterful Old Schoolhouse has 12 luxurious, modern rooms, each named for a former US president. The former classroom, now swathed in shades of deep claret and decorated with old musical instru-

TOP FIVE ROMANTIC HIDEAWAYS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- Bushmills Inn (p662)
- Galgorm Resort & Spa (p675)
- Malmaison Hotel (p595)
- Narrows (p617)
- Old Inn (p614)

ments, houses an award-winning restaurant (three-course dinner £22; open 7pm to 10pm Monday to Saturday and noon to 3pm Sunday) serving local produce cooked in French country-kitchen style.

Old Post Office Tearoom (☎ 9754 3335; 191 Killinchy Rd, Lisbane; mains £3–5; ☎ 9.30am–5pm Mon–Sat) The thatched cottage that once housed the village post office has been lovingly converted into a tearoom and art gallery with walls of cream plaster and bare stone, pine furniture and a wood-burning stove. It serves great coffee and home-baked scones.

Nendrum Monastic Site

The Celtic monastic community of **Nendrum** (admission free; ☎ 24hr) was built in the 5th century under the guidance of St Mochoai (St Mahee). It is much older than the Norman monastery at Grey Abbey on the opposite shore and couldn’t be more different. The scant remains provide a clear outline of its early plan with the foundations of a number of churches, a round tower, beehive cells and other buildings, as well as three concentric stone ramparts and a monks’ cemetery, all in a wonderful island setting. A particularly interesting relic is the stone sundial that has been reconstructed using some of the original pieces. The minor road to Mahee Island from the lough’s western shore crosses a causeway to Reagh Island and then a bridge guarded by the ruined tower of 15th-century Mahee Castle.

The small **visitor centre** (☎ 9754 2547; admission free; ☎ 10am–7pm Tue–Sat & 2–7pm Sun Apr–Sep, 10am–4pm Sat & 2–4pm Sun Oct–Mar) screens an excellent video comparing Nendrum to Grey Abbey, and there’s some interesting material about the concept of time and how we measure it, presented in a child-friendly fashion.

The site is signposted from Lisbane, on the A20 5km south of Comber.

Killyleagh

pop 2200

Killyleagh (Cill O Laoch) is a former fishing village dominated by the impressive **castle** (closed to the public) of the Hamilton family. Built originally by John de Courcy in the 12th century, the Scottish Baronial-style reconstruction of 1850 sits on the original Norman motte and bailey. Outside the gatehouse, a plaque commemorates Sir Hans Sloane, the naturalist born in Killyleagh in 1660, whose collection was the basis for the founding of the British Museum (London’s Sloane Square is named after him). The parish church houses the tombs of members of the Blackwood family (marquesses of Dufferin), who married into the Hamiltons in the 18th century.

SLEEPING & EATING

Killyleagh Castle Towers (☎ 4482 8261; polly@killyleagh.plus.com; High St; 4-person apt per weekend/week £210/429; ☎) If you ever fancied staying in a castle, Killyleagh’s three gatehouse towers (complete with spiral staircases and roof terraces) are available for weekly rental, including use of the castle gardens, swimming pool and tennis court. The two smaller towers sleep four and the largest sleeps five.

Our pick Dufferin Coaching Inn (☎ 4482 8229; www.dufferincoachinginn.com; 35 High St; s/d £45/70) The comfortable lounge in this lovely Georgian house, complete with coal-fired stove and free Sunday papers, was once the village bank – the manager’s office in the corner now houses a little library. The six plush rooms have crisp linen and fluffy towels, and some have four-poster beds; unusually, the smallest double has the bath *in* the bedroom, charmingly hidden behind a curtain. The excellent breakfasts include freshly squeezed orange juice, good coffee and scrambled eggs with smoked salmon.

Dufferin Arms (☎ 4482 1182; www.dufferinarms.co.uk; 35 High St; mains £7–15; ☎ noon–3pm & 5.30–9pm Mon–Wed, noon–9.30pm Thu–Sat, 12.30–7.30pm Sun) This comfortably old-fashioned pub, and the larger Stables Bar downstairs, serves decent pub grub, while the cosy, candle-lit Kitchen Restaurant offers a more intimate atmosphere. Bands play on Friday and Saturday nights from 9pm, with traditional sessions on Saturday afternoons.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ulsterbus buses 11 and 511 run from Belfast to Killyleagh (£4, one hour, eight daily Monday to Friday, five Saturday, two Sunday) via

Comber. Bus 14 continues from Killyleagh to Downpatrick (£3, 20 minutes, eight daily Monday to Friday, four Saturday).

DOWNPATRICK

pop 10,300

St Patrick’s mission to spread Christianity to Ireland began and ended at Downpatrick. Ireland’s patron saint is associated with numerous places in this corner of Down – he made his first convert at nearby Saul, and is buried at Down Cathedral – and on St Patrick’s Day (17 March) the town is crammed with crowds of pilgrims and revellers.

Downpatrick – now County Down’s administrative centre – was settled long before the saint’s arrival. His first church here was constructed inside the earthwork *dún* (fort) of Rath Celtchair, still visible to the southwest of the cathedral. The place later became known as Dún Pádraig (Patrick’s Fort), anglicised to Downpatrick in the 17th century.

In 1176 the Norman John de Courcy is said to have brought the relics of St Colmcille and St Brigid to Downpatrick to rest with the remains of St Patrick, hence the local saying, ‘In Down, three saints one grave do fill, Patrick, Brigid and Colmcille’. Later the town declined along with the cathedral until the 17th and 18th centuries, when the Southwell family developed the old town centre you see today. The best of its Georgian architecture is centred on English St and the Mall, which lead up to the cathedral.

Orientation & Information

The bus station is on Market St (the main A25 road south towards Newcastle), on the southern edge of the town centre.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 4461 2233; www.visitdownpatrick.com; 53A Market St; ☎ 9.30am–6pm Mon–Sat & 2–6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat Sep–Jun) is in the St Patrick Centre, just north of the bus station.

Sights

The **Mall** is the most attractive street in Downpatrick, with some lovely 18th-century architecture, including Soundwell School, built in 1733, and a courthouse with a finely decorated pediment.

SAINT PATRICK CENTRE

This centre houses a multimedia exhibition called **Ego Patricius** (☎ 4461 9000; www.saintpatrick

centre.com; 53A Market St; adult/child £4.90/2.50; (M) 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-6pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat & 1-5.30pm Sun Apr, May & Sep, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar, 9.30am-7pm St Patrick's Day), charting the life and legacy of Ireland's patron saint. Occasionally filled with parties of school kids, the exhibition uses audio and video presentations to tell St Patrick's story, often in his own words (taken from his *Confession*, written in Latin around the year AD 450, which begins with the words 'Ego Patricius', meaning 'I am Patrick'). At the end is a spectacular widescreen film that takes the audience on a swooping, low-level helicopter ride over the landscapes of Ireland.

DOWN CATHEDRAL

According to legend St Patrick died in Saul, where angels told his followers to place his body on a cart drawn by two untamed oxen, and that wherever the oxen halted, was where the saint should be buried. They supposedly stopped at the church on the hill of Down, now the site of the Church of Ireland's **Down Cathedral** (☎ 4461 4922; the Mall; admission free; (M) 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun).

The cathedral is a testimony to 1600 years of building and rebuilding. Viking attacks wiped away all trace of the earliest churches, and the subsequent Norman cathedral and monasteries were destroyed by Scottish raiders in 1316. The rubble was used in a 15th-century church finished in 1512, but after the Dissolution of the Monasteries it was razed to the ground in 1541. Today's building dates largely from the 18th and 19th centuries, with a completely new interior installed in the 1980s.

In the churchyard immediately south of the cathedral is a slab of Mourne granite with the inscription 'Patric', placed there by the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club in 1900, marking the traditional site of **St Patrick's grave**.

To reach the cathedral, go up the stairs to the right of the Saint Patrick Centre and turn left at the top, opposite Down County Museum.

DOWN COUNTY MUSEUM

Downhill from the cathedral is **Down County Museum** (☎ 4461 5218; www.downcountymuseum.com; the Mall; admission free; (M) 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-5pm Sat & Sun), housed in the town's restored 18th-century jail. In a former cell block at the back are models of some of the prisoners once incarcerated there, and details of their sad sto-

ries. Displays cover the story of the Norman conquest of Down, but the biggest exhibit of all is outside – a short signposted trail leads to the **Mound of Down**, a good example of a Norman motte and bailey.

INCH ABBEY

Built by de Courcy for the Cistercians in 1180 on an earlier Irish monastic site, **Inch Abbey** (☎ 9054 6552; admission free; (M) 24hr) is visible across the river from the cathedral. The English Cistercians had a strict policy of non-admittance to Irishmen and maintained this until the end in 1541. Most of the ruins are just foundations and low walls; the neatly groomed setting beside the marshes of the River Quoile is its most attractive feature.

To get there, head out of town on the A7 Belfast road for about 1.5km, then take the first left after crossing the river.

DOWNPATRICK & COUNTY DOWN RAILWAY

From mid-June to mid-September, plus December, St Patrick's Day, Easter, May Day and Halloween, this working **railway museum** (☎ 4461 5779; www.downrail.co.uk; Market St; adult/child £4.70/3.70; (M) 2-5pm Sat & Sun) runs steam-hauled trains over a restored section of the former Belfast-Newcastle line. There is a western terminus at Ballydugan, and a northern one close to Inch Abbey, plus a halt next to the grave of King Magnus Barefoot, a Norwegian king who died in battle on this spot in 1103. The ticket price includes a return journey on the train and a tour around the engine shed and signal cabin.

QUOILE COUNTRYSIDE CENTRE

A tidal barrier was built at Hare Island, 3km downstream from Downpatrick, in 1957 to control flooding. The waters enclosed by the barrier now form the Quoile Pondage Nature Reserve, whose ecology is explained at the **Quoile Countryside Centre** (☎ 4461 5520; 5 Quay Rd; admission free; (M) reserve 24hr, visitor centre 11am-5pm daily Apr-Aug, 1-5pm Sat & Sun Sep-Mar). The centre is housed in a little cottage beside the ruins of **Quoile Castle**, a 17th-century tower house. There's a **bird-watching hide** ((M) 10am-4pm; (E) on Castle Island, downstream from the centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Denvir's Hotel & Pub (☎ 4461 2012; www.denvirshotel.com; 14 English St; s/d £38/60; (P)) Denvir's is an old coaching inn dating back to 1642, offer-

ing B&B in six characterful rooms with pine floorboards, Georgian windows and period fireplaces. The elegant, candle-lit restaurant (mains £8 to £12; open noon to 2.30pm and 5pm to 9pm) has an enormous, original stone fireplace and exposed timber roofbeams, and serves quality local produce in dishes such as smoked trout and Cashel blue cheese tart, and slow roast leg of lamb with minted organic vegetables.

Mill at Ballydugan (☎ 4461 3654; www.ballyduganmill.com; Drumcullen Rd, Ballydugan; s/d/f £55/75/85; (P)) This giant, eight-storey, 18th-century mill building overlooking Ballydugan Lake has been restored as a hotel and restaurant, housing 11 atmospheric rooms with lots of exposed stone and timber. It's 3km southwest of Downpatrick, off the A25.

Getting There & Away

Downpatrick is 32km southeast of Belfast. Buses 15, 15A and 515 depart from the Europa BusCentre in Belfast for Downpatrick (£5, one hour, at least hourly Monday to Friday, six Saturday, four Sunday). There's also the Goldline Express bus 215 (50 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday).

Goldline Express bus 240 runs from Downpatrick to Newry (£5, 1¼ hour, six daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday) via Dundrum, Newcastle, Castlewellan and Hilltown.

AROUND DOWNPATRICK

According to popular tradition the young St Patrick was kidnapped from Britain by Irish pirates and spent six years as a slave tending sheep (possibly on Slemish, p675) before escaping back home to his family. After religious training, he returned to Ireland to spread the faith and is said to have landed on the shores of Strangford Lough near Saul, northeast of Downpatrick. He preached his first sermon in a nearby barn, and eventually retired to Saul after some 30 years of evangelising.

Saul

On landing near this spot in AD 432, St Patrick made his first convert: Dichú, the local chieftain, who gave the holy man a sheep barn (*sabhal* in Gaelic, pronounced 'sawl') in which to preach. West of Saul village is the supposed site of the *sabhal*, with a replica 10th-century **church and round tower** built in 1932 to mark the 1500th anniversary of his arrival.

GUITAR-MAKER TO THE GREATS

Belfast-born George Lowden has been creating guitars in Northern Ireland since the 1970s, and his hand-built instruments have gained a world-wide reputation for excellence – satisfied Lowden owners include Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, Richard Thompson, Mark Knopfler and the Edge. If you're interested in buying one, you can get a tour of the workshop at **Lowden Guitars** (☎ 4461 9161; www.george-lowden.com; 34 Down Business Park, Belfast Rd, Downpatrick; (M) by prior arrangement Mon-Fri). However, be prepared to shell out upwards of £4000.

East of the village is the small hill of **Slieve Patrick** (120m), with stations of the cross along the path to the top and a massive 10m-high statue of St Patrick, also dating from 1932, on the summit. The hill is the object of a popular pilgrimage on St Patrick's Day.

Saul is 3km northeast of Downpatrick off the A2 Strangford road.

Struell Wells

These supposedly curative spring waters are traditionally associated with St Patrick – it is said he scoured himself here, spending 'a great part of the night, stark naked and singing psalms' immersed in what is now the **Drinking Well**. He must have been a hardy soul – the well-preserved but chilly 17th-century **bathhouses** here look more likely to induce ill health than cure it! The site has been venerated for centuries, although the buildings are all post-1600. Between the bathhouses and the ruined chapel stands the **Eye Well**, whose waters are said to cure eye ailments.

The wells are in a scenic, secluded glen 2km east of Downpatrick. Take the B1 road towards Ardglass, and turn left after passing the hospital.

LECALE PENINSULA

The low-lying Lecale Peninsula is situated east of Downpatrick, isolated by the sea and Strangford Lough to the north, south and east, and the marshes of the Quoile and Blackstaff Rivers to the west. In Irish it is Leath Chathail (pronounced lay-cahal), meaning 'the territory of Cathal' (an 8th-century prince), a region of fertile farmland that is

fringed by fishing harbours, rocky bluffs and sandy beaches.

Lecale is a place of pilgrimage for Van Morrison fans – Coney Island, immortalised in his song of the same name, is between Ardglass and Killough in the south of the peninsula.

Strangford

pop 550

The picturesque fishing village of Strangford (Baile Loch Cuan) is dominated by **Strangford Castle** (☎ 9023 5000; Castle St; admission free), a 16th-century tower house that faces its counterpart across the Narrows in Portaferry. To get inside, ask for the keys from Mr Seed across the road at 39 Castle St (10am to 4pm). At the end of Castle St is a footpath called the **Squeeze Gut** that leads over the hill behind the village, with a fine view of the lough, before looping back to Strangford via tree-lined Dufferin Ave (1.5km), or continuing around the shoreline to Castle Ward Estate (4.5km).

Strangford is 16km northeast of Downpatrick. See p618 for details of the car ferry between Strangford and Portaferry.

SLEEPING & EATING

Castle Ward Estate Camp Site (☎ 4488 1680; 19 Castle Ward Rd; camp/caravan sites £7/12; ☹ mid-Mar–Sep) The entrance to this wooded, lough-shore National Trust site is separate from the main estate entrance (closer to Strangford village).

Cuan (☎ 4488 1222; www.thecuan.com; the Square; s/d £53/85, mains £8-15; ☹ food noon-9pm Mon-Thu, noon-9.30pm Fri & Sat, noon-8.30pm Sun; (P)) You can't miss the Cuan's duck-egg-green façade, just around the corner from the ferry slip. The atmospheric, wood-panelled restaurant here is the main attraction, serving giant portions of local seafood, lamb and beef, but there are also nine neat, comfortable and well-equipped rooms if you want to stay the night.

our pick **Lobster Pot** (☎ 4488 1288; 9-11 the Square; bar meals £6-11, restaurant mains £10-17; ☹ noon-9.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-9pm Sun) This charmingly old-fashioned pub overlooking the harbour has a smart, modern bistro at the back, with green marble tables and linen napkins, serving excellent seafood – the house speciality is, of course, local lobster, with a separate Lobster Menu available all day.

Castle Ward Estate

Castle Ward house enjoys a superb setting overlooking the bay to the west of Strangford,

but has something of a split personality. It was built in the 1760s for Lord and Lady Bangor – Bernard Ward and his wife, Anne – who were a bit of an odd couple. Their widely differing tastes in architecture resulted in an eccentric country residence – and a subsequent divorce. Bernard favoured the neoclassical style seen in the front façade and the main staircase, while Anne leant towards the Strawberry Hill Gothic of the rear façade, which reaches a peak in the incredible fan vaulting of her Gothic boudoir.

The house is now part of the National Trust's **Castle Ward Estate** (☎ 4488 1204; Park Rd; house & grounds adult/child £6.50/3, grounds only £4.30/2; ☹ house 1-6pm daily Easter Week, Jul & Aug, 1-6pm Sat, Sun & public hols Apr-Jun & Sep; grounds 10am-8pm daily Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm daily Oct-Mar). In the grounds you can visit a Victorian laundry museum, the Strangford Lough Wildlife Centre, Old Castle Ward (a fine 16th-century Plantation tower) and Castle Audley (a 15th-century tower house).

Kilclief Castle

Square-jawed and thick-set, **Kilclief Castle** (☎ 9023 5000; Kilclief; admission free; ☹ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug) sprouts incongruously from a rural farmyard, framed between house and rickety barn. This is the oldest tower house in the county, built between 1413 and 1441 to guard the seaward entrance to the Narrows. It has some elaborate details and is thought to have been the prototype for Ardglass, Strangford and other castles in Lecale.

Kilclief Castle is on the A2, 4km south of Strangford.

Ardglass

pop 2900

Ardglass (Ard Ghlais) today is a small village with a busy fishing harbour, but in medieval times it was a major port and an important trading centre. The legacy of its heyday is the seven tower houses, dating from the 14th to the 16th centuries, that punctuate the hillside above the harbour.

The only one open to the public is **Jordan's Castle** (☎ 9181 1491; Low Rd; admission free; ☹ 10am-1pm Tue, Fri & Sat, 2-6pm Wed & Thu Jul & Aug), a four-storey tower near the harbour, built by a wealthy 15th-century merchant at the dawn of Ulster's economic development. The castle now houses a local museum and a collection of antiques accumulated by its last owner.

Ardglass is on the A2, 13km south of Strangford. Ulsterbus 16A runs from Downpatrick to Ardglass (20 minutes, hourly Monday to Friday, seven on Saturday, two on Sunday).

SLEEPING & EATING

Margaret's Cottage (☎ 4484 1080; www.margarets.cottage.com; 9 Castle Pl; s/d £30/50; (P)) A dinky little flower-bedecked 18th-century cottage (with a modern upper floor), Margaret's is squeezed between Aldo's Restaurant and the ruins of Margaret's Castle and offers luxurious B&B accommodation, with four cosy rooms and an open fire in the lounge.

Aldo's Restaurant (☎ 4484 1315; 7 Castle Pl; mains £9-12; ☹ 5-10pm daily Jun-Aug, 5-10pm Thu-Sun, plus 12.30-2pm Sun year-round) A local institution, this cosy Italian restaurant serves excellent seafood, pasta and vegetarian dishes.

Curran's Bar (☎ 4484 1332; 83 Strangford Rd, Chapel-town; mains £8-18; ☹ food 12.30-9pm) This popular pub, 2.5km north of Ardglass on the A2 towards Strangford, has an atmospheric restaurant with worn wooden floors, a crackling open fire and old family photographs. It specialises in local seafood (try smoked haddock with braised leeks and dill butter) and prime Irish beef accompanied with potatoes and vegetables fresh from farmer Doyle along the road.

SOUTH DOWN & THE MOURNE MOUNTAINS

Newcastle

pop 7500

In the last couple of years the Victorian seaside resort of Newcastle (An Caisleán Nua) has undergone a multimillion-pound makeover, and now sports a snazzy new promenade stretching for more than a kilometre along the seafront, complete with modern sculptures and an elegant footbridge over the Shimna River. The facelift makes the most of Newcastle's superb setting on a 5km strand of golden sand at the foot of the Mourne Mountains, and there are hopes that it will transform the town's fortunes from fading bucket-and-spade resort to outdoor activities capital and gateway to the proposed Mourne National Park.

One short stretch of main street is still a gauntlet of amusement arcades and fast-food takeaways, which can get a bit raucous on Friday and Saturday nights, but the town is still a good base for exploring Murlough National

Nature Reserve and the Mourne Mountains – accessible from here on foot, by car or by public transport – while golfers from around the globe flock to the Royal County Down golf course, voted the 'best in the world outside the US' by the magazine Planet Golf in 2007.

ORIENTATION

As you exit the bus station, Main St stretches ahead towards the mountains, becoming Central Promenade (with the tourist office on the left) and then South Promenade. Turning left out of the bus station leads to a mini-roundabout; straight ahead is the beach, to the right is Downs Rd and the youth hostel, and to the left is the Slieve Donard Hotel.

INFORMATION

Coffee-Net (☎ 4372 7388; 5-7 Railway St; per 15 min £1; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Internet access in the coffee shop in the bus station.

Mourne Heritage Trust (☎ 4372 4059; www.mourne.live.com; 87 Central Promenade; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Books, maps and brochures on the Mourne region, plus information on walking in the Mourne.

Post office (☎ 4372 2651; 6 Railway St) Opposite the bus station.

Tourist information centre (☎ 4372 2222; newcastle.ti@downc.gov.uk; 10-14 Central Promenade; ☹ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 1-7pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Sep-Jun) Sells local-interest books and maps, and a range of traditional and contemporary crafts.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Newcastle's main attraction is the **beach**, which stretches 5km northeast to **Murlough National Nature Reserve** (admission free, car park £3 May-Sep; ☹ 24hr), where footpaths and boardwalks meander among the grassy dunes, with great views back towards the Mourne.

Back in town, **Tropicana** (☎ 4372 5034; Central Promenade; adult/child £3/2.50; ☹ 11am-7pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 11am-5pm Tue & Sat, 1-5.30pm Sun Jul & Aug) is a family entertainment centre with outdoor heated fun pools, giant water slides, and paddling pools for toddlers.

At the south end of the seafront is the **Rock Pool** (☎ 4372 5034; South Promenade; adult/child £1.50/1.30; ☹ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat & 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug), an outdoor seawater swimming pool that dates from the 1930s. If it's too cold for outdoor bathing, you can simmer away in a hot seaweed bath at nearby **Soak** (☎ 4372 6002; www.soakseaweedbaths.co.uk; 5A South Promenade; ☹ noon-8pm

daily Jun-Sep, 2-8pm Mon, Thu & Fri, noon-8pm Sat & Sun Oct-May), where a one-hour session costs £20.

The little **harbour** at the south end of town once served the 'stone boats' that exported Mourne granite from the quarries of Slieve Donard. The **Granite Trail**, which begins across the road from the harbour, is a waymarked footpath that leads up a disused funicular railway line that once carried granite blocks to the harbour. The view from the top is worth the steep, 200m climb.

Stretching north of town is the **Royal County Down Golf Course** (☎ 4372 3314; www.royalcountdown.org; green fees weekday/weekend £135/150 May-Oct, £65/70 Oct-Mar). The challenging Championship Links – venue for the 2007 Walker Cup – is full of blind tee-shots and monster rough, and is regularly voted one of the world's top 10 golf courses. It's open to visitors on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

SLEEPING

Tollymore Forest Park (☎ 4372 2428; 176 Tullybrangan Rd; camp/caravan sites £9-13) Many of Newcastle's 'camping sites' are caravans only – the nearest place where you can pitch a tent is 3km northwest of the town centre, amid the attractive scenery of Tollymore Forest Park. You can hike here (along Bryansford Ave and Bryansford Rd) in 45 minutes.

Newcastle Youth Hostel (☎ 4372 2133; www.hini.org.uk; 30 Downs Rd; dm £13; ☎ daily Mar-Oct, Fri & Sat nights only Nov & Dec, closed Jan & Feb) This hostel is only a few minutes' walk from the bus station, housed in an attractive 19th-century villa with sea views. It has 37 beds, mostly in six-bed dorms, a kitchen, a laundry and a TV room.

our pick **Briers Country House** (☎ 4372 4347; www.thebriers.co.uk; 39 Middle Tollymore Rd; s/d £38/55; P) A peaceful farmhouse B&B with a country setting and views of the Mournes, Briers is just 1.5km northwest of the town centre (signposted off the road between Newcastle and Bryansford). Huge breakfasts – vegetarian if you like – are served with a view over the garden, and evening meals are available by prior arrangement.

Harbour House Inn (☎ 4372 3445; www.stoneboatrestaurant.com; 4 South Promenade; s/d £40/60; P) The Harbour House is a family-friendly pub and restaurant with four rooms upstairs that are a little tattered round the edges but clean and comfortable. It's next to the old harbour, almost 2km south of the bus station, a perfect base for climbing Slieve Donard.

Beach House (☎ 4372 2345; myrtle.macauley@tesco.net; 22 Downs Rd; s/d £40/70; P) Enjoy a sea view with your breakfast at the Beach House, an elegant Victorian B&B with three rooms (two with private bathroom) and a balcony (open to all guests) overlooking the beach.

Slieve Donard Resort & Spa (☎ 4372 3681; www.hastingshotels.com; Downs Rd; s/d from £120/150; P) Established in 1897, the Slieve Donard is a magnificent, Victorian red-brick pile overlooking the beach, recently refurbished and equipped with a luxurious spa. This is where golf legends Tom Watson, Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods stay when they're in town.

EATING

Maud's (☎ 4372 6184; 106 Main St; mains £3-6; ☎ 9am-9.30pm) Maud's is a bright, modern café with picture windows framing a stunning view across the river to the Mournes. It serves breakfast, good coffee, a range of tempting scones and sticky buns, plus salads, crêpes, pizzas and pastas; there's a kids menu too.

Strand Restaurant & Bakery (☎ 4372 3472; 53-55 Central Promenade; mains £5-9; ☎ 8.30am-11pm Jun-Aug, 9am-6pm Sep-May) The Strand has been around since 1930, and dishes up great home-made ice cream and cakes, as well as serving all-day breakfast (£2 to £5), lunch and dinner in its traditional, seaside, chips-with-everything restaurant.

Percy French Bar & Restaurant (☎ 4372 3175; Downs Rd; mains £7-12; ☎ food served noon-2.30pm & 5.30-9pm) Themed after local composer William Percy French, this is an appealing, low-raftered barn of a place, with sea views in summer and a roaring log fire in winter. The menu includes steaks, salads, and Mexican and Italian dishes, with the choice of bar meals or a sit-down restaurant.

Campers can stock up on provisions at the **Lidl Supermarket** (3 Railway St; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 9am-9pm Thu, 9am-6pm Sat, 1-6pm Sun) in the red-brick former train station beside the bus station.

SHOPPING

Hill Trekker (☎ 4372 3842; 115 Central Promenade; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun), at the far south end of town, sells hiking, climbing and camping equipment.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The bus station is on Railway St. Ulsterbus 20 runs to Newcastle from Belfast's Europa

BusCentre (£6, 1¼ hours, hourly Monday to Saturday, seven Sunday) via Dundrum. Bus 37 continues along the coast road from Newcastle to Annalong and Kilkeel (£3, 40 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday, six Sunday).

Goldline Express bus 240 takes the inland route from Newry to Newcastle (£5, 50 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday) via Hilltown and on to Downpatrick. You can also get to Newry along the coast road, changing buses at Kilkeel.

Wiki Wiki Wheels (☎ 4372 3973; 108 Donard St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) and **Ross Cycles** (☎ 4372 5525; Unit 9, Slieve Donard Shopping Centre, Railway St; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun), both near the bus station, hire out bikes for around £10/50 per day/week.

Around Newcastle DUNDRUM

Second only to Carrickfergus as Northern Ireland's finest Norman fortress is **Dundrum Castle** (☎ 9181 1491; Dundrum; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sat, 2-7pm Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Sat, 2-4pm Sun Oct-Mar), founded in 1177 by John de Courcy of Carrickfergus. The castle overlooks the sheltered waters of Dundrum Bay, famous for its oysters and mussels.

our pick **Mourne Seafood Bar** (☎ 4375 1377; 10 Main St; mains £7-16, 2-course lunch £9; ☎ noon-9.30pm daily Apr-Oct, closed Mon & Tue Nov-Mar) is a friendly and informal fishmonger-cum-restaurant set in a wood-panelled Victorian house with local art brightening the walls. As well as a choice of oysters served five different ways, the menu includes seafood chowder, crab, langoustines and daily fish specials.

Dundrum is 5km north of Newcastle. Bus 17 from Newcastle to Downpatrick stops in Dundrum (£2, 12 minutes, eight daily Monday to Friday, three Saturday, two Sunday).

TOLLYMORE FOREST PARK

This scenic **forest park** (☎ 4372 2428; Bryansford; car/pedestrian £4/2; ☎ 10am-dusk), 3km west of Newcastle, has lengthy walks along the Shimna River and across the northern slopes of the Mournes. The **visitor centre** (☎ noon-5pm daily Jun-Aug, noon-5pm Sat & Sun Sep-May), in 18th-century Clanbrassil Barn (it looks more like a church), has information on the flora, fauna and history of the park. Note: mountain-biking is not allowed in the park.

CASTLEWELLAN

A less rugged outdoor experience is offered by **Castlewellan Forest Park** (☎ 4377 8664; Main St, Castlewellan; car/pedestrian £4/2; ☎ 10am-dusk), with gentle walks around the castle grounds and **trout fishing** in its lovely lake (a daily permit costs £5).

Castlewellan village is the focus of the **Celtic Fusion Festival** (www.celticfusion.co.uk), a 10-day celebration of Celtic music, art, drama and dance at venues around County Down, including Castlewellan, Newcastle and Downpatrick.

Mourne Mountains

The hump-backed granite hills of the Mourne Mountains dominate the horizon as you head south from Belfast towards Newcastle. This is one of the most beautiful corners of Northern Ireland, a distinctive landscape of yellow gorse, grey granite and whitewashed cottages, the lower slopes of the hills latticed with a neat patchwork of dry-stone walls cobbled together from huge, rounded granite boulders.

The hills were made famous in a popular song penned by Irish songwriter William Percy French in 1896, whose chorus, 'Where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea', captures perfectly their scenic blend of ocean, sky and hillside. At the time of writing the government was looking at proposals to create **Mourne National Park** (www.mourneworkingparty.org).

The Mournes offer some of the best hill-walking and rock-climbing in the North. Specialist guidebooks include *The Mournes: Walks* by Paddy Dillon and *A Rock-Climbing Guide to the Mourne Mountains* by Robert Bankhead. You'll also need an Ordnance Survey map, either the 1:50,000 Discoverer Series (Sheet No 29: *The Mournes*), or the 1:25,000 Activity Series (*The Mournes*). You can buy maps at the tourist information centre in Newcastle.

HISTORY

The crescent of low-lying land on the southern side of the mountains is known as the Kingdom of Mourne. Cut off for centuries by its difficult approaches (the main overland route passed north of the hills), it developed a distinctive landscape and culture. Neither St Patrick nor the Normans (their nearest strongholds were at Greencastle and Dundrum) ventured here, and until the coast road was built in the early 19th century, the only access was on foot or by sea.

Smuggling provided a source of income in the 18th century. Boats carrying French spirits would land at night and packhorses would carry the casks through the hills to the inland road, avoiding the excise men at Newcastle. The Brandy Pad, an ex-smugglers' path from Bloody Bridge to Tollymore, is today a popular walking route.

Apart from farming and fishing, the main industry was the quarrying of Mourne granite. The quarried stone was carried down from the hills on carts to harbours at Newcastle, Annalong and Kilkeel where 'stone boats' shipped it out; kerbstones of Mourne granite are found in Belfast, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Birmingham. There are still several working quarries today, and Mourne granite has been used in the 9/11 British Memorial Garden in New York.

SIGHTS

At the heart of the Mournes is the beautiful **Silent Valley Reservoir** (☎ 9074 6581; car/motorcycle £3/2, plus per pedestrian adult/child £1.50/0.50; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 10am-4pm Oct-Mar), where the Kilkeel River was dammed in 1933. There are scenic, waymarked walks around the grounds, a **coffee shop** (☎ 11am-6.30pm daily Jun-Aug, 11am-6.30pm Sat &

Sun Apr, May & Sep) and an interesting exhibition on the building of the dam. From the car park a shuttle bus (adult/child return £1.20/0.90) will take you another 4km up the valley to the Crom Dam. It runs daily in July and August, weekends only in May, June and September.

The dry-stone **Mourne Wall** was built between 1904 and 1922 to keep livestock out of the catchment area of the Kilkeel and Annalong Rivers, which were to be dammed to provide a water supply for Belfast. (Poor geological conditions meant the Annalong could not be dammed, and its waters were diverted to the Silent Valley Reservoir via a 3.6km-long tunnel beneath Slieve Binnian.) The spectacular wall, 2m high, 1m thick and over 35km long, marches across the summits of 15 of the surrounding peaks including the highest, Slieve Donard (853m).

ACTIVITIES

If you fancy a shot at hill walking, rock-climbing, canoeing or a range of outdoor activities, **Bluelough Mountain & Water Sports Centre** (☎ 4377 0714; www.mountainandwater.com; Grange Courtyard, Castlewellan Forest Park) offers one-day, have-a-go sessions for individuals, couples and families (around £50 to £90 per person), and Sunday

afternoon taster sessions. They also rent canoes for £15/40 per hour/day.

If the weather is wet, you can still go rock-climbing at **hot rock** (☎ 4372 5354; www.hotrockwall.com; adult/child £4.50/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat-Mon, to 10pm Tue-Fri), the indoor climbing wall at Tollymore Mountain Centre. The entrance is on the B180, 2km west of the Tollymore Forest Park exit gate. You can hire rock boots and harness for £3.50.

Surfin' Dirt (☎ 07739-210119; Tullyree Rd, Bryansford; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 11am-6pm Sat & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep-Nov) is a mountain-boarding track off the B180 3km west of Bryansford village. A three-hour beginner's session, including board, safety gear and instruction, costs £15.

More sedate outdoor activities are offered by the **Mount Pleasant Pony Trekking & Horse Riding Centre** (☎ 4377 8651; www.mountpleasantcentre.com; Bannontown Rd, Castlewellan; per hr £12-15), which caters for both experienced riders and beginners, and offers various guided treks into the park. Short rides, beach rides and pony trekking can also be arranged.

Mourne Cycle Tours (☎ 4372 4348; www.mourmecycle-tours.com; 13 Spelga Ave, Newcastle) provide mountain and touring bike hire (from £10/15/80 per half-day/full day/week) and can arrange self-guided tours and family cycling weekends, including accommodation.

FESTIVALS

The Mournes are the venue for various hiking festivals, including the **Mourne International Walking Festival** (www.mournewalking.co.uk) in late June, and the Down District Walking Festival in early August.

SLEEPING

Meelmore Lodge (☎ 4372 6657; www.meelmorelodge.co.uk; 52 Trassey Rd, Bryansford; camping per adult/child £4/2.50, dm/tw £15/44; ☎) Set on the northern slopes of the Mournes, 5km west of Bryansford village, Meelmore has hostel accommodation with cosy lounge and kitchen, a family camp site and a coffee shop.

Cnocafeola Centre (☎ 4176 5859; www.mournehostel.com; Bog Rd, Atticall; dm/tw/f £14/36/55; ☎) This modern, purpose-built hostel is in the village of Atticall 6km north of Kilkeel, off the B27 Hilltown road, and 3km west of the entrance to Silent Valley. As well as a self-catering kitchen, there's a restaurant that serves breakfast (from £4), lunch and dinner.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

In July and August only, the Ulsterbus 405 Mourne Rambler service runs a circular route from Newcastle, calling at a dozen stops around the Mournes, including Bryansford (8 minutes), Meelmore (17 minutes), Silent Valley (40 minutes), Carrick Little (45 minutes) and Bloody Bridge (one hour). There are six buses daily – the first leaves at 9.30am, the last at 4.30pm; a £4 all-day ticket allows you to get on and off as many times as you like.

Bus 34A (July and August only) runs from Newcastle to the Silent Valley car park (30 minutes, four daily Monday to Friday, three Saturday, two Sunday), calling at Donard Park (five minutes) and Bloody Bridge (10 minutes).

Mournes Coast Road

The scenic drive south along the A2 coast road from Newcastle to Newry is the most memorable journey in Down. Annalong, Kilkeel and Rostrevor offer convenient stopping points from which you can detour into the mountains.

ANNALONG

The harbour at the fishing village of Annalong (Áth na Long) desperately wants to be picturesque, with an early 19th-century **Corn Mill** (☎ 4376 8736; Marine Park; adult/child £2/1.10; ☎ 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 3-5pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar) overlooking the river mouth on one side. The effect is spoiled a bit by graffiti and ugly buildings on the other side.

You can overnight at the family-oriented **Cornmill Quay Hostel** (☎ 4376 8269; www.cornmillquay.com; Marine Park; dm adult/child £15/10, d £40; ☎), set in a pretty little cottage courtyard above the harbour. There are also four self-catering cottages (from £350 a week in high season).

The attractive **Harbour Inn** (☎ 4376 8678; 6 Harbour Dr; mains £5-9; ☎ food 12.30-2.30pm, 5-8pm Sun-Fri, 12.30-9pm Sat) has an attractive lounge bar with sofas arranged along the picture windows beside the harbour, and an upstairs restaurant with a great view of the Mournes.

KILKEEL

Kilkeel (Cill Chaoilí, meaning 'church of the narrow place') takes its name from the 14th-century **Church of St Colman**, whose ruins stand in the graveyard across the street from the tourist office. The town has a busy commercial fishing harbour and a quayside fish

WALK: SLIEVE DONARD

The rounded form of Slieve Donard (853m), the highest hill in Northern Ireland, looms above Newcastle like a slumbering giant. You can hike to the summit from various starting points in and around Newcastle, but remember – it's a stiff climb, and you shouldn't attempt it without proper walking boots, waterproofs and a map and compass.

On a good day the view from the top extends to the hills of Donegal, the Wicklow Mountains, the coast of Scotland, the Isle of Man and even the hills of Snowdonia in Wales. Two cairns near the summit were long believed to have been cells of St Donard, who retreated here to pray in early Christian times.

From Newcastle (9km, three hours)

This is the shortest but least interesting route. Begin at Donard Park car park, at the edge of town 1km south of the bus station. At the far end of the car park, turn right through the gate and head into the woods, with the river on your left. A gravel path leads up the Glen River valley to the saddle between Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh. From here, turn left and follow the Mourne Wall to the summit (see above for more on the Mourne Wall). Return by the same route.

From Bloody Bridge (10km, 3½ hours)

Start from the car park at Bloody Bridge on the A2 coast road 5km south of Newcastle (any bus to Kilkeel will drop you there). From here, an old smugglers' path called the Brandy Pad (see boxed text, p630) leads up the valley of the Bloody Bridge River past old granite workings to the saddle south of Slieve Donard. Turn right and follow the Mourne Wall to the summit; cross the wall first, as the best views are to your left. Return by the same route, or descend the Glen River to Newcastle.

WALK: THE BRANDY PAD

The Brandy Pad is an ancient smugglers' trail across the Mourne Mountains that was used in the 18th century to carry brandy, wine, tobacco and coffee to Hilltown, avoiding the excise officer at Newcastle. The trail begins at Bloody Bridge, 5km south of Newcastle.

The first part of the path follows the route up Slieve Donard from Bloody Bridge (see boxed text, p628) as far as the Mourne Wall (3.5km). On the far side of the wall a wide path contours north (to your right) across the lower slopes of Slieve Donard, then continues traversing west below the Castles, a huddle of weathered granite pinnacles. Beyond the peaty col beneath Slieve Commedagh, the path descends slightly into the valley of the Kilkeel River (or Silent Valley), and continues traversing with Ben Crom reservoir down to your left, to reach Hare's Gap and a reunion with the Mourne Wall.

Go through the gap in the wall and descend to the northwest, steeply at first then more easily on a broad and stony trail known as the Trassey Track which leads down to a minor road and the Trassey Bridge car park near Meelmore Lodge (12km from Bloody Bridge; allow three to five hours).

From here you can return to Newcastle on foot through Tollymore Forest Park, along the trail that begins immediately above the car park (8km; allow two to three hours), or (July and August only) you can catch the Mourne Rambler bus from either the car park or Meelmore Lodge.

market supplied by Northern Ireland's largest fishing fleet.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 4176 2525; kdakilkeel@hotmail.com; Rooney Rd; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, also Sat Easter-Oct) is in the Nautilus Centre next to the harbour.

ROSTREVOR

Rostrevor (Caislean Ruairi) is a pretty Victorian seaside resort famed for its lively pubs. Each year in late July, folk musicians converge on the village for the **Fiddler's Green International Festival** (☎ 4173 9819; www.fiddlersgreenfestival.co.uk).

The town is noted for its many pubs, most of which have regular live music. The best ones to eat in are the **Kilbroney** (☎ 4173 8390; 31 Church St) and the **Celtic Fjord** (☎ 4173 8005; 8 Mary St).

To the east is **Kilbroney Forest Park** (☎ 4173 8134; Shore Rd; admission free; ☎ 9am-10pm Jun-Aug, to 5pm Sep-May). From the car park at the top of the forest drive, a 10-minute hike leads up to the **Cloughmore Stone**, a 30-tonne granite boulder inscribed with Victorian graffiti, and a superb view over the lough to Carlingford Mountain.

Warrenpoint
pop 7000

Warrenpoint (An Pointe) is a Victorian resort at the head of Carlingford Lough, its seaside appeal somewhat diminished by the large industrial harbour at the west end of town. Its broad streets, main square and recently renovated prom are pleasant enough,

though, and it has better sleeping and eating options than either Newry or Rostrevor.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 4175 2256; Church St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-May, also Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) is in the town hall.

About 2km northwest of the town centre is **Narrow Water Castle** (☎ 9181 1491; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm Tue, Fri & Sat, 2-6pm Wed & Thu Jul & Aug), a fine Elizabethan tower house built in 1568 to command the entrance to the Newry River.

SLEEPING & EATING

our pick **Whistledown & Finns** (☎ 4175 4174; www.whistledown.co.uk; 6 Seaview; s/d £40/70) This waterfront guesthouse offers country-style accommodation in five rooms (ask for No 2, with its pine four-poster bed and bay window overlooking the sea), and a stylish bar and restaurant (mains £9 to £14; open noon to 5pm & 7.30pm to 10pm Monday to Saturday, plus 12.30pm to 3.30pm Sunday).

Boathouse Inn (☎ 4175 3743; www.boathouseinn.com; 3 Marine Pde; s/d £45/70; ☎) The Boathouse offers two top-notch dining options: the Boathouse Restaurant (mains £11 to £17; open 7pm to 10pm), a chilled out, candle-lit bistro with a modern fusion menu, and the Vecchia Roma (mains £6 to £15; open noon to 2.30pm and 6pm to 11pm), a traditional, checked-tablecloth-and-candle-in-a-chianti-bottle Italian restaurant. It also has 12 comfortable but unremarkable rooms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 39 runs between Newry and Warrenpoint (£2, 20 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, 10 on Sunday), with some services continuing to Kilkeel (one hour).

Newry

pop 22,975

Newry has long been a frontier town, guarding the land route from Dublin to Ulster through the 'Gap of the North', the pass between Slieve Gullion and the Carlingford hills, still followed by the main Dublin-Belfast road and railway. Its name derives from a yew tree (An tIúir) supposedly planted here by St Patrick.

The opening of the Newry Canal in 1742, linking the town with the River Bann at Portadown, made Newry into a busy trading port, exporting coal from Coalisland on Lough Neagh as well as linen and butter from the surrounding area.

Newry today is a major shopping centre, with a busy market on Thursday and Saturday, and makes a good base for exploring the Mourne Mountains, South Armagh and the Cooley Peninsula in County Louth.

INFORMATION

Coffee-Net (☎ 3026 3531; Newry BusCentre, the Mall; per 15min £1; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 5-8pm Sun) Internet access.

Tourist information centre (☎ 3031 3170; Bagenal's Castle, Castle St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri year-round, to 7pm Tue-Fri mid Jun-Sep, also 10am-4pm Sat Apr-Sep)

SIGHTS

So fierce was the rivalry between counties Down and Armagh in the 19th century, that when the new red-brick **town hall** was built in 1893 it was erected right on the border – on a three-arched bridge across the Newry River. The cannon outside was captured during the Crimean War (1853–56) and given to the town in memory of local volunteers who fought in the war.

Bagenal's Castle is the town's oldest surviving building, a 16th-century tower house built for Nicholas Bagenal, grand marshal of the English army in Ireland. Recently rediscovered, having been incorporated into more recent buildings, the castle has been restored and now houses the **Newry and Mourne Museum** (☎ 3031 3178; www.bagenalscastle.com; Castle St; admission free; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat & 1-4.30pm Sun),

with exhibits on the Newry Canal and local archaeology, culture and folklore.

The **Newry Canal** runs parallel to the river through the town centre, and is a focus for the city's redevelopment. A cycle path runs 30km north to Portadown, following the route of the canal. **Newry Ship Canal** runs 6km south towards Carlingford Lough, where the Victoria Lock has been restored to working order as part of a long-term project to reopen the whole canal to leisure traffic. Designed by Sir John Rennie, the civil engineer who designed Waterloo, Southwark and London Bridges in London, the ship canal allowed large, sea-going vessels to reach Albert Basin in the centre of Newry.

SLEEPING

Marymount (☎ 3026 1099; patricia.ohare2@btinternet.com; Windsor Ave; s/d £32/54; ☎) A modern bungalow in a quiet location up a hill off the A1 Belfast road, Marymount is only a 10-minute walk from the town centre. Only one of the three rooms comes with private bathroom.

Canal Court Hotel (☎ 3025 1234; www.canalcourt-hotel.com; Merchants Quay; s/d from £80/130; ☎) You can't miss this huge, yellow building opposite the bus station. Although it's a modern hotel, it affects a deliberately old-fashioned atmosphere with leather sofas dotted around the vast wood-panelled lobby and a restaurant that veers dangerously close to chintzy.

EATING & DRINKING

Café Krem (☎ 3026 6233; 14 Hill St; mains £2-3; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) A friendly, community atmosphere and the best coffee in town make Café Krem stand out from the crowd. There's also wicked hot chocolate, tasty *panini* (a type of Italian sandwich) and a couple of big, soft sofas to sink into.

Brass Monkey (☎ 3026 3176; 1-4 Sandy St; mains £7-12; ☎ food 12.30-2.30pm & 5-8pm) Newry's most popular pub, with Victorian brass, brick and timber décor, serves good bar meals ranging from lasagne and burgers to seafood and steaks.

Cobbles (☎ 3083 3333; 15 the Mall; mains £5-12; ☎ food 10am-9.30pm) This stylish lounge-bar is decked out in dark parquet flooring and blonde wood with leather chairs and banquettes in burgundy and cream. It dishes up big breakfasts (till noon), chunky lunches and delicious dinners from a fancy pub-grub menu that ranges from soup and a sandwich to home-made burgers and pizza.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Newry BusCentre is on the Mall, opposite the Canal Court Hotel. Goldline Express bus 238 runs regularly to Newry from Belfast's Europa BusCentre (£7, 1½ hours, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, eight Sunday) via Hillsborough and Banbridge.

Bus 44 runs from Newry to Armagh (£5, 1¼ hours, twice daily Monday to Friday, three on Saturday), and Goldline Express bus 295 goes from Newry to Enniskillen (£9, 2¾ hours, twice daily Monday to Saturday, July and August only) via Armagh and Monaghan. Bus 39 departs for Warrenpoint (20 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, 10 on Sunday) and Rostrevor (30 minutes), with 10 a day continuing to Kilkeel (£4, one hour).

The train station is 2.5km northwest of the centre, on the A25; bus 341 (free for train passengers) goes there hourly from the bus station. Newry is a stop on the service between Dublin (£16, 1¼ hours) and Belfast (£8, 50 minutes, 10 daily Monday to Saturday, five Sunday).

COUNTY ARMAGH

SOUTH ARMAGH

Rural and staunchly republican, South Armagh is known to its inhabitants as 'God's Country'. But to the British soldiers stationed there in the 1970s it had another, more sinister nickname – 'Bandit Country'. With the Republic only a few miles away,

South Armagh was a favourite venue for IRA cross-border attacks and bombings. For more than 30 years, British soldiers on foot patrol in village streets and the constant clatter of army helicopters were a part of everyday life.

The peace process has probably had more visible effect here than anywhere else in Northern Ireland. As part of the UK government's 'normalisation process' the army pulled out in 2007 – the hilltop watchtowers have all been removed (their former location marked here and there by a defiant Irish tricolour) and the huge barracks at Bessbrook Mill and Crossmaglen have been closed down.

Hopefully, a part of Ireland that was once notorious for its violence will once again be known for its historic sites, enchanting rural scenery and traditional music.

Bessbrook**pop 3150**

Bessbrook (An Sruthán) was founded in the mid-19th century by Quaker linen manufacturer John Grubb Richardson as a 'model village' to house the workers at his flax mill. Rows of pretty terraced houses made from local granite line the two main squares, Charlemont and College, each with a green in the middle, and are complemented by a town hall, school, bathhouse and dispensary. It is said that Bessbrook was the inspiration for Bournville (near Birmingham in England), the model village built by the Cadbury family for their chocolate factory.

At the centre of the village is the massive **Bessbrook Mill**. Requisitioned by the British Army in 1970, it served as a military base for more than 30 years – the helipad on top was reputedly the busiest in Europe – until the troops moved out in 2007. There are plans to convert the mill building into apartments, and the new complex may house an art gallery and café.

Just south of Bessbrook is **Derrymore House** (☎ 8778 4753; 🌳 gardens 10am-7pm May-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Apr), an elegant thatched cottage built in 1776 for Isaac Corry, the Irish MP for Newry for 30 years; the Act of Union was drafted in the drawing room here in 1800. At the time of research the house was closed to the public, but the surrounding parkland – laid out by John Sutherland (1745–1826), one of the most celebrated disciples of English landscape gardener Capability Brown –

offers scenic trails with views to the Ring of Gullion.

Bessbrook is 5km northwest of Newry. Bus 41 runs from Newry to Bessbrook (15 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday), while buses 42 (to Crossmaglen) and 44 (to Armagh) pass the entrance to Derrymore House on the A25 Camlough road.

Ring of Gullion

The Ring of Gullion is a magical region steeped in Celtic legend, centred on Slieve Gullion (Sliabh gCuilinn; 576m) where the Celtic warrior Cúchulainn is said to have taken his name after killing the dog (*cú*) belonging to the smith Culainn. The 'ring' is a necklace of rugged hills strung between Newry and Forkhill, 15km to the southwest, encircling the central whaleback ridge of Slieve Gullion. This unusual concentric formation is a geological structure known as a ring-dyke.

KILLEVY CHURCHES

Surrounded by beech trees, these ruined, conjoined **churches** (admission free; 🕒 24hr) were constructed on the site of a 5th-century nunnery that was founded by St Moninna. The eastern church dates from the 15th century, and shares a gable wall with the 12th-century western one. The west door, with a massive lintel and granite jambs, may be 200 years older still. At the side of the churchyard a footpath leads uphill to a white cross that marks St Moninna's holy well.

The churches are 6km south of Camlough, on a minor road to Meigh. Look out for a crossroads with a sign pointing west to the churches and east to Bernish Rock Viewpoint.

SLIEVE GULLION FOREST PARK

A 13km scenic drive through this **forest park** (admission free; 🕒 8am-dusk) provides picturesque views over the surrounding hills. From the parking and picnic area at the top of the drive you can hike to the summit of Slieve Gullion, the highest point in County Armagh, topped by two early-Bronze Age cairns and a tiny lake (1.5km round trip). The park entrance is 10km southwest of Newry on the B113 road to Forkhill.

MULLAGHBANE & FORKHILL

In the village of Mullaghbane (Mullach Bán), just west of Slieve Gullion, is **Tí Chu-**

lainn (☎ 3088 8828; www.tichulainn.com; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-12.30pm Sat), a cultural activities centre that promotes the Irish language, local folklore, traditional music and storytelling. The centre houses an exhibition, craft shop and café. It also offers hostel-type accommodation (£40 for a room sleeping up to three people).

The pubs in nearby Forkhill hold traditional music sessions on Tuesday nights and alternate Saturdays, and a folk music festival in October.

Crossmaglen**pop 1600**

Crossmaglen (Crois Mhic Linnáin), arranged around one of Ireland's biggest market squares, is a strongly republican village just 4km inside the border. At the height of the Troubles the barracks at 'Cross' (or XMG, as it was known) was the most feared posting in the British Army.

Now the army has gone, and for today's visitors Crossmaglen is a friendly place with a reputation for Gaelic football (Crossmaglen Rangers were the All-Ireland Club Champions in 2007), horse breeding and lively pubs known for their excellent music sessions.

You can get tourist information at **RoSA** (☎ 3086 8900; 25-26 O'Fiaich Sq; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), and **Twisted Briar Tours** (☎ 3026 0488; twistedbriar.tours@ireland.com) can provide customised tours of the area for around £70 per half day.

Murtagh's Bar (☎ 3086 1378; aidanmurtagh@hotmail.com; 13 North St; s/d £25/50) offers good craic, traditional music, bar meals and B&B, while the brand new **Cross Square Hotel** (☎ 3086 0505; www.crosssquarehotel.com; 4-5 O'Fiaich Sq; s/d £50/80; mains £7-10; 🕒 food served 9.30am-9pm) serves bar meals all day and an à la carte menu at lunch and dinner. There's live music on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

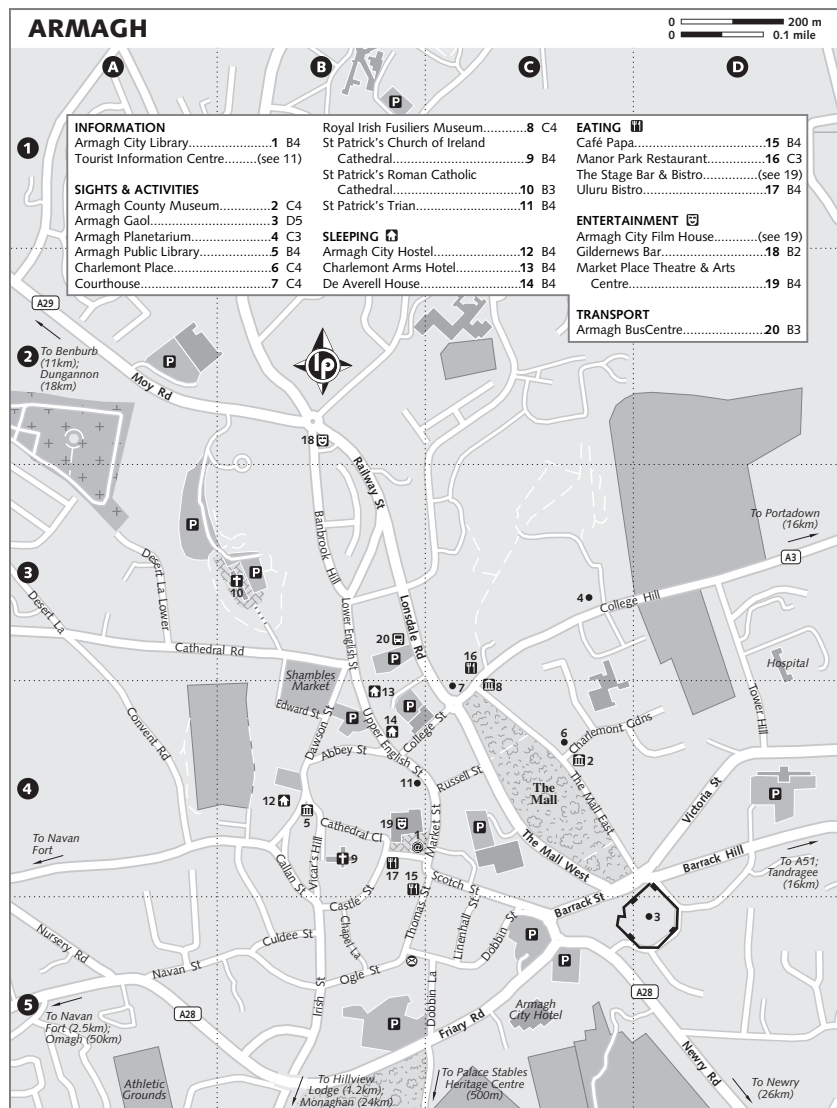
Bus 42 runs from Newry to Crossmaglen (£4, 50 minutes, six daily Monday to Friday, four Saturday) via Camlough and Mullaghbane.

ARMAGH CITY**pop 14,600**

The little cathedral city of Armagh (Ard Macha) has been an important religious centre since the 5th century, and today it remains the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, the seat of both the Anglican and Roman Catholic archbishops of Armagh, and

TOP 10 RESTAURANTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND (OUTSIDE BELFAST)

- 55 Degrees North (p660)
- Brown's Restaurant (p651)
- Grace Neill's (p616)
- Lime Tree (p655)
- Lobster Pot (p624)
- Mourne Seafood Bar (p627)
- Narrows (p617)
- Oscar's (p681)
- Plough Inn (p611)
- Uluru Bistro (p637)



primates of all Ireland. Their two cathedrals, both named for St Patrick, stare each other out from their respective hilltops.

Despite having a number of attractive Georgian buildings, the town has a bit of a dreary, run-down feel to it, with gap sites, wasteland and boarded-up windows spoiling the streetscape, but it's worth a visit for

the fascinating Armagh Public Library and nearby Navan Fort.

History

When St Patrick began his mission to spread Christianity throughout Ireland, he chose a site close to Emain Macha (Navan Fort), the nerve centre of pagan Ulster, for his power

base. In AD 445 he built Ireland's first stone church on a hill nearby (now home to the Church of Ireland cathedral), and later decreed that Armagh should have pre-eminence over all the churches in Ireland.

By the 8th century Armagh was one of Europe's best-known centres of religion, learning and craftwork. The city was divided into three districts (called *trians*), centred around English, Scottish and Irish streets. Armagh's fame was its undoing, however, as the Vikings plundered the city 10 times between AD 831 and 1013.

The city gained a new prosperity from the linen trade in the 18th century, a period whose legacy includes a Royal School, an astronomical observatory, a renowned public library and a fine crop of Georgian architecture.

Armagh is associated with some prominent historical figures. James Ussher (1580–1655), Archbishop of Armagh, was an avid scholar who is best known for pinning down the day of the Creation to Sunday, 23 October 4004 BC by adding up the generations quoted in the Bible, a date which was accepted as fact until the late 19th century. His extensive library became the nucleus of the great library at Trinity College, Dublin. Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, and author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was a frequent visitor to Armagh, while the architect Francis Johnston (1760–1829), responsible for many of Dublin's finest Georgian streetscapes, was born in the city.

Information

Armagh City Library (☎ 3752 4072; Market St; ☎ 9.30am–5.30pm Mon, Wed & Fri, to 8pm Tue & Thu, to 5pm Sat) Internet access for £1.50 per 30 minutes.
Tourist information centre (☎ 3752 1800; www.visitarmagh.com; 40 English St; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat year-round, also noon–5.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 2–5pm Sun Sep–Jun) Part of the St Patrick's Trian complex.

Sights

ST PATRICK'S TRIAN

The old Presbyterian church behind the tourist office has been turned into a heritage centre and visitor complex known as **St Patrick's Trian** (☎ 3752 1801; 40 English St; adult/child £4.75/3; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat year-round, noon–5pm Sun Jul & Aug, 2–5pm Sun Sep–Jun). There are three exhibitions: the Armagh Story explores the history of Armagh from pagan prehistory to

the present day; Patrick's Testament takes an interactive look at the ancient *Book of Armagh*; and for the kids there's the Land of Lilliput where Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput are recounted by a gigantic model of Jonathan Swift's famous creation.

ST PATRICK'S CHURCH OF IRELAND CATHEDRAL

The city's **Anglican cathedral** (☎ 3752 3142; Cathedral Close; admission £1; ☎ 10am–5pm Apr–Oct, 10am–4pm Nov–Mar, guided tours 11.30am–2.30pm Mon–Sat Jun–Aug) occupies the site of St Patrick's original stone church. The present cathedral's ground plan is 13th century but the building itself is a Gothic restoration dating from 1834 to 1840. A stone slab on the exterior wall of the north transept marks the burial place of Brian Ború, the High King of Ireland, who died near Dublin during the last great battle against the Vikings in 1014.

Within the church are the remains of an 11th-century **Celtic Cross** that once stood nearby, and the **Tandragee Idol**, a curious granite figure dating back to the Iron Age. In the south aisle is a **memorial to Archbishop Richard Robinson** (1709–94), who founded Armagh's observatory and public library. Guided tours, which should be booked in advance, cost £2 per person.

ARMAGH PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Greek inscription above the main entrance to **Armagh Public Library** (☎ 3752 3142; www.armaghrobinsonlibrary.org; 43 Abbey St; admission free, guided tour £2; ☎ 10am–1pm & 2–4pm Mon–Fri), founded in 1771 by Archbishop Robinson, means 'the medicine shop of the soul'. Step inside and you'd swear that the archbishop had just swept out of the door, leaving you to browse among his personal collection of 17th- and 18th-century books, maps and engravings.

The library's most prized possession is a first edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726 and annotated by none other than Swift himself. It was stolen in an armed robbery in 1999, but was recovered, undamaged, in Dublin 20 months later.

Other treasures of the library include Sir Walter Raleigh's 1614 *History of the World*, the *Claims of the Innocents* (pleas to Oliver Cromwell) and a large collection of engravings by Hogarth and others.

ST PATRICK'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL

The other **St Patrick's Cathedral** (☎ 3752 2802; Cathedral Rd; admission free; ☞ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 8am-6.30pm Sun) was built between 1838 and 1873 in Gothic Revival style with huge twin towers dominating the approach up flight after flight of steps. Inside it seems almost Byzantine, with every piece of wall and ceiling covered in brilliantly coloured mosaics. The sanctuary was modernised in 1981 and has a very distinctive tabernacle holder and crucifix that seem out of place among the mosaics and statues of the rest of the church. Mass is said at 10am Monday to Friday, and at 9am, 11am and 5.30pm on Sunday.

THE MALL

The Mall, to the east of the town centre, was a venue for horse racing, cock fighting and bull baiting until the 18th century when Archbishop Robinson decided all that was a tad vulgar for a city of learning, and transformed it into an elegant Georgian park.

At its northern end stands the **courthouse**, rebuilt after being destroyed by a huge IRA bomb in 1993. It originally dates from 1809, designed by local man Francis Johnston, who later became one of Ireland's most famous architects. At the southern end, directly opposite the courthouse, is the forbidding **Armagh Gaol**. Built in 1780 to the design of Thomas Cooley, it remained in use until 1988.

The east side of the park is lined with handsome Georgian terraces. **Charlemont Place** is another creation of Francis Johnston, as is the portico fronting **Armagh County Museum** (☎ 3752 3070; the Mall East; admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat). The museum displays prehistoric axe heads, items found in bogs, corn dollies and straw-boy outfits, and military costumes and equipment. Don't miss the gruesome cast-iron skull that once graced the top of the Armagh gallows.

The nearby **Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum** (☎ 3752 2911; the Mall East; admission free; ☞ 10am-12.30pm & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri) tells the story of the 'Eagle Takers', the first regiment to capture one of Bonaparte's imperial eagle standards in 1811.

ARMAGH PLANETARIUM

The Armagh Observatory was founded by Archbishop Robinson in 1790 and is still Ireland's leading astronomical research institute. Aimed mainly at educating young people, the

nearby **Armagh Planetarium** (☎ 3752 3689; www.armaghplanet.com; College Hill; admission to exhibition area per person £2, shows per adult/child £6/5; ☞ 1-5pm Tue-Fri, 11.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) has an interactive exhibition on space exploration, and a digital theatre that screens a range of spectacular half-hour shows on its domed ceiling (check website for show times).

PALACE STABLES HERITAGE CENTRE

The Primate's Palace, overlooking the ruins of a 13th-century Franciscan friary on the southern edge of town, was built for Archbishop Robinson when he was appointed primate of Ireland in 1769. The bishop's stables are now home to the **Palace Stables Heritage Centre** (☎ 3752 9629; Palace demesne; adult/child £4.75/3; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat & noon-5pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat & noon-5pm Sun Apr, May & Sep), a set of tableaux staffed by costumed guides illustrating how the archbishop's guests were entertained in the 18th century.

Sleeping

Armagh City Hostel (☎ 3751 1800; www.hini.org.uk; 39 Abbey St; dm/tw £15/32; ☞ open daily Mar-Oct, Fri & Sat only Nov-Feb, closed 23 Dec-2 Jan; Ⓟ) This modern, purpose-built hostel near the Church of Ireland Cathedral is more like a small hotel – there are six comfortable twin rooms with private bathrooms, TV and tea-and-coffee facilities, as well as 12 small dorms, a well-equipped kitchen, a laundry, a lounge and a reading room.

Hillview Lodge (☎ 3752 2000; www.hillviewlodge.com; 33 Newtownhamilton Rd; s/d £38/50; Ⓟ) Just 1.5km south of Armagh, Hillview is a welcoming, family-run guesthouse with a self-contained accommodation block containing six appealing rooms with great countryside views. And there's a driving range next door if you feel like improving your golf swing.

De Averell House (☎ 3751 1213; www.deaverellhouse.net; 47 Upper English St; s/d £40/70; Ⓟ) A converted Georgian town house with four spacious rooms and a self-catering apartment, the De Averell is run by a friendly landlord who can't do enough to help. Rooms at the front can be noisy; the twin at the back is the quietest.

Charlemont Arms Hotel (☎ 3752 2028; www.charlemontarmshotel.com; 57-65 English St; s/d £50/80; Ⓟ) This hotel dates from the 19th century, but has been renovated in charming period décor – oak-panelled dining room, Victorian fireplaces, flagstone-floored cellar restaurant. The bedrooms, in contrast, are modern and stylish.

Eating

Café Papa (☎ 3751 1205; 15 Thomas St; mains £4-8; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 6-9pm Fri & Sat) This deli-cum-café serves good coffee, cakes, home-baked bread and gourmet sandwiches, and does bistro dinners on Friday and Saturday evenings when you can bring your own wine.

Our pick Uluru Bistro (☎ 3751 8051; 16-18 Market St; mains £5-12; ☞ noon-2.30pm & 6-9.30pm Tue-Fri, noon-10pm Sat) The Aussie chef at Uluru brings a bit of antipodean flair to Armagh, with a fusion menu that ranges from Thai-style hot-and-sour chicken broth to marinated, char-grilled kangaroo, plus some local favourites such as beer-battered fish and chips.

Stage Bar & Bistro (☎ 3751 828; Market Sq; mains £9-15; ☞ food noon-4pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-6pm Sun, 5-9pm Thu-Sat, café menu from 9.30am Mon-Sat, from noon Sun) This stylish little place is a chilled-out haven of coffee- and cream-coloured sofas and chairs in the theatre lobby, with a menu that offers some tasty vegetarian dishes – try vegetable tempura with teriyaki dip – as well as pork chops with cabbage and bacon, and fillet of salmon with cheese and herb sauce.

Manor Park Restaurant (☎ 3751 5353; 2 College Hill, the Mall; mains £19-25; ☞ noon-2.30pm daily, 5.30-9.30pm Mon-Thu, 5.30-10pm Fri & Sat) Crisp white linen and silver candlesticks complement a cosy old-world décor of red-brick walls, parquet floors and Persian rugs in this atmospheric French restaurant. The menu runs the gastronomic gamut from frogs legs fricassee to local pollan and eel, with a wine list as long as the Loire. There's a two-course set menu for £21, available midweek only.

Entertainment

Market Place Theatre & Arts Centre (☎ 3752 1821; www.marketplacearmagh.com; Market St; ☞ box office 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Armagh's main cultural venue hosts a 400-seat theatre, exhibition galleries, a restaurant, a café and the Stage Bar, which has live bands on Saturday nights.

Armagh City Film House (☎ 3751 1033; www.armaghfilmhouse.com; Market St; adult/child £4/3) Next door to the arts centre.

Gildernews Bar (☎ 3752 7315; 100 Railway St) Formerly Hughes' Bar, Gildernews has traditional music sessions every Tuesday at 10pm, and DJs on Friday and Saturday.

You may be lucky enough to catch a game of **road bowling** (www.irishroadbowling.ie), a traditional Irish game now played mostly in Armagh and Cork. Contestants hurl small metal

bowls weighing 750g along quiet country lanes to see who can make it to the finishing line with the least number of throws. Games usually take place on Sunday afternoons in summer, with the Ulster Finals held at Armagh in late June. Ask for details at the tourist information centre.

Getting There & Away

Buses stop at Armagh BusCentre on Lonsdale Rd, north of the town centre.

Goldline Express bus 251 runs from Belfast's Europa BusCentre (€7, one to 1½ hours, hourly Monday to Friday, eight Saturday, three Sunday) to Armagh. Bus 44 runs from Armagh to Newry (€5, 1¼ hours, twice daily Monday to Friday, once on Saturday), and Goldline Express 295 runs to Enniskillen (€7, two hours, twice daily Monday to Saturday, July and August only) via Monaghan.

There are no direct services from Armagh to Derry – the fastest route (three hours) is via Dungannon (buses 72 and 273).

Armagh is a stop on the once-daily (except Saturday) bus 278 from Coleraine to Monaghan (change here for Dublin) and the once-daily bus 270 from Belfast to Galway.

AROUND ARMAGH CITY

Navan Fort

Perched atop a drumlin a little over 3km west of Armagh is Navan Fort (Emain Macha), the most important archaeological site in Ulster. It was probably a prehistoric provincial capital and ritual site, on a par with Tara in County Meath.

The Irish name Emain Macha means 'the twins of Macha', Macha being the same mythical queen or goddess after whom Armagh itself is named (from Ard Macha, 'heights of Macha'). The site is linked in legend with the tales of Cúchulainn and named as capital of Ulster and the seat of the legendary Knights of the Red Branch.

It was an important centre from around 1150 BC until the coming of Christianity; the discovery of the skull of a Barbary ape on the site indicates trading links with North Africa. The main circular earthwork enclosure is no less than 240m in diameter, and encloses a smaller circular structure and an Iron Age burial mound. The circular structure has intrigued archaeologists – it appears to be some sort of temple, whose roof was supported by concentric rows of wooden posts, and whose

interior was filled with a vast pile of stones. Stranger still, the whole thing was set on fire soon after its construction around 95 BC, possibly for ritual purposes.

The nearby **Navan Centre** (☎ 3752 1800; 81 Killylea Rd, Armagh; adult/child £4.75/3; ☞ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat & noon-5pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-5pm Sat & noon-5pm Sun Apr, May & Sep) has exhibitions placing the fort in its historical context, and a re-creation of an Iron Age settlement.

You can walk to the site from Armagh (45 minutes), or you can take bus 73 to Navan village (10 minutes, seven daily Monday to Friday).

NORTH ARMAGH

North Armagh, 'the orchard of Ireland', is the island's main fruit-growing region, famed for its apples and strawberries. In May the countryside is awash with pink apple blossoms.

Address House

Starting life as a farmhouse, **Address House** (☎ 3885 1236; 64 Address Rd; adult/child £4/2; ☞ 2-6pm Sat, Sun & public hols mid-Mar-Sep) was extended and converted to a manor house in 1760. Much of the original neoclassical interior remains, including a table made in 1799 on which King George V signed the Constitution of Northern Ireland in 1921, and the farmyard houses a vast collection of machinery, along with a piggery and a smithy. The walled garden has been planted with a selection of the old apple varieties for which north Armagh's orchards are famous, and there are pleasant walks around the wooded grounds.

Address House is 15km northeast of Armagh, on the B28 halfway between Moy and Portadown.

LOUGH NEAGH

Lough Neagh (pronounced 'nay') is the largest freshwater lake in all of Britain and Ireland, big enough to swallow the city of Birmingham (West Midlands, UK, or Alabama, USA – either one would fit). Though vast (around 32km long and 16km wide), the lough is relatively shallow – never more than 9m deep – and is an important habitat for waterfowl. Its waters are home to the pollan, a freshwater herring found only in Ireland, and the dollaghan, a subspecies of trout, unique to Lough Neagh. Connected to the sea by the River Bann, the lough has been an important waterway and food source since prehistoric times, and still has an eel fishery that employs around 200 people.

The main points of access to the lough include Antrim Town (p674) on the eastern shore, Oxford Island (above) in the south, and Ballyronan and Ardboe (p692) in the west. The **Lough-shore Trail** (www.loughshoretrail.com) is a 180-km cycle route that encircles the lough. For most of its length it follows quiet country roads set back from the shore; the best sections for actually seeing the lough itself are west of Oxford Island and south from Antrim town.

Argory

A fine country house above the River Blackwater, the **Argory** (☎ 8778 4753; Derrycaw Rd; adult/child grounds & tour £5/2.50, grounds only per car £3; ☞ house 1-6pm daily Easter week & Jun-Aug, 1-6pm Sat, Sun & public hols mid-Mar-May & Sep-mid-Oct) retains most of its original 1824 fittings; some rooms are still lit by acetylene gas from the house's private plant. There are two formal gardens featuring roses, Victorian clipped-yew arbours and a lime walk by the river.

The Argory is 3.5km northeast of Moy on the Derrycaw road (off the B28), and 5km northwest of Address.

Oxford Island

Oxford Island National Nature Reserve protects a range of habitats – woodland, wildflower meadows, reedy shoreline and shallow lake margins – on the southern edge of Lough Neagh (see boxed text, below), and is criss-crossed with walking trails, information boards and bird-watching hides.

The **Lough Neagh Discovery Centre** (☎ 3832 2205; www.oxfordisland.com; Oxford Island, Lurgan; admission free; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun, to 6pm daily Jul & Aug), set in the middle of a reed-fringed pond inhabited by waterfowl, has a tourist information desk, a gift shop and a great little **café** (☞ 10am-4.30pm year-round, to 5.30pm Easter-Sep) with lake-shore views.

One-hour **boat trips** (☎ 3832 7573; adult/child £4/2; ☞ 1.30-6.30pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct) on the lough depart from nearby Kinnego Marina, aboard the 12-seater cabin cruiser *Master McGra*.

Oxford Island is just north of Lurgan, signposted from Junction 10 on the M1 motorway.

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