

1

The Best of Ireland

by Keith Bain

IN MANY WAYS, IRELAND CLINGS—IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION ESPECIALLY—to the idea of itself as a small, mostly rural, and eternally countrified realm still tuned in to a way of life long forgotten. Vast uninterrupted swaths of green rolling hills; shaggy sheep forever grazing along cliffs that tumble down to a raging ocean; luminous shamrocks emblazoned on everything from airplanes to guesthouse signboards; and tributes to the national pastime—Guinness drinking—posted on any available surface. These are some of the endearing images that permeate the popular conception of Ireland.

And yes, some of the stereotypes hold true. It's true about the Irish being tremendously gregarious. They're largely Catholic, too, with large chunks of their country given over to agriculture. But don't be fooled into thinking that village charm and bucolic meadow scenes are all there is to the country. As the late great Irish author John McGahern wrote, Ireland "is a peculiar society in the sense that it was a 19th century society up to about 1970 and then it almost bypassed the 20th century." It's been Ireland's great economic boom—its "Celtic Tiger" phase, a phrase first coined in 1994 to describe a suddenly vibrant Irish economy—that has perhaps brought some of the most obvious changes throughout the island. With foreign capital pouring in, much of the landscape has been recently transformed as holiday homes, cluster developments, and—on the positive side—decent roads were built. Large-scale hotels are replacing family-run B&Bs, BMWs have taken over from tractors, and rather than hearing Yeats recited in a pub, you're likely to hear familiar rhetoric on mortgage repayments.

The other great change, of course, has been arrival of peace. The IRA's announcement (also in 1994) that it intended a "cessation of military activity," fundamentally altered the prospects and culture of the Emerald Isle. Yes, lingering resentments still exist, particularly in Northern Ireland, but after centuries of conflict—between warring tribes, with invading Vikings and Brits, and between Protestants and Catholics—hope has gained the upper hand over hatred. And this change, along with economic progress, has fundamentally reshaped life here.

Learning about this history of conflict—which you'll see in Ireland's ruined monasteries, ancient fortresses, and bullet-pocked walls and hear about in pubs in every town big and small—is part of the experience of visiting a land that constantly reveals itself to be a far more complex, complicated, and intriguing destination than you might have imagined.

But you also visit, well, to hang out with the Irish and discover the joys of *craic*—pronounced "crack" and denoting nothing more complicated than good old-fashioned fun. After only a short time here, I think you'll find, as I have, that you wish you'd been born Irish, too.

A QUICK LOOK AT ALL IRELAND

The island of Ireland consists of four ancient provinces—Ulster, Leinster, Munster, and Connacht. Today these are largely used to denote the competitive sports terrain, and express historical allegiances. Modern Ireland is divided into 33 counties—six of them in Northern Ireland, and the rest in the independent Republic of Ireland, sometimes referred to by the Northern Irish as the “South” despite the anomalous fact that the Republic’s northernmost point, in County Donegal—is actually farther north than any point in Northern Ireland. Now that’s Ireland for you . . .

DUBLIN

Established by the Vikings and now the country’s financial powerhouse where everything from hamburgers to houses are pricier than anywhere else in Europe, except maybe Stockholm or Moscow, Dublin is a mad, busy place where around 40% of the nation’s 4.1 million people live within commuting distance. People say that success has changed everything about the city, and there are those who bemoan the ebb of traditional culture. But there’s good reason for Dublin’s reputation as a fun little capital—there’s plenty here to see and do, with a brilliant social scene, cultural activities and festivals galore, and an urban center brimming with history.

“When anyone asks me about the Irish character, I say look at the trees. Maimed, stark and misshapen, but ferociously tenacious.”

—Edna O’Brien, author

DUBLIN’S NEIGHBORS

Easily overlooked because of their proximity to the feisty capital, the counties around Dublin have an intriguing history as the last line of English defense against the savage Irish hordes who dwelt farther west—beyond the Pale. Today, Dublin’s neighbors are an excellent place to discover picturesque towns and villages, spectacular gardens (especially in County Wicklow), and intriguing ancient Celtic archaeological sites (notably Newgrange in County Meath).

THE SOUTHEAST

Ireland’s southeast—Counties Kilkenny, Wexford, Waterford, South Tipperary, and Carlow—enjoys the best of both worlds: a dazzling coastline powered by more sunlight than anywhere else in the country, and a sublime countryside with tranquil waterways coursing through pristine, unruffled villages. Wexford and Waterford were both ancient Viking strongholds, and Kilkenny was once the headquarters of the powerful Ormonde clan, making this an important region in the riveting history of fierce sieges and mighty battles.

THE SOUTHWEST

With five ruggedly beautiful peninsulas stretching out into the Atlantic, the southwest is the most popular region in Ireland (for all the good and bad that implies). Still, there’s a fantastic social scene in Cork City, remote boho enclaves around the West of Cork, and some of the most gob-smackingly gorgeous scenery as you drive all along the coast.

COUNTY CLARE

County Clare is known for its traditional music sessions, the dramatic Cliffs of Moher, and the boulder-strewn otherworldly surface of the Burren, perhaps the most engrossing landscape in Ireland.

GALWAY CITY & COUNTY

One of Ireland's most cosmopolitan and culturally-active cities, Galway is as vibrant and glittering as you could hope, with a line-up of carnival-style festivals celebrating everything from oysters to movie-making. But don't just stick to the city; County Galway also impresses with the brooding landscape of the Connemara Peninsula, forever immortalized in the film *The Quiet Man*.

ALONG THE SHANNON

Seldom-explored, and often only seen by tourists as they hightail it from one coast of the country to the other, this is a great part of the country to escape the masses, become friendly with the locals, and—while seeing some of Ireland's hidden treasures—bedding down in some of the country's loveliest family-run guesthouses.

COUNTIES MAYO, SLIGO & DONEGAL

Sligo is Yeats country and it delivers a landscape that's as rugged and heart-stirring as the poetry which the land inspired. It's also known for its surfing and for the chance to take a bath in seaweed and to hike through hills dotted with Neolithic cairns. Donegal includes the country's most northerly point, Malin Head, and all along the county's sublime coastline are feisty villages packed with personality (some also surfing meccas). Mayo, meanwhile, is very much an extension of Connemara, Galway's rugged, rural hinterland. Here's where you'll discover abandoned islands where communities once thrived, while on the mainland, towns, and villages are exuberant and picturesque enough to be attractions in their own right.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Home to 1.7 million people, Northern Ireland was for so long relegated to “no go” status because of the ongoing political trouble between militant Republicans and Loyalists. The tension has now calmed to a near-indiscernible simmer and many might wonder what all the fuss was about. You can learn about that turbulent, tragic recent history on various fascinating walking tours and often simply by strolling through once-cursed neighborhoods. But your biggest impression of the North will be its friendly, open welcome, its geographic beauty, and fabulously unfettered rural hinterland.

Belfast

Northern Ireland's capital is celebrating a social and cultural Renaissance. Considering its size—under 500,000 people live in the greater Belfast area—the energy in this once strife-torn city is fantastic. Nightlife is booming, shops are doing a wild trade, and there's a burgeoning restaurant scene. There's so much going on, in fact, you might be forgiven for forgetting to stop and stare at all the marvelous architecture bestowed upon Belfast during its glory days as one of the most powerful port cities on earth.

Derry & the Western Counties

Derry is the North's second city—once a world leader in the textile industry, it became a major center for violence during the Troubles, and is now an intriguing place to gain insight into the centuries-old conflict that has defined the history of this island. Among the highlights of the North's seldom-visited western counties are the lush, boggy Sperrin Mountains, and the tranquil lakelands of tiny Fermanagh.

Counties Antrim & Down

Northern Ireland's two eastern counties are also its coastal gems. Antrim's Causeway coast is a geological phenomenon so astonishing it is mythically said to have been fashioned by a love-crazed giant, while Down's brooding Mountains of Mourne have inspired popular songs and fantasy literature. There are further myths, too—like fairy folk who make their home in the beautiful Glens of Antrim, and the legendary St. Patrick, who arrived by way of Strangford Lough, and bestowed on Ireland her greatest cultural icons.

ENCOUNTER NATURE'S MARVELS

EXPLORE THE SOUTHWEST'S ICONIC PENINSULAS Dramatic cliffs and furious sea spray defines much of the glorious coastline that hugs each of the five peninsulas of southwest Ireland. You could devote your entire vacation to either the **Dingle** (p. 185) or **Iveragh** (p. 174) peninsulas, both of which are famous for their superb coastal drives and melancholic villages. Or lose yourself in a dreamy, undiscovered wilderness on **Sheep's Head** (p. 226), **Beara** (p. 230), or **Mizen Head** (p. 224), each captivating for their idyllic mix of jagged cliffs, serene coves, shaggy grass-covered hills, and a blissful sense of remoteness.

WITNESS DROP-DEAD CLIFFS Join the millions of enthralled visitors who annually arrive to gape at the reality-defying **Cliffs of Moher** (p. 236)—it's arguably the finest spot in the country to witness the land being ravaged by the sea (although there are other, even higher cliffs off the northern coast of County Mayo if you'd like to do a comparison, p. 309). At their highest (and most popular) point, Moher's ancient precipices—said to be 300-million years old—rise some 214m (702 ft.) above the water, creating some of the most iconic imagery in Ireland. And as if Clare weren't blessed enough, just south of Moher, there's the spectacle of more precarious edge-of-the-world vistas and ocean-plunging seacliffs around the peninsular tip at **Loop Head** (p. 237). The careening cliffs and craggy caves are all there, but the crowds are wonderfully non-existent.

“Geographically, Ireland is a medium-sized rural island that is slowly but steadily being consumed by sheep.”

—Dave Barry, comedian

DRIFT ACROSS A LUNAR LANDSCAPE In the west of Ireland, County Clare is known primarily for its dramatic oceanfront cliffs and spectacular line-up of traditional music. But almost half the county is given over to one of Ireland's

Walkabouts & Bike Trips

Pack your hiking boots because—when it's not raining—Ireland is best seen on foot. Marked trails are found throughout the country, but particularly worthwhile are the **Wicklow Way** (p. 92), the **Burren Way** (p. 251), and parts of the **Ulster Way** (p. 406) that take you along the Causeway Coast and through the Glens of Antrim. Excellent day walks are possible along the **Slieve Bloom Way** (p. 105) straddling the hills of Laois and Offaly, the **Southwest** (p. 183), and the **Slieve League cliffs** (p. 350) in Donegal. The **Mourne Mountains** (p. 430)—said to have inspired C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*—are another fabulous hiking destination in Northern Ireland, while in the **Sperrins** (p. 446) you may well run into a number of mystifying stone circles.

Many of the most popular driving routes in Ireland are suitable for cyclists—but top of the heap for bikers are the **Kerry Way** (p. 174) or the stunning **Connemara Loop** (p. 283).

most mesmerizing landscapes—simply called the Burren. Its magnificent boulder-strewn topography looks like nothing else on earth and has the eerie ability to make you lose your sense of perspective—tiny rocks mysteriously become huge hills as you wander through this captivating otherworldly space. As you hike, bike or drive through the population-deprived rockscape, you'll encounter exotic plants, ancient ringforts, and prehistoric tombs that add immeasurably to the surreal experience. See chapter 6.

FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS Along the northernmost coast of Northern Ireland, thousands of basalt pillars in geometrical shapes form a wondrous stonework tapestry terrace that disappears into the sea. It's called the **Giant's Causeway**, and legend dictates that a lovesick giant built it in order to find his way to his would-be lover across the ocean. Ireland boasts some pretty captivating geological marvels, but the splendid precision of these colossal stepping stones borders on the miraculous, and will surely have you, too, believing the Irish myths. See p. 410.

VENTURE THROUGH FAIRYTALE PARKS A setting worthy of a starring movie role, there seems to be no end to the loveliness of **Killarney National Park** (p. 180)—its legendary beauty not only won over Queen Victoria, but has seduced visitors and awed potential conquerors through the ages. You can row across the shimmering mirror-surface of its lakes; discover enchanted islands plump with ancient monastic ruins; explore cultivated gardens; hike through forests and climb mountains; walk or cycle through the awesome Gap of Dunloe; or simply head for higher ground and take it all in from above. Farther north, in the wilds of Donegal, **Glenveagh National Park** (p. 355) is Ireland's biggest single attraction—literally. It's a massive (6,475 hectare/16,000 acre) protected landscape incorporating

mountains, bogland, lakes, and forests, not to mention a recently introduced population of golden eagles.

GO ISLAND-HOPPING Ireland may be an island, but it's also the mainland for a number of tiny offshore enclaves worth visiting for the pure adventure of the often-bumpy sea journey and thrill of discovering the magical impact of centuries of relative isolation. Life unfolds at a languid, timeless pace on several of these islands that have indeed been tamed and managed to remain inhabited—excursions to the **Sherkin** and **Cape Clear islands** (p. 222), **Aran Islands** (p. 277), **Tory Island** (p. 356) or **Clare Island** (p. 321) will reveal a way of life that you might no longer have thought possible. Meanwhile, the **Skelligs** (p. 179), **Great Blasket Island** (p. 191), and **Innishmurray Island** (p. 340) are hauntingly uninhabited rocks that have either been abandoned by a once-hardy human population, or were never fit for habitation in the first place. One delightful oddity is the fascinating **Garinish Island** (p. 229), established as an immense pleasure garden in the early-Twentieth Century, and still going strong.

OGLE MAN-MADE WONDERS

MYSTICAL STONE CIRCLES Ireland's ancient ruins represent some of the oldest evidence of human creativity and ingenuity, and draw on a diversity of cultural traditions and influences. Among the world's most intriguing Neolithic sites, **Newgrange** (p. 113) and its lesser-known cousin, **Knowth** (p. 113), are older than the Giza pyramids and Stonehenge, and both continue to baffle scientists because of their perplexing astronomical alignments. These are among the most important ancient monuments on earth, set amidst mystical landscapes that many believe to have profound spiritual significance. Whatever purpose these immense passage tombs might once have served, it's impossible not to admire their creators for their engineering ingenuity and sheer determination.

PRE-HISTORIC MINIMALISM The **Poulnabrone Portal Dolmen** (p. 248) in County Clare, may look like nothing more than an avant garde stone table, but to see it standing there—in a patch of grass amidst the bewitching landscape of the Burren—thousands of years after it was erected as part of an ancient tomb, is an experience nothing short of mystical and sublime.

BASTIONS OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY Near the bellybutton of Ireland are two of the world's great ecclesiastical sites—the early Christian ruins at **Clonmacnoise** (p. 296) overlooking the River Shannon, and the hilltop **Rock of Cashel** (p. 162), where St. Patrick supposedly converted Celtic kings to the new faith. While much of their original splendor has dwindled with time, there's no denying the visual impact of the human endeavor—magnificent High Crosses, elegant architecture, and intricate sculptural effects—that made these holy sites such tremendous beacons of Christian scholarship at a time when the rest of Europe was slogging through a medieval wilderness.

FORTIFIED DEFENSIVE STRUCTURES The main attraction in one of Ireland's tidiest little towns, **Trim Castle** (or King John's Castle, p. 115) is one of the best places to discover why medieval castles look the way they do—and why, for example, their inhabitants filled their moats with raw sewage! Although partially in

ruins, the castle was dazzling enough to feature in *Braveheart*, not to mention playing a starring role in a surfeit of battles and sieges over the centuries. With its back to the ocean and a hazardous cliff-edge location, the ruins of **Dunluce Castle** (p. 413) in County Antrim remain tantalizingly evocative; the dramatic setting is enough to make your heart skip a beat. And then you're reminded that people once lived here . . .

SHOWSTOPPER REAL ESTATE If there's any defining quality to more recent Irish architecture, it's probably the dissimilarity of styles and wide range of influences. Grand mansions stand like monuments to the high life near humble whitewashed thatched cottages; planned Georgian towns created to make life more civilized vie with severe forts designed to keep invaders at bay. But one thing Ireland's rich seldom skimped on was their propensity for spending mountains of cash on mansions, castles, and show-off holiday homes. Considered Ireland's most beautiful building, Wicklow's **Russborough House** (p. 94) is hailed for its impeccable Palladian symmetry, packed with one-of-a-kind furniture, and set within lush designer gardens on the edge of Blessington Lake. It's worth stopping in the Midlands to check out the humungous, superbly grotesque facade of **Tullynally Castle** (p. 298), surely the most enormous faux-Gothic enterprise in the country, and—in stark contrast with Russborough—lacking any semblance of symmetry whatsoever. A tour through **Kilkenny Castle** (p. 140) reveals some of the country's best public and private living spaces, once inhabited by one of the most powerful families in pre-independent Ireland. In a similar spirit of aristocratic excess, **Muckross House** (p. 184) just outside Killarney looks much as it did when it was extensively renovated for a visit by Queen Victoria—there's so much to see here, you'll need to take the tour twice to take even half of it in.

QUIRKY DESIGNER PROPERTIES Don't for one instant think that the architects to the rich and famous didn't have loads of fun putting together some of the country's most intriguing (and perplexing) monuments. Dublin's **Casino Marino** (p. 61) is a stunning agglomeration of architectural tricks starting with one in which you think you're visiting a miniature classical temple. Even more tricky is the beautifully inventive **Swiss Cottage** (p. 164), built purely as an ornamental conceit by aristocrats who got a kick out of pretending to be commoners as a form of entertainment for their guests. Fortunately, their architect managed to foist fistfuls of masterful design—inspired by nature—into the mix, so the end result is one of Ireland's most superb (and beguilingly simple) freestanding buildings. And if bizarre excess is a measure of fashion consciousness, then don't skip the schizophrenically-designed **Castle Ward** (p. 424) where two distinct aesthetic sensibilities are appeased in a single building on an aristocratic estate in bucolic County Down.

PAY TRIBUTE TO THE ARTS

WITNESS INCREDIBLE MANUSCRIPTS More museum-gallery than library, the **Chester Beatty Library** (p. 52) is one of Dublin's most riveting indoor attractions where one man's love of books spawned perhaps the most significant collection of tomes on earth. Among the hand-written manuscripts and

beautifully type-set volumes are some of the earliest Biblical texts, as well as an impeccable selection of elaborately crafted Oriental documents, wall-hangings, canvases, and even authentic samurai armor.

BROWSE THE ULTIMATE LIBRARY Some of Ireland's brightest talents attended Dublin's landmark university, **Trinity College** (p. 54), and these days tourists queue up to get a peek at some of the world's most eye-poppingly beautiful, medieval illuminated manuscripts—including the austere guarded Book of Kells, kept in a dimly lit vault-like modern chamber. While the manuscripts are worth fighting the crowds for, the best part of the tour continues into the utterly fantastic Long Room, surely the most beautiful medieval library you'll ever likely lay eyes on.

STUDY ICONIC IRISH IMAGES George Bernard Shaw called Dublin's **National Museum of Modern Art** (p. 58) one of his universities. A sumptuous repository of great Irish art, this is the ultimate place to become familiar with the iconic Irish masters, including Jack B. Yeats (brother of the great poet, William Butler), Paul Henry, Séan Keating, and William Orpen, all of whom manage to capture the agony and ecstasy of Ireland in mesmerizing, often haunting, canvases.

UNDERSTAND VIKING HERITAGE Although most people go to Waterford to see crystal being crafted, it's **Museum of Treasures** (p. 153) is one of the very best places in the world to admire Viking artifacts—the city is Ireland's oldest, and a considerable portion of the nation's Viking heritage has been unearthed here.

ENCOUNTER IRELAND'S LITERARY HERITAGE Ireland has a fiercely proud literary tradition, and you'll encounter myriad sites associated with this articulate country's poets, playwrights, authors, and musicians. You'll traverse landscapes that have inspired great poetry and prose, and gone on to appear in silver screen epics as breathtaking backdrops. Dublin is popping with tributes to Ireland's greatest wordsmiths; besides statues and museums dedicated to brilliant men—Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, Joyce, Beckett—there are **literary walks** and **city tours** that focus on their life and times (p. 57). And, on the other side of the country, many of Ireland's greatest writers and artists, including George Bernard Shaw and W.B. Yeats, spent long creative periods at the estate house at County Galway's **Coole Park** (p. 284), once the residence of Lady Augusta Gregory, and an essential visit for anyone who takes their love of literature to a higher level.

LEARN WITH A MASTER CRAFTSMAN You could haul out the photos and tell your friends about the wonders you've seen—or you could take home evidence that you've embraced a new art form and acquired a useful skill during your travels through artsy West Cork where some of the nation's finest craftsmen and women hold classes (p. 232). You can **learn to make a chair** using natural wood which you'll collect from the forest floor in Rossnagoose; or you can take up **pottery** under an expert, nurturing teacher in fabled Kinsale; or develop a flair for raku under one of Ireland's most respected **ceramicists**.

SPECIAL PLACES FOR A NIP OR A PINT

MOST ENTICING TRADITIONAL PUBS Ireland's traditional pubs have long served as vanguards of social intercourse, unique places where locals in even the tiniest villages can meet up, exchange the latest news or gossip, enjoy a glass or two of the black stuff—yes, Guinness really is the drink of choice—and perhaps even stock up on groceries. Steadily, the old-style watering holes are disappearing and being replaced by look-alike super-pubs and late bars that lack both the character and the characters that have always made ordering a pint in this country something of an event. While we hate to play favorites, there are two true pubs—one in each of the capitals—that you absolutely *daren't* miss. In the south of Dublin, near the city's largest cemetery, Kavanagh's **Gravediggers** (p. 78) is anything but morbid—in fact, it's one of the merriest places in the city for a pint, and it draws a discerning following that includes, well, savvy gravediggers. In Belfast, the **Duke of York** (p. 388) is particularly memorable, its walls packed with memorabilia and its floors always brimming with a lovely, uproarious crowd.

IRELAND'S PARTY CAPITALS We could tell you to head straight to Dublin for the non-stop social scene that spills out of Temple Bar and seems to wend its way down every imaginable sidestreet. We could encourage you to make a beeline for Belfast where the pub scene pulsates with an unmistakable energy any night of the week. We could insist that you sample the rich musical cadences of Cork's unshakeable late night music scene. Or we could remind you that tiny **Kilkenny** (p. 131) not only has a stout named after it, but more pubs and bars than you could possibly know what to do with! But what we won't do is suggest you try all four fabulous cities so you can decide for yourself and let us know where you think the richest party pickings preside.

ANCIENT & NOTEWORTHY In Athlone—smack dab in the very center of Ireland—**Seán's Pub** (p. 296) is thought to be the world's oldest pub, and already holds the Guinness record as the oldest pub in Ireland. Pre-dating the town itself, Seán's fills to capacity every night with a crowd as mixed and vibrant as you'd hope to see in any big city watering hole, only here you'll have sawdust underfoot and the very authentic sense that the entire pub slopes to one side.

MOST SWOON-WORTHY DECOR Belfast probably has the edge on Dublin for its broad selection of noteworthy historic pubs, many of them in mint vintage condition, and with a sociability score to match. More than just a place to put away a pint, the heritage-listed **Crown Liquor Saloon** (p. 377) is an especially beautiful High Victorian drinking hole with original gas lighting, opulently decorated private snugs, colorful mosaic tilework, and ornate detailing that tremendously distracting. Thank goodness that the clientele is equally entrancing.

TOP SPOTS FOR TRADITIONAL MUSIC Some of the best traditional music can be heard in County Clare. Although the little village of Doolin has become a regular stop on the well-trodden tourist circuit, you can still hear wonderful *seisiúns* here; our favorite is **McDermott's Pub** (p. 241), where some of the nation's hottest artists have played to crowds intoxicated not by booze, but by the

Find Out Why the Irish Have the Gift of Gab

Not everyone in Ireland has kissed the **Blarney Stone** (p. 213), but you'll quickly notice that the Irish gift of the gab is virtually genetic. Storytelling is traditionally a major part of Irish culture, but is sadly a dying art form; fortunately, events focused on preserving this great tradition still happen regularly at festivals around the country—look out for professional storytellers like **Eddie Lenihan** (p. 250) from County Clare, or **Liz Weir** (p. 404) who resides in Antrim. In Wexford, you can visit **Ár mBréacha** (p. 128), a traditional Irish “rambling house,” where folks gather to share tales, tea, and fun. Poetry is also wildly popular—don't be surprised if someone suddenly stands up after a few pints at the pub and starts reciting with fiery gusto. They may be witty limericks or heartfelt, woeful ballads, or perhaps something with a political edge; check out how the *ouls* do it at the **Sky & the Ground** (p. 130), a wonderfully rowdy pub in Wexford Town. For poetry that's a little more organized, there are open mic events in **Cork** (p. 209), pub poetry nights in **Limerick** (p. 256), and during Belfast's **Cathedral Quarter Festival** (p. 453), there's a poetry slam in which locals get to sound off while the audience judges the competition—if you're brave enough, you can compete for the prize.

toe-tapping beat. Further south, in the seaside town of **Dingle** (p. 185), there's trad playing virtually every night of the year and always ample opportunities to catch class acts of world repute. In Cork City you can hear music from just about every imaginable genre—but for a fiery session of inspirational trad, you need to stop off at **Sin É** (p. 212), reputedly the city's only remaining authentic pub. And, if you venture up to Northern Ireland, don't miss **Peadar O'Donnell's** (p. 445) in Derry—it's a legendary spot for excellent traditional music and the finest *craic*.