

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Ireland

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Enjoying Ireland's best travel experiences
- ▶ Finding Ireland's best hotels, restaurants, and pubs
- ▶ Exploring Irish history at the best castles and archaeological sites

**T**his chapter gives you the lowdown on the very best that Ireland has to offer, from the best food on the island to the most gorgeous sea-scapes to the best spots to hear traditional Irish music.



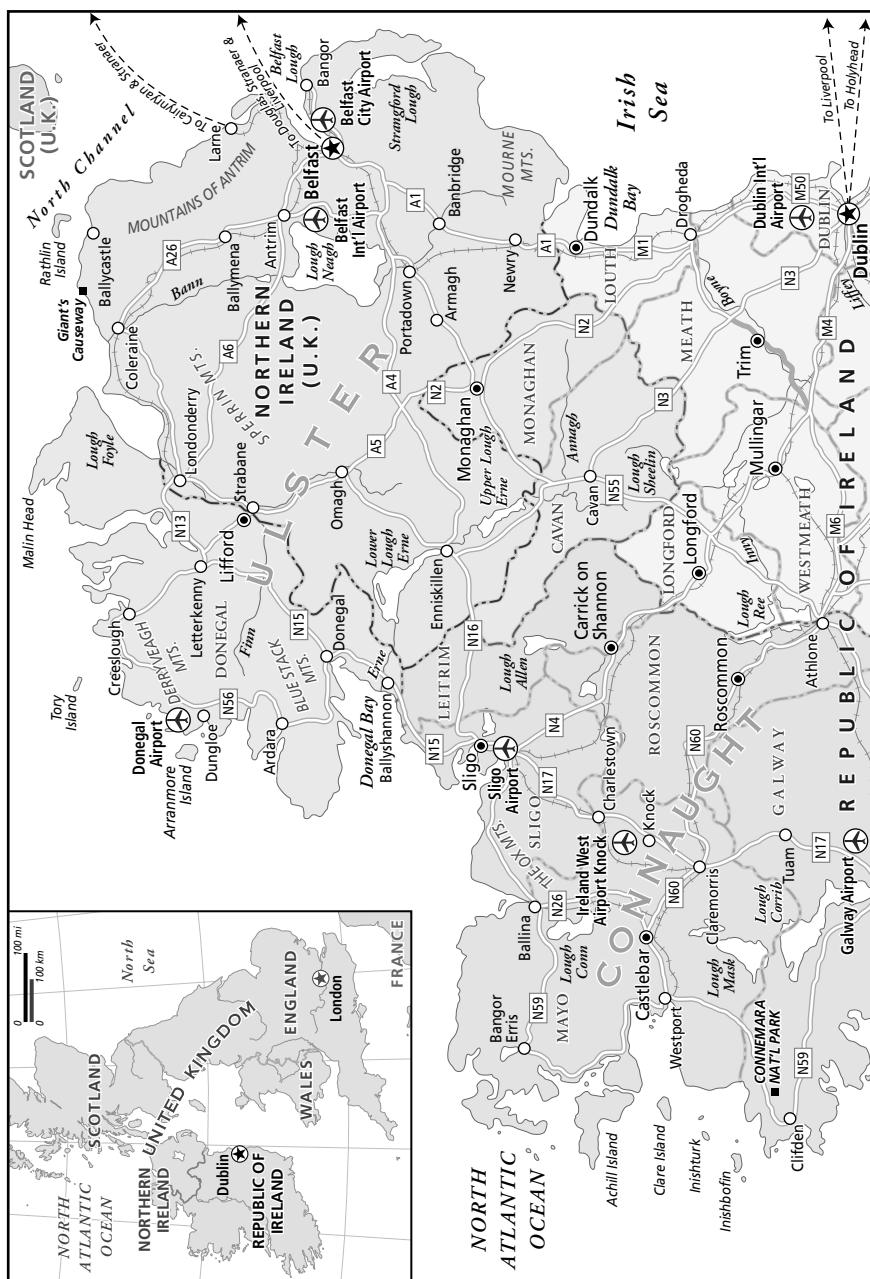
Throughout the book, the Best of the Best icon refers you to the items mentioned in this chapter.

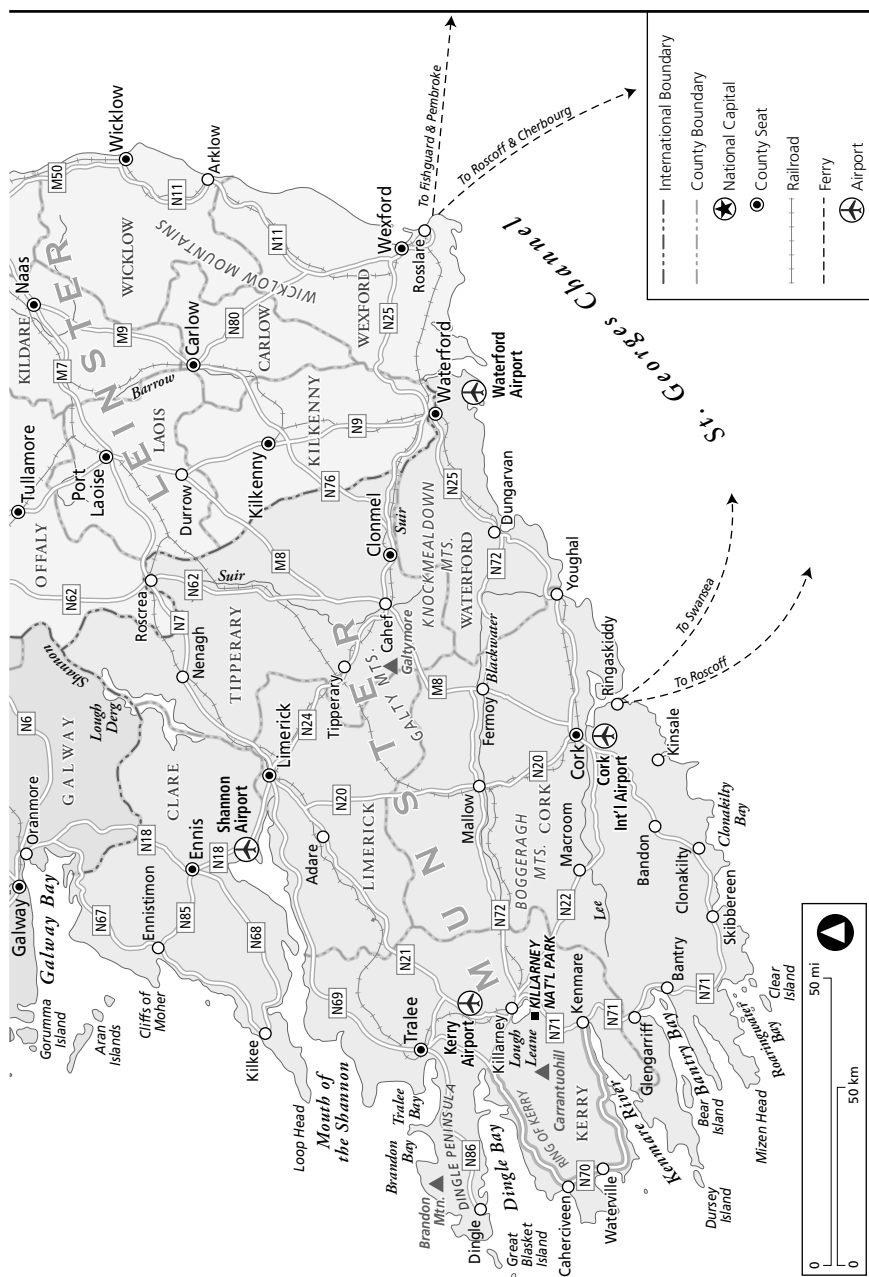
## *The Best Travel Experiences*

With all that Ireland has to offer, it's tough to come up with a list of favorite experiences; but here are some of the adventures I keep day-dreaming about long after I'm home:

- ✓ **Listening to traditional Irish music:** What could be better than relaxing to live traditional music in an atmospheric pub? The Traditional Irish Musical Pub Crawl in Dublin is a terrific introduction to the musical style. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Taking in the Book of Kells and Trinity College:** This ninth-century book of the four gospels glows with ornate Latin script and stunning Celtic knots and designs. The book is found in a museum at lovely Trinity College. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Filing into Newgrange Tomb:** You'll feel like a lucky explorer as you descend into the cool, dim chamber of this 5,000-year-old *passage tomb* (an underground chamber thought to have religious or ceremonial importance). See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Rambling around the Wicklow Mountains (Wicklow):** In the lush and rolling Wicklow Mountains, you'll find leafy woodlands,

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shimmering lakes, verdant fields, and plenty of trails on which to enjoy the surroundings. See Chapter 13.

- ✓ **Strolling through Powerscourt Gardens:** These gardens have many facets, including a mossy grotto, a formal garden with an impressive fountain and statuary, a rose garden that bursts into a riot of color in season, and peaceful woodlands. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Touring the House of Waterford Crystal:** This fascinating tour takes you behind the scenes to watch the evolution of Waterford Crystal pieces, from their beginnings as molten crystal to the finished product. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Exploring Killarney National Park:** Use a bike, horse, jaunting car, or your own two feet to explore the silver streams, sapphire lakes, dense woodlands, and heather-covered mountains here. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Driving the Ring of Kerry and the Dingle Peninsula:** Driving along both of these peninsulas, each vista you encounter is more spectacular than the one before it. Seascapes, cliffs, and mountain views are the order of the day on the Ring of Kerry, while the Dingle Peninsula has hills, farms, sandy beaches, craggy cliffs, loads of ruins, and more seascapes. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Hiking through the Burren:** Hiking is the ultimate way to see this strange and stunning rocky plateau, filled with wildflowers that poke up through cracks in the rock, rivers that spring up from below the ground, and ruins from the Stone Age through medieval times. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Exploring Ireland's islands:** Taking a ferry out to explore one (or more) of Ireland's islands is like an adventure within an adventure. See Chapter 18 for information on the Aran Islands.
- ✓ **Taking a hike:** There's nothing like wandering through the countryside to really experience Ireland. Two of my favorite hikes are a ramble along County Cork's Sheep's Head Way, and a jaunt out of Port, north of Donegal Bay. See Chapters 15 and 20.
- ✓ **Adventuring out to the Skelligs (Kerry):** A boat ride is the best way to appreciate these rocks, which jut dramatically from the frothing sea below. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Gazing awestruck at the Cliffs of Moher and Slieve League:** The breathtaking Cliffs of Moher plummet down to the Atlantic 288m (760 ft.) below. The vistas are stunning — you can see all the way to the Aran Islands in Galway Bay when the weather is clear. If you can't get enough of cliffscapes, Slieve League are the highest in all of Europe, towering dizzily over the turbulent Atlantic. See Chapters 17 and 20.
- ✓ **Seeing the Derry and Belfast political murals:** These murals are moving testaments of the Troubles. The best way to view them in context is with a driving or walking tour. See Chapters 21 and 22.

- ✔ **Clambering around the Giant's Causeway:** You can climb around this natural wonder — a stretch of tightly packed six-sided basalt columns of varying heights — like you're on a StairMaster gone crazy. See Chapter 22.
- ✔ **Going to market:** Markets in Ireland are colorful, interesting, and filled with some of the best local and artisanal foods around. My favorite markets are in Dublin; Bantry, in West Cork; and Belfast. See Chapters 12, 15, and 22.

## *The Best Luxury Lodgings*

The following hotels and manor houses made my list of favorites because they offer a unique atmosphere, outstanding service, uncommon luxury, a particularly Irish flavor, or perhaps all the above:

- ✔ **The Merrion (Dublin):** This place is a classic, with lovely architectural details and a welcoming staff. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **The Ritz-Carlton Powerscourt (Wicklow):** It's a Ritz-Carlton. Among lush, rolling green hills. Need I say more? See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Waterford Castle (Waterford):** Don your crown and head to this castle on its own island, with an interior featuring tapestries, antiques, and stone fireplaces. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Killarney Park Hotel (Kerry):** Luxury, luxury, and more luxury are on tap at this hotel, with a gorgeous Victorian-style lobby, spacious guest rooms furnished with antiques and lush fabrics, and an outstanding staff. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Dromoland Castle (Clare):** This just may be the fairytale castle you've dreamt of, with towers aplenty, and grand public spaces. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Dolphin Beach House (Galway):** Perhaps my all-time favorite place to stay in Ireland, Dolphin Beach House offers dazzling views, an interior that was clearly designed by someone with a skilled artistic eye, and two of the nicest hosts I've ever come across. **Caution:** People have a hard time leaving. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **The g (Galway):** Okay, so it's expensive (really expensive), but this place boasts theatrical surroundings, a wonderful spa, friendly staff, and possibly the most comfortable beds on the Emerald Isle. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Templehouse (Sligo):** A stay at Templehouse is like a visit to a close relative . . . who just happens to own a sprawling manor house on 400 hectares (1,000 acres). See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Ashford Castle (Mayo):** Live out a medieval tale with a stay in this luxurious castle. Public rooms feature large gilt-framed oil paintings, medieval coats of armor, and oak paneling, while antiques and

carved-wood furniture are the order of the day in guest rooms. The hotel offers all sorts of activities, from horseback riding to fishing. See Chapter 19.

- ✔ **Malmaison (Antrim):** This boldly funky Belfast boutique hotel provides extraordinarily friendly service to celebrities and the rest of us. See Chapter 22.

## *The Best Moderately Priced Accommodations*

Want a great bargain without sacrificing comfort and style? Check out the following options. Many are B&Bs — one of my favorite lodging choices in Ireland because you get the company and advice of a friendly local along with your room.

- ✔ **Kilronan House (Dublin):** Cormac, the warm proprietor of this guesthouse, couldn't be more helpful. Rooms are simple and bright, and the setting is a grand Georgian house about a ten-minute walk from downtown Dublin. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **McMenamins Townhouse (Wexford):** Kind hosts, soothing rooms, a central location, and a spectacular breakfast make this place one of Ireland's best B&Bs. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Foxmount Country House (Waterford):** It's easy to feel like the lord or lady of this manor as you stroll the stunningly landscaped grounds and settle into your cozy, elegant room. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **The Old Presbytery (Cork):** The only way that this place could be more relaxing would be if a masseuse came with each room. The huge beds are filled with snow-white blankets and pillows, many rooms have tubs or Jacuzzis, and the staff is among the friendliest and most helpful around. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Sandycove House B&B (Cork):** Lie on your fluffy duvet and gaze out at the crescent of beach framed by cliffs in the background and your hosts' adorable pet donkey in the foreground. Ahhh, this is what vacation is about. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Milestone B&B (Kerry):** Owners Barbara and Michael Carroll make this B&B a standout, helping every guest to plan his or her perfect Dingle Peninsula itinerary. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Berry Lodge (Clare):** The views of farmland and sea are gorgeous, and the bedrooms are comfy and bright, but the real reason to stay here is the unbelievably delicious cuisine served at dinner. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Devondell House (Galway):** This sweet B&B is a slice of home (with a terrific breakfast) right outside of Galway City. See Chapter 18.

## The best of the Irish awards

As you make your way around Ireland, you'll discover that the Irish absolutely love awards. Almost every restaurant and lodging has some sort of sign or sticker indicating that the place is lauded by one organization or other. In fact, there are even awards for the best public bathrooms in each county. You heard it here first: One of Ireland's top toilets is in Lismore, in County Cork. The esteemed public bathroom is located at the foot of the road leading toward the castle.

- ✔ **Sea Mist House (Galway):** *Peace* and *tranquility* are the words that come to mind at this B&B in the middle of the bustling little town of Clifden. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **The Merchant's House (Derry):** Slip back in time with a stay at this beautifully restored Georgian B&B, featuring high ceilings, intricate plasterwork, and a museum-quality Georgian-style dining room. See Chapter 21.
- ✔ **Killead Lodge (Antrim):** This serene B&B is a welcome oasis after a day exploring Belfast. Rooms are comfortable and bright, and the breakfast is top-notch. See Chapter 22.
- ✔ **Slieve Croob Inn (Down):** You can't beat the location of this comfortable inn, nestled in rolling green hills a few minutes away from the Mourne Mountains. Hiking trails start practically at the front door. See Chapter 23.

## The Best Restaurants

Feel like sitting down to an elegantly prepared slice of Irish salmon with lemongrass and ginger? Or is Irish stew more your style? No matter what you're craving, you won't go hungry in Ireland. Here are my favorite places to dig in:

- ✔ **L'Gueulton (Dublin):** French-influenced cuisine is perfectly prepared from fresh ingredients at this casually elegant (and popular) restaurant. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **The Winding Stair (Dublin):** At this lovely restaurant, overlooking the River Liffey, you'll find Irish classics all dressed up for 21st-century Dublin. Think spring lamb chops with mint crème fraîche. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Man Friday (Cork):** There's no fancy footwork at this seafood-and-meat-centric restaurant, just excellent ingredients cooked in a way that allows their flavor to shine, such as the black sole cooked on the bone. The interior is warm, romantic, and cozy, lit by lantern-style lamps. See Chapter 15.

- ✓ **Mary Ann's (Cork):** This warm and buzzing pub in the tiny West Cork town of Castletownshend serves up some of the best fish I've ever had. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Out of the Blue (Kerry):** This cheerful, Mediterranean-style restaurant offers some of the freshest fish in town. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Lighthouse Café (Kerry):** The view from the picnic benches will knock your socks off, as will the unbelievable seafood chowder and other casual dishes. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Long Dock (Clare):** Go for a traditional dish in the cozy pub (bacon and cabbage with parsley sauce, perhaps?), or order the fresh-caught fish that was just swimming in the nearby bay that morning. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Cava (Galway):** Traditional tapas in Ireland? Yup, and they're fantastic, served up in an airy, relaxing space. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Cayenne (Antrim):** There's a reason that all those folks are crowded into the entranceway of this restaurant: The fusion cuisine here is daring and luscious, featuring such bold dishes as an appetizer of cinnamon quail with carrot, honey, and ginger salad. See Chapter 22.

## The Best Castles

You can step back in time and unleash your inner lord or lady at any of the following castles:

- ✓ **Dublin Castle (Dublin):** Art and history lovers alike will appreciate a tour of Dublin's castle, which has been used in various capacities for the past 800 years. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Cahir Castle (Tipperary):** This 13th- to 15th-century defensive castle, the setting for the movie *Excalibur*, is one of the best-preserved medieval castles in Ireland. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Kilkenny Castle (Kilkenny):** A storybook-castle exterior, a beautiful interior boasting 1830s furnishings, and expansive grounds are the charms of this medieval castle. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Bunratty Castle and Folk Park (Clare):** Built in 1425, and featuring an interior that's furnished as it was in the 15th century, Bunratty Castle is one of Ireland's most popular attractions. For the full castle experience, book a seat at one of the medieval banquets held here. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Dunluce Castle (Antrim):** Perched over the crashing waves of the ocean, the stone ruins of 17th-century Dunluce Castle are some of the most picturesque in Ireland. Window openings and doors frame the sea and sky, and you can still see the remains of the giant stone fireplaces. See Chapter 22.



## Travel: A study in serendipity

This is probably the most difficult chapter to write, because some of my Ireland bests are one-of-a-kind moments, which lack admission fees and open hours — a late-night Irish music session, a great conversation with a Dublin taxi driver, the sun breaking out of the clouds to illuminate a faraway hill. You'll have these bests too, experiences unique to your trip. Dog-ear this book, mark off everything you want to experience, and make reservations for the best restaurants, but don't forget to be open to those serendipitous experiences that make travel so magical.

## *The Best Ruins and Archeological Sites*

History buffs will have a field day at any of the following attractions:

- ✓ **Newgrange (Meath):** Check out the stones carved with geometric designs before you climb down a passageway into the heart of this 5,000-year-old burial chamber. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Glendalough (Wicklow):** A monastic community founded in the sixth century, Glendalough functioned as a community of learning for almost 900 years. Today you can see the remains of a cathedral, a graveyard, and a remarkably well-preserved round tower. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Jerpoint Abbey (Kilkenny):** One of the best-preserved monastic ruins in the country, this 15th-century Cistercian Abbey is home to Celtic crosses and stone carvings of knights and dragons. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Rock of Cashel (Tipperary):** Once the province of the high kings of Munster, many of the ruins on this limestone outcropping are tied to St. Patrick, who is said to have explained the Holy Trinity to pagans on this site. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Gallarus Oratory (Kerry):** This tiny seventh-century church, built without any sort of mortar, is one of Dingle Peninsula's many interesting archaeological sites. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Dún Aengus (Galway):** Set on a sheer cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, this giant, well-preserved prehistoric stone fort stretches over 4.4 hectares (11 acres). See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery and Carrowkeel Megalithic Cemetery (Sligo):** A tour of Carrowmore, the largest group of megalithic tombs in Ireland, paints a vivid picture of life on the island thousands of years ago. An exploration of Carrowkeel is otherworldly, as you hike around the vast, practically untouched collection of megalithic tombs, stopping to crawl down the passageways of several of the tombs. See Chapter 19.

## *The Best Scenic Drives*

Ireland's landscape is so stunning that almost every drive is a scenic drive. Here's a list of my favorite excursions:

- ✓ **The Vee drive:** This drive provides panoramas of lush mountains and farmland laid out like a quilt below. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **The coastal drive from Skibbereen to Mizen Head:** Cliffs and seascapes are the stars of this drive, which ends at wild-and-wooly Mizen Head, where the Atlantic waves crash on Ireland's south-westernmost point. See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **The Ring of Kerry:** Give yourself at least an entire day for this winding drive, because you'll be pulling over every couple minutes to take pictures of the ever-changing seascapes, mountain views, and charming villages along the way. I recommend getting off the Ring drive at some point to explore the beautiful mountains in the interior. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Slea Head Tour on the Dingle Peninsula:** This round-trip circuit will make your jaw drop. Highlights include the towering cliffs of Slea Head, incredible views of the Atlantic Ocean and the nearby Blasket Islands, and hills covered in a patchwork of small fields. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **The Connemara drive:** The spectacular drive west from Galway on N59 affords picture-perfect views of the silent bogs, lush woodlands, and glistening lakes of Connemara. See Chapter 18.
- ✓ **The drive around Lough Gill:** Take along a book of Yeats's poems as you make the drive around this peaceful blue lake. The lake itself and its many islands (including the famed Lake Isle of Innisfree) feature prominently in the poet's works. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **The Clew Bay drive:** This dazzling drive (one of my absolute favorites in Ireland) takes you past the pyramid-shaped peak of Croagh Patrick, through moody bogland, and along glassy Killary Fjord. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **The peninsula north of Donegal Bay:** Make sure that you find the twisty little road to Port as you cruise around this peninsula. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **The A2 along the Antrim coast:** As you wind along the Antrim coast, you'll pass cliffs, beautiful seascapes, small seaside towns, and the incredible Giant's Causeway. See Chapter 22.

## *The Best Pubs*

It's no secret that the Irish have a bit of a reputation for spending long nights at the pub. Check out a few of these inviting options, and maybe you'll understand why:

- ✔ **Cobblestone (Dublin):** This is the real deal — a cozy pub filled with locals and ringing to the rafters with traditional Irish music played by excellent musicians. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Jack Meade's (Waterford):** Crackling fires, loud laughter, a warren of small rooms, and terrific pub food conspire to make Jack Meade's a gem in the Waterford countryside. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **The Long Valley (Cork):** Belly up to the long bar here to drink pints, munch on giant sandwiches, and shoot the breeze with the friendly regulars. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **The Bulman (Cork):** This pub has it all — crackling fires, good company, live traditional Irish music, great seafood dishes, and a view of beautiful Kenmare Bay. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Dick Mack's (Kerry):** One of Ireland's quaintest pubs, Dick Mack's used to double as a cobbler's shop, and one side of the place still holds the leather-working tools of the trade. The interior hasn't changed in years, and the music is terrific. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **The Poet's Corner (Clare):** A warm, always-humming bar located in the Old Ground Hotel, this place offers some of the best traditional Irish music in Ennis, a town known for its formidable traditional music scene. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Crane Bar (Galway):** In a city full of excellent traditional Irish music, this is the place to go for the very best. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **Nancy's (Donegal):** Cozy and welcoming, Nancy's fulfills all my fantasies of stepping into Middle Earth for an evening at a Shire pub. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Crown Liquor Saloon (Antrim):** This is one of the most beautiful Victorian pubs in all Ireland, outfitted with carved wood, brass fittings, and gas lamps. You'll be drooling into your Guinness. See Chapter 22.