In many ways WATERFORD is Ireland’s least discovered city, often bypassed by tourists heading from Rosslare for the more hyped destinations of Cork and Kerry further west. Even the hardiest defender of this dockland city’s reputation would be hard-pressed to mount a campaign centred upon Waterford’s immediate allures. Though neat wooded hillsides figure north of Rice Bridge, the vista mainly encompasses ugly industrial development, with cranes and a refinery dominating the skyline and the unappealing quays of the River Suir offering barely a hint of the vibrant city lying behind. Continue reading to find out more about...Some history Waterford Treasures Waterford’s coast But Waterford is one of those places where scraping the surface reveals numerous delights. Behind those ugly quays lies a complex of narrow lanes, first formed in medieval times, and many grand examples of Georgian town planning in the shape of sturdy townhouses and elegant municipal and ecclesiastical buildings. There’s a lively nightlife here too, with plenty of enjoyable bars, as well as decent cafés and restaurants. **Some history** Waterford’s origins are integrally linked to the River Suir. The Vikings built a settlement here in the early tenth century to provide shelter for their longboats and to exploit the trading opportunities offered by the river, which along with the Barrow and the Nore provided easy access to the southeast’s fertile farmland. The Viking settlement prospered and controlled much of this part of Ireland, exacting a tribute from the Celts called Airgead Sróine (Nose Money) since the punishment for welshers was to have their noses cut off. Later, the course of both local and national history was much impacted by Strongbow’s assault on the city in 1170, caused by Dermot MacMurrough’s attempts to gain sway over Ireland. The success of the Anglo-Norman earl’s bloody offensive not only led to his marriage to MacMurrough’s daughter but brought his liege lord, Henry II, scurrying to Ireland the following year to assume control of the country’s conquest. Henry granted a charter providing royal protection to the city and his descendant, King John, increased its size by adding new walls and towers. Though much affected by the Black Death and frequent incursions by both Irish and Anglo-Norman neighbours, Waterford continued to flourish as a port, reliant on trade in wool, hides and wine. Though Cromwell was repelled in 1649, a year later Ireton’s troops took control and expelled many of the Catholic merchants. Protestant domination of the city’s trade was reinforced by William of Orange’s accession. The eighteenth century witnessed major architectural developments, mostly designed by locally born John Roberts. Shipbuilding prospered during the nineteenth century, the city becoming second only to Belfast in terms of tonnage constructed, and many Waterford-built vessels transported the city’s famous crystal, first manufactured here in 1783. However, Waterford suffered economically during the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of this century, witnessing factory closures, a major downsizing of the iconic Waterford Crystal and the virtual end of shipbuilding here. **Waterford Treasures** In a stylishly renovated granary behind the tourist office on Merchants Quay lies one of Ireland’s most entrancing museums, Waterford Treasures. Impressively designed and employing a diverse range of display techniques, the museum brings the city’s history into focus, often with a telling sense of humour. The collection is organized chronologically and begins with the third-floor Viking galleries. These exhibit an extraordinary array of artefacts from the tenth to twelfth centuries, including a meticulously carved bird-bone flute, a gaming board and pieces, intricate jewellery and a perfectly rounded alder hanap, or drinking goblet. The Anglo-Norman era is also well represented, with a finely worked gold stirrup-ring set with a sapphire, illuminated charters, an entire medieval bow – the only surviving example in Ireland or Britain – and the Edward IV sword, a mighty piece of silver weaponry presented to the Mayor of Waterford in 1462. The second-floor galleries include a superb collection of royal charters from Tudor and Stuart times before moving on to Georgian Waterford; here the Monstrance Throne made for a local dignitary in 1729 features dazzling silverwork, resembling a small fireplace topped by a huge crown. Displays also trace the career of the architect John Roberts, designer of many of the city’s finest Georgian buildings, who is now honoured with an architecture festival in Waterford in April (http://www.wfa.ie/). The last section on this floor vividly focuses on Waterford’s strong links through emigration with Newfoundland in Canada, while the first floor hosts interesting history and art exhibitions. **Waterford’s coast** Waterford’s coastline lacks the wildness of the shoreline further east, but there are still glorious, enticing beaches – especially at Dunmore East, Stradbally and Ardmore – and plenty of balmy cliff-top walks, not least at Ardmore, which is also a major ecclesiastical site. Among the larger towns here, it’s best to give the kiss-me-quick resort of Tramore a wide berth, but Dungarvan enjoys a picturesque bayside setting and offers some fine places to stay, eat and listen to traditional music. **Dunmore East** DUNMORE EAST, 16km southeast of Waterford, is a picturesque getaway for the city’s wealthier denizens. The village is actually split in two, with the eastern part set neatly around a small, sandy, Blue Flag beach backed by sandstone cliffs, while the much busier western half is built above and around a lively fishing harbour and marina. In late August, the village comes to life for the three-day Bluegrass Festival. **Dungarvan** Attractive, bustling DUNGARVAN is splendidly situated on a large bay where the waters of the River Colligan broaden as they reach the sea. Unlike many of its fellow resorts, it remains largely unscathed by the blight of chain-store similitude. It plays host to the weekend-long Waterford Festival of Food in April (wwww.waterfordfestivaloffood.com) and a major traditional-music festival, Féile na nDeise (wwww.feilenandeise.com), over five days around the bank-holiday weekend in early May.