Much of the coastline of County Antrim is as spectacular as anything you’ll find across the whole of Ireland and, consequently, unlike other parts of the North, it has always attracted an abundance of tourists. North from the ferry port of Larne, the A2 coast road takes in attractive villages and small towns, such as Carnlough, Cushendall and the port of Ballycastle, all set against or within the verdant Antrim Glens. A short boat trip from Ballycastle lies rugged Rathlin Island, while further along the coast to the west, blustery cliff-top walks lead to the strange basalt formations of the Giant’s Causeway. With an attractive backdrop, Portrush and, just over the border in Derry, Portstewart are popular seaside holiday resorts. Continue reading to find out more about... North from Belfast The Glens of Antrim and Rathlin Island The north Antrim coast Northern County Derry The Siege of Derry Southern County Derry Seamus Heaney County Derry’s coastline is also blessed with wonderful strands, overlooked by Mount Binevenagh and the eccentric Mussenden Temple. Derry city itself is a lively place, set on the banks of the Foyle, with its hilltop core still enclosed by some of the best-preserved city walls in Europe. The county’s hinterland is more dramatic than Antrim’s, especially where it skirts the Sperrin Mountains around historic Dungiven. The flatter territory towards Lough Neagh features some noteworthy Plantation settlements at Magherafelt and Moneymore. **North from Belfast** The coastal strip from Belfast to Larne is largely uninspiring farmland, although there are a few spots to detain you as you head towards the more enticing Antrim Glens further north. Heading out of Belfast’s northern suburbs, the A2 skirts the edge of Belfast Lough before reaching CARRICKFERGUS, an unremarkable seaside town whose seafront is dominated by its only real point of interest, well-preserved Carrick- fergus Castle, one of the earliest and largest Irish castles. A dozen or so miles north of Carrickfergus lies LARNE, an important freight centre, if a rather grim town, and one of the main ports of entry to Northern Ireland, served by P&O ferries from Cairnryan and Troon and Stena Line services from Fleetwood. Three-quarters of a mile north of Larne on the Antrim coast road stands a large monument to the engineer of this road, William Bald, and his stalwart workers, who blasted their way through, over and round the cliffs and rocky shoreline to create this route in the 1830s. The impressive scale of this achievement becomes apparent the moment you leave Larne’s dull suburbs and the view expands to take in the open sea and, beyond it, the low outline of the Scottish coast. About three miles north of Larne, Carnfunnock Country Park is a good place to stop for a walk, with a walled garden, a time garden – with a collection of sundials ranging from the simple to the arcane – a maze in the shape of Northern Ireland, a miniature railway, and a nine-hole mini-golf course. **The Glens of Antrim and Rathlin Island** Northwest of Larne lie the nine Glens of Antrim, a curious landscape in which neat seaside villages contrast vividly with the rough moorland above. Despite their proximity to the Scottish coast, the Glens were extremely isolated until the completion of the coast road in the 1830s. Their largest town is Ballycastle, which is also the departure point for the ferry to rugged Rathlin, Northern Ireland’s last inhabited offshore island, in one of whose caves Robert the Bruce of Scotland acquired a legendary lesson in patience from a spider spinning and respinning its web. The best base for exploration of the area, though, is Cushendall, a charming village 26 miles along the coast from Larne. **Carnlough** CARNLOUGH stands at the head of Glencloy. Until the 1960s, Carnlough’s way of life was linked to its limestone quarries, and the village’s most striking feature today remains its sturdy limestone buildings, dating mainly from the mid-nineteenth century. Right in the village centre, running over the main road, there’s a solid stone bridge that once carried a railway bringing material down to the harbour, which itself has an impressive breakwater, clock tower and limestone courthouse. **Cushendall** CUSHENDALL, which lies at the head of three of the nine Glens, is a delightfully understated village, its charming colour-washed buildings grouped together on a spectacular shore. The red-sandstone tower at the central crossroads was built in 1817 by one Francis Turnley, an official of the East India Company, as “a place of confinement for idlers and rioters”, and, though there’s little else to see here, the village makes a fine base for exploring the local countryside and catching a traditional-music session. If at all possible, time your visit to coincide with the Heart of the Glens festival (wwww.glensfestival.com) in the middle of August, one of the area’s oldest events, replete with traditional music, sporting events and much merriment, culminating in a huge street ceilidh on the Sunday. **Ballycastle** The lively market town and port of BALLYCASTLE sits at the mouth of the two northernmost Antrim Glens, Glenshesk and Glentaisie, and makes a pleasant base for exploring the Causeway Coast or the Glens themselves. The best time to visit Ballycastle is at the time of the Ould Lammas Fair, Ireland’s oldest fair, dating from 1606. Held on the last Monday and Tuesday in August, it features sheep and pony sales. Stallholders do a roaring trade in dulse, an edible seaweed, and yellowman, a tooth-breaking yellow toffee that’s so hard it needs a hammer to break it up. **The north Antrim coast** The north coast of County Antrim, west of Ballycastle, is dominated, from a tourist perspective, by Northern Ireland’s most famous tourist attraction, the bizarre formation of basalt columns at the Giant’s Causeway. On the way, near the town of Ballintoy, there are several pleasant diversions, not least the precarious rope bridge to Carrick-a-rede Island. West of the Causeway, you can sample some whiskey at Bushmills and visit the imposing and well-preserved remains of Dunluce Castle, the stronghold of the local MacDonnell clan. The coastline west of Dunluce is another major holiday spot, with the resort of Portrush filled with tourists in July and August and students the rest of the year. **Portrush** The town of PORTRUSH, on the Ramore Peninsula, has everything you’d expect from a seaside resort, from sandy beaches backed by dunes, which run both east and west, to summer drama in the town hall and plenty of amusements for children. Many students from the University of Ulster at Coleraine live here and make it a considerably livelier place than you might expect, even out of season; the huge popularity of the local dance scene draws clubbers from all over the North and the town can have a distinctly raucous feel at weekends. The long, sandy beach towards Dunluce ends at the White Rocks, where the weather has carved the soft limestone cliffs into strange shapes, most famously the so-called “Cathedral Cave”, nearly 60m from end to end. **Northern County Derry** West of Portrush the A2 continues to hug the coastline as it traverses the northern part of County Derry, taking in marvellous beaches all the way from Portstewart, near which it crosses the River Bann, to Magilligan Point. On the way there are impressive seascapes visible from the clifftop Mussenden Temple and stunning views from the land around Mount Binevenagh. The land becomes drabber as the road nears the small manufacturing town of Limavady, which retains a few remnants of Georgian times. **Danny Boy** The lyrics for the quintessential “Oirish” ballad Danny Boy were actually composed by an English lawyer, Fred E. Weatherley, in 1912 and, a year later, fitted to The Londonderry Air, a tune collected by Jane Ross, a resident of 51 Main Street, Limavady, from a travelling fiddler in 1851. The song achieved renown in Ireland when recorded in the 1930s by Margaret Burke-Sheridan and has since seen many other tear-jerking renditions (Sinéad O’Connor recorded an idiosyncratically spine-tingling version); it still remains endearingly popular with dewy-eyed expats and Irish-Americans. Limavady holds the annual Danny Boy festival over the first weekend in May (wwww.dannyboyfestival.com), featuring a variety of music. **Portstewart** Derry’s largest coastal resort, PORTSTEWART, like its near neighbour Portrush, is full of Victorian boarding houses. Of the two, Portstewart is decidedly more sedate and has always had more airs and graces: the train station is said to have been built a mile out of town to stop hoi polloi from coming. In terms of sheer location, though, Portstewart wins hands down. Just west of the town is Portstewart Strand, a long sand beach firm enough to drive on – which the locals delight in doing – with some of the best surfing in the country. It’s a grand place, too, if you hit fine weather and feel like getting out your bucket and spade. The best way to take the sea air is the bracing cliffside walk, which runs between the beach and the town, passing battlements and an imposing Gothic mansion, now a Dominican college. **Downhill Palace and Mussenden Temple** A mile west of the coastal resort of Castlerock, a pair of huge, ornate gates alongside the A2 mark the main entrance to the ruins of Downhill Palace, built in the 1780s by Frederick Augustus Hervey, Anglican Bishop of Derry and fourth Earl of Bristol. Hervey was an enthusiastic grand traveller (all the many Hotel Bristols throughout Europe are named after him), and was also an art collector and great sportsman, once organizing a pre-prandial race between Anglican and Presbyterian clergy along the local strand. His palace, accessed through pleasant gardens, was last occupied by US troops, billeted here during World War II, and was dismantled on their departure. Across fields at the back of the palace is the diminutive Mussenden Temple, which clings precariously to the eroding cliff-edge and offers stunning sea views. Its classic domed rotunda was apparently modelled on the Temple of Vesta in Rome and was built by Hervey in honour of his cousin Mrs Frideswide Mussenden, who died aged 22 before it was completed, after which it was used as a summer library. Later, with characteristic generosity and a fairly startling lack of prejudice, Hervey allowed a weekly Mass to be celebrated in the temple, as there was no local Catholic church. The inscription on the temple frieze translates rather smugly as: “It is agreeable to watch, from land, someone else involved in a great struggle while winds whip up the waves out at sea.” Just west from here the A2 curves steeply downwards to reach the appositely named DOWNHILL hamlet, on the edge of the hugely long beach. From here it’s possible to take the Bishop’s Road (constructed at Hervey’s bidding) southwards to reach Mount Binevenagh and its fabulous viewpoints. The land around the mountain is now a conservation park, dedicated to the preservation of birds of prey, in particular falcons and kestrels. **The Siege of Derry** Derry’s walls underwent – and withstood – siege on a number of occasions during the seventeenth century. The last of these, in 1688–89, played a key part in the Williamite army’s victory over the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne, when the Derrymen’s obduracy crucially delayed the plans of James and his ally Louis XIV to maintain Catholic ascendancy over the kingdom. The suffering and heroism of the fifteen-week siege, the longest in British history, still have the immediacy of recent history in the minds of Derry Protestants. James’s accession in 1685 had seen the introduction of a policy of replacing Protestants with Catholics in leading positions in the Irish administration and army. In December 1688, a new garrison attempted to enter the city, but was prevented when a group of young apprentices seized the keys and locked the city’s gates. Eventually, after negotiation, an all-Protestant garrison under Governor Robert Lundy was admitted. Over the following few months the city’s resident population of two thousand swelled to thirty thousand as people from the surrounding area took refuge from Jacobite forces advancing into Ulster. Fearing that resistance against the Jacobite army was futile, Lundy departed; his effigy is still burnt each December by Protestants. Around seven thousand Protestants died during the siege that followed, the survivors being reduced to eating dogs, cats and rats. Today, the siege is commemorated with a skeleton on the city coat of arms, and the lyrical tag “maiden city”, a somewhat sexist reference to the city’s unbreached walls. **The walls** The best approach to Derry's walls is from the Guildhall Square, once the old quay, east of Shipquay Gate. The Neogothic ecclesiastical appearance of the Guildhall belies its true function as the headquarters of the City Council. Inside, the city’s history is depicted in a series of stained-glass windows. Most of the city’s cannons are lined up opposite here, between Shipquay Gate and Magazine Gate, their muzzles peering out above the ramparts. A reconstruction of the medieval O’Doherty Tower here houses the Tower Museum, whose showpieces are a series of stimulating displays and galleries recounting the city’s history and a splendid exhibition, spread over four storeys, focused on Spanish Armada Treasures, which features gold artefacts and finely worked jewellery from La Trinidad Valencera, which sank in Kinnegoe Bay (off Inishower) in 1588. **Southern County Derry** The Derry–Antrim A6 road follows a river valley through fertile farming land before reaching Dungiven, a former political and religious power-base with ruined evidence of its former glories, then ascends to the Glenshane Pass on the northeastern fringe of the Sperrin Mountains. Southeast from here are Magherafelt and Moneymore, two attractive and entirely planned towns, the latter adjacent to the grand Plantation manor house of Springhill. The huge expanse of Ireland’s biggest lake, Lough Neagh, laps against the county’s southeastern corner and here too is one of the must-see sights of the entire North, Bellaghy Bawn castle. **Dungiven** DUNGIVEN, some twenty miles southeast of Derry, is a fairly unremarkable town, though it does harbour one or two ruins of interest, including the ruined Augustinian Dungiven Priory. Originally a stronghold of the O’Cahan clan, Dungiven was given to the Skinners’ Company of London to settle in the seventeenth century. The remains of the O’Cahan fortifications are incorporated into the newly restored castle, whose battlemented outline gives Dungiven a particularly historic aspect when approached from the south. The castle dates back to 1839 and is set in 22 acres of parkland with views across to the Sperrins. During World War II, it was used as a dance hall by American troops, and in 1971 it was the scene of an attempt to set up an independent Northern Ireland parliament. Following restoration work, it now houses upmarket guesthouse accommodation and a restaurant. **Lough Neagh** East of Magherafelt and Moneymore are the fish-filled waters of the biggest lake in Ireland, Lough Neagh. Tributaries flow from every point of the compass: the Lower Bann, which drains the lake and runs north to Lough Beg (finally reaching the sea north of Coleraine), contains some huge trout, including the dollaghan, unique to these waters. Similar to salmon – which are also common – dollaghan grow by three pounds every year and can be caught by spinning, worming and fly-fishing: the Ballinderry Black and the Bann Olive are famous flies derived from this region. The best fishing is from mid-July to October but you will need a Fisheries Conservation Board Rod licence, available from tourist offices. Information on day-tickets for fishing and specialist boat-trips, respectively issued and run by the Lough Neagh Angling Association, can also be obtained from the tourist office. **Bellaghy Bawn** One of the best surviving examples of a plantation castle is Bellaghy Bawn, built in 1618 by the Vintners’ Company. Most of its fortifications were lost in 1641, but it still retains a striking circular flanker tower which has been well restored. Inside you’ll find fascinating interpretive displays explaining the 7000-year-old history of the settlements in this area, the construction of the village – today’s houses still occupy the same original allocated plots of land – and the diverse ecology of the Lough Beg wetland area. The real treasure here, however, is the dedication of much of the Bawn’s space to one of the world’s greatest living poets, Seamus Heaney, who was born and raised nearby. Heaney himself is the star of a unique and atmospheric film showing in the Bawn, A Sense of Place, in which he reflects on the influence of his upbringing, local character and landmarks on his poetry. His father, for instance, rented grazing rights on the strand at Lough Beg; in his poem Ancestral Photograph, Heaney recalls helping to herd the cattle that grazed there down Castle Street on their way to market. Prints of other poems are displayed on the walls of various rooms, and the Bawn’s library contains the ultimate collection of his works, including first drafts and extremely limited editions. You can see the shimmering Lough Beg from the windows of the flanker tower, and a stroll down to the lake is well worthwhile. In summer, its waters recede and Church Island becomes accessible from the shore. Besides a walled graveyard, you’ll find the ruins of a medieval church here, said to have been founded centuries before by the ubiquitous St Patrick, with a tower and spire added in 1788 by the eccentric Frederick Augustus Hervey to improve his view from Ballyscullion House on the mainland nearby. He commissioned Charles Lanyon to build a huge replacement for the original house which stood here, with, apparently, 365 windows, but died abroad before ever moving in, and the building subsequently fell into ruin. **The plantation towns** Southeast of Dungiven and over the Glenshane Pass on the way to the northern tip of Lough Neagh, it is worth making a detour to see some interesting examples of town planning – the plantation towns of the London companies, most of them characteristically focused around a central Diamond. One such town is MAGHERAFELT, granted to the Salters’ Company by James I, which has a wide, sloping main street and makes a reasonable base for exploring the lough and the Bellaghy area. MONEYMORE, about five miles further south, was originally constructed by the Drapers in the early seventeenth century (and restored by them in 1817), and was the first town in the North to have piped water – amazingly enough, as early as 1615. A mile outside town off the B18, Springhill is a grand plantation manor-house built between 1680 and 1700 by William “Good- Will” Conygham in order to fulfil a marriage contract with the father of his bride- to-be, Anne Upton. Elegant both without and within, its sober whitewashed architecture houses fine rooms, equipped with original period furniture and paintings belonging to William and his descendants, who occupied the house until 1959. Upstairs, the Blue Room is said to be haunted by the ghost of Olivia Lenox- Conyngham, whose husband George was found shot here in 1816. Outside, the stables house a costume collection, which adopts a specific theme each year, drawing upon three thousand items collected from the mid-seventeenth century to the 1970s. There are also delightful gardens, a tower dating from the 1730s, which was probably originally part of a windmill, and a pleasant walk through beech and yew trees. **Seamus Heaney** It’s impossible to conceive of a contemporary poet, Irish or otherwise, whose works are more evocative of time and place than Seamus Heaney. He was born, the eldest of nine children, on the family farm of Mossbawn (itself the title of two poems in his fourth collection, North), in the townland of Tamniarn, near Bellaghy, on April 13, 1939. Heaney’s family background, his Catholic upbringing and his study of Irish at school imbued him with a strong sense of being Irish in a state that considered itself British, a paradox that would form a major motif in his work during the 1970s. While at Queen’s University, Belfast, he was further influenced by the literature he discovered in Belfast’s Linen Hall library, especially the works of John Hewitt, the Antrim-born “Poet of the Glens”, and the English “naturalist” poet Ted Hughes, in whose work he found an “association of sounds in print that connected with the world below”. The rural Monaghan setting of Patrick Kavanagh’s poetry further echoed his own experience and vision. Heaney’s first poem, Tractors, was published in the Belfast Evening Telegraph in 1962. His first significant collection, Death of a Naturalist, followed in 1966 and was immediately recognized for its earthiness and command of diverse metrical forms. In the 1960s, while lecturing at Queen’s, Heaney’s career expanded into journalism and television and he became increasingly involved in the civil-rights movement. His response to the Troubles saw him seeking for “images and symbols adequate to our predicament” and he began to see poetry as a mode of resistance. Eventually, though, the violence so disturbed him that he moved with his family to County Wicklow, prompting Ian Paisley’s Protestant Telegraph to bid farewell to “the well-known papist propagandist” on his departure to his “spiritual home in the popish republic”. While his 1970s collections North and Field Work had mixed receptions – some saw the strong influence of Robert Lowell on the former – Heaney found himself turning increasingly to his Irish heritage as a source of inspiration, particularly the long medieval poem Buile Suibhne (The Madness of Sweeney), and published his own Sweeney Astray collection in 1983. The following year’s Station Island drew on his experiences as a participant in St Patrick’s Purgatory. The hunger strikes of the early 1980s brought a new urgency to Northern politics and a revival of Heaney’s polemicism. Prompted by the staging in Derry in 1980 of Brian Friel’s play Translations, which showed English surveyors travelling through eighteenth-century Ireland anglicizing all the place names, Heaney cofounded the Field Day Theatre Company with Friel, his old friend and fellow academic Séamus Deane, the actor Stephen Rea and others. While the group’s theatrical activities were themselves controversial, it was their publications that engendered the most antipathy. Their pamphlets were criticized as attempts to over-intellectualize the Troubles and the 1991 Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing was decried for its under-representation of work by women writers, though a subsequent volume entirely devoted to them has since been published. Heaney’s reputation, however, has remained largely unsullied, maintained not merely by the sheer literary strength of his work and its ready accessibility, but by his undoubted charisma and a lack of pomposity. In 1995, his body of work was more widely recognized by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Heaney’s recent works include: a translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf, his dramatic retelling of this tale of monster- and dragon-slaying managing to breathe new life into a work that was long considered too dense and metaphorical for a modern readership; and his collection, District and Circle, which won the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2006.