Once part of a land barrier across the south side of Galway Bay, the Aran Islands (Oileáin Árann) – Inishmore, Inishmaan and Inisheer – have proved alluring to travellers for centuries. Until recently, their isolation allowed the continuation of an ancient Gaelic culture, traces of which remain, along with Irish, still the main language of the islands. Fishing and farming are to this day the main activities on Inishmaan, while tourism is the major earner on Inishmore and Inisheer, attracting around a quarter of a million visitors a year. Continue reading to find out more about... Some history As well as the islands’ heritage, their dramatic landscapes, continuing the limestone pavement of the Burren in County Clare into the sea, are a major draw. This bleak geology manages to sustain over four hundred varieties of wild flower, including the rare Alpine Spring gentian, as well as a healthy population of butterflies and endangered bird species such as the chough and the Little Tern. And strewn across the islands is one of the richest concentrations of pre-Christian and early Christian archeological sites in Europe, encapsulated by Dun Aengus, a spectacular prehistoric ring fort on the edge of Inishmore’s sea cliffs. **Some history** Few areas of Ireland are as well endowed with ancient remains as the Aran Islands, notably the massive stone forts that so enhance the grandeur of the landscape. The dating of these forts, however, is tricky, especially as their functions and significance seem to have varied over the centuries, but it’s clear that all seven forts on the Arans were in use around 800 AD, while some are as old as 1100 BC, during the Bronze Age. Meanwhile, from the fifth or sixth century onwards, the islands were a centre of monastic learning, their wildness and remoteness drawing students from far and wide. St Enda’s monastery on Inishmore, the first of Ireland’s dozens of island monasteries, was also one of the most influential of the age, training monks who went on to found important houses of their own, such as Brendan of Clonfert, Ciarán of Clonmacnois and Colmcille of Iona. The monasteries of the Arans had gone into decline by the early thirteenth century, at which time Galway city began to take off as a trading port under the Anglo-Normans. For controlling piracy – and their own piratical instincts – in Galway Bay, the Gaelic lords of Aran, the O’Briens of County Clare, received an annual payment from the city. In the sixteenth century, however, the O’Briens fell into dispute with the O’Flahertys of west Galway over the islands – to their mutual detriment. The argument was eventually resolved by Queen Elizabeth I, who, seeing the Arans as strategically important against the Spanish and French, annexed the islands to the Crown. In 1588, the Arans were sold to the Lynch family of Galway, who were required to keep a garrison of soldiers there. The family, however, remained loyal to the king during the English Civil War of the 1640s, and the victorious Cromwell declared Sir Robert Lynch a traitor and his lands forfeit. Thereafter, the islands passed through a succession of landowners, whose main interest was the income from ever-increasing rents. The islands escaped the worst effects of the Famine of the 1840s, as the availability of food from the sea and the shore helped to compensate for the failure of the potato crop. Indeed, the populations of Inishmaan and Inisheer increased during the decade, perhaps because they provided refuge for mainlanders. It wasn’t until 1922 that the absentee landlords sold their interests and the islands’ farmers finally came to own their land.