Counties Down and Armagh occupy the southeastern corner of Northern Ireland, between Belfast and the border and contain some of the region’s most attractive countryside, especially around the coast. You’re also never far away from places associated with St Patrick, who sailed into Strangford Lough to make his final Irish landfall in County Down, founded his first bishopric at Armagh and is buried at either Downpatrick or Armagh, depending on whose claim you prefer. Continue reading to find out more about... Hillsborough The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum Strangford Lough The Lecale region Newcastle Armagh city Loughgall and around South Armagh The Mourne Mountains The Orange Order and the marching tradition As you head south from Belfast, the glowering Mourne Mountains increasingly dominate the panorama, and it’s in this direction that most of the attractions lie. If you simply take the main roads in and out of Belfast – the A1 for Newry and the border, or the M1 motorway west – you’ll come across very little to stop for: it’s in the rural areas, the mountains and coast, that the charm of this region lies. One of the best options is to head east from Belfast around the Down shore – past the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, one of the best in the North, and the blowsy suburban resort of Bangor into the Ards Peninsula or along the banks of Strangford Lough. Near the Lough’s southern tip, Downpatrick is closely associated with the arrival of St Patrick. There are plenty of little beaches, early Christian sites, defensive tower houses and fine mansions to visit on the way towards Newcastle, the best base for excursions on foot into the Mourne Mountains. Beyond the Mournes a fine coast road curves around to Carlingford Lough and the border. Inland, Hillsborough, resembling an English Cotswolds-style village, is closely linked to the political development of the North. Below Lough Neagh, the north of County Armagh is dominated by the developed industrial strip known as Craigavon which contains the towns of Lurgan and Portadown, and has little to attract you. Away from the towns, however, there are two stately homes of interest, Ardress and the Argory, and some excellent cycling country north of Loughgall. The villages of South Armagh – a predominantly Catholic area – were the heartland of violent Republicanism, and often referred to as “Bandit Country” or “The Killing Fields”, even by locals. Armagh city, however, is well worth visiting for its ancient associations, cathedrals and fine Georgian streets, while South Armagh has some startlingly attractive country, especially around the peak of Slieve Gullion. **Hillsborough** The historic village of HILLSBOROUGH, just a mile off the main A1 road and twelve miles southwest of Belfast, merits a quick detour. Its main street has a chintzy, Middle English ambience, reinforced by a sprinkling of tearooms and antique shops. You get the best of Hillsborough by following a route that starts from the war memorial (where regular Ulsterbus services from Newry and Belfast stop) and heads up the magnificent approach to the eighteenth-century Gothic parish church. Bear right here for the main entrance to Hillsborough’s elegant but ruined fort, constructed by Colonel Arthur Hill (after whom the village is named) in 1650 and remodelled in the eighteenth century as a venue for family feasts and entertainment. Beyond this, a deciduous forest opens up, curving around a lake stocked with brown and rainbow trout. Footpaths meander through the trees in all directions – a circuit of the lake takes around an hour. **The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum** One of the most fascinating museums in the North is the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. The main site is an open-air museum village where about thirty typical buildings from all over the North, some dating from the eighteenth century, have been taken from their original sites and rebuilt complete with authentic furnishings, including an entire street from Dromore and Belfast terraces. Conceptually, you can walk from one part of Northern Ireland to another, amid appropriate scenes. Traditional farms have also been created and assorted livestock roam between the buildings. The starting point is a gallery on Ulster’s social history and an introduction to the buildings themselves. From here you walk around the grounds, visiting the various buildings, including a small village street with church and rectory, two schools, various typical farm dwellings, a forge and other buildings used in light manufacture. Each of these is “inhabited” by a member of staff, garbed in period costume and informative about the building and its origins. Such historical realism is impressive, though sometimes a little disquieting: the Kilmore Church graveyard contains real tombstones donated by family members. On the far side of the main road, across a bridge, are the transport galleries, where the exhibits include every conceivable form of transport, from horse-drawn carts to lifeboats and a vertical take-off plane, but especially veteran cars, motorcycles and trams. You’ll also meet Old Maeve, the largest locomotive ever built in Ireland, and a DeLorean sports car from the infamously defunct factory, while the Titanic exhibit documents the origins and fate of the Belfast-constructed liner. “The Flight Experience” examines the history of aviation through films, models and interactive displays. Outside the galleries there’s a miniature railway that runs on summer Saturdays, and back in the main section there’s a decent restaurant, located in the Education Centre. The museum also regularly stages temporary exhibitions and occasional cultural events. **Strangford Lough** Ancient annals record that Strangford Lough was formed around 1650 BC by the sea sweeping in over the lands of Brena. This created a beautiful, calm inlet, the archipelago-like pieces of land along its inner arm fringed with brown and yellow bladderwrack and tangleweed, and tenanted by a rich gathering of bird life during the warmer months and vast flocks of geese and waders in the winter. It’s an attractive haven for small boats and yachts, and several picturesque halts for the land-bound make the road along the lough’s western shore the most interesting route leading south from Belfast. **Portaferry** PORTAFERRY, at the mouth of Strangford Lough, is the home of the Exploris aquarium, which has a touch-tank for the brave to stroke a stingray, and an open-sea tank where you can view the odd roaming shark and basking seals. However, the town’s main attraction is the marvellous sunset looking across the “Narrows” to Strangford, a view enhanced by a ten-minute climb to the stump of the old windmill just behind the town. **The Lecale region** Jutting into the southern reach of Strangford Lough, the Lecale Peninsula is above all St Patrick country. Ireland’s patron saint was a Roman Briton, first carried off as a youth from somewhere near Carlisle in northern England by Irish raiders. He spent six years in slavery in Ireland before escaping home again and, at the age of 30, decided to return to Ireland as a bishop, to spread Christianity. Christianity had already reached Ireland a while earlier, probably through traders and other slaves, and, indeed, St Patrick was not in fact the first bishop of Ireland, but he remains easily the most famous. He arrived in Ireland this second time, according to his biographer Muirchú (also his erstwhile captor, converted), on the shores of the Lecale region, and his first Irish sermon was preached at Saul in 432. Today the region commemorates the association with sites at Struell Wells and Saul, as well as at Downpatrick. The Lecale Way is an almost forty-mile waymarked walking tour of the peninsula starting in Raholp and running to Strangford and thence around the coast to Clough and onwards to Newcastle (maps available from the Downpatrick tourist office). If you’ve had enough of St Patrick and his seeming connection with nearly every landmark, alternative ways of exploring the peninsula are the nature rambles and horse rides available at the Quoile Countryside Centre just outside Downpatrick. **Downpatrick** DOWNPATRICK, 23 miles south of Belfast, is a pleasant enough place of little more than ten thousand people, and its compact size and the proximity of some rich and well-preserved historical sites make for an easy and worthwhile day’s visit. The Hill of Down, at the north of the town, was once a rise of great strategic worth, fought over long before the arrival of St Patrick made it famous. A Celtic fort of mammoth proportions was built here and was called first Arús Cealtchair, then later Dún Cealtchair. Celtchar was one of the Red Branch Knights, a friend of the then King of Ulster, Conor MacNessa, and, according to the Book of the Dun Cow, “an angry terrific hideous man with a long nose, huge ears, apple eyes, and coarse dark-grey hair”. The Dún part of the fort’s name went on to become the name of the county, as well as the town. By the time the Norman knight John de Courcy made his mark here in the late twelfth century, a settlement was well established. Pushing north out of Leinster, and defeating Rory MacDonlevy, King of Ulster, de Courcy dispossessed the Augustinian canons who occupied the Hill of Down to establish his own Benedictine abbey. He flaunted as much pomp as he could to mark the occasion, and one of his festive tricks was to import what were supposedly the disinterred bodies of St Brigid and St Columba to join St Patrick, who was (allegedly) buried here. One of the earliest accounts of Patrick’s life asserts that he’s buried in a church near the sea; and since a later account admits that “where his bones are, no man knows”, Downpatrick’s claim seems as good as any. **On the trail of St Patrick** About four miles west of Inch Abbey (take the B2 to Annacloy and then the first turning on the left), Loughinisland is probably the most worthwhile of all the sites in the area associated with St Patrick, and indeed one of the most idyllic spots in County Down. It comprises a reed-fringed lake contained by ten or so little drumlin hills, one of which forms an island in the lake. Here, across a short causeway, are the ruins of three small churches, set next door to each other. The smallest one, MacCartan’s Chapel (1636), has an entrance door no taller than four or five feet. The larger northern church was used by both Catholics and Protestants until they quarrelled on a wet Sunday around 1720 over which camp should remain outside during the service. The Protestants left and built their church at Seaforde instead. The next St Patrick landmark is at Saul, a couple of miles northeast of Downpatrick off the Strangford road. St Patrick is said to have landed nearby, sailing up the tiny River Slaney, and it was here that he first preached, immediately converting Dichu, the lord of this territory. Dichu gave Patrick a barn as his first base and the saint frequently returned here to rest from his travelling missions – legend has it that he died here in 461. Today a memorial chapel and round tower in the Celtic Revival style, built of pristine silver-grey granite in 1932 to commemorate the 1500th anniversary of the saint’s arrival, is open to visitors (9am–5pm daily). Two cross-carved stones from between the eighth and twelfth centuries still stand in the graveyard, though there’s not a trace of the medieval monastery built here by St Malachy in the twelfth century. A short distance further south, between Saul and Raholp, St Patrick’s Shrine sits atop Slieve Patrick, a tract of hillside much like a slalom ski-slope, with the Stations of the Cross marking a pathway up. This huge Mourne-granite statue, clad at the base with bronze panels depicting Patrick’s life, was erected in the same year as Saul church. The summit is no more than a twenty-minute climb and offers a commanding view of the county, a vista of the endless little bumps of this drumlin-filled territory. At Raholp is the ruined church of St Tassach, named after the bishop from whom the dying Patrick received the sacrament. Patrick gave Raholp to Tassach as a reward for crafting a case for Christ’s crozier, the Bachall Isú, one of Ireland’s chief relics until its destruction in 1538. The ruins here were mainly restored in 1915 from the rubble that lay around, but their material is thought to date from the eleventh century. If you’re eager for the complete St Patrick experience, it’s a mile from the car park of the Slaney Inn (which serves superb bar meals) in Raholp to the spot on the lough shore where he is believed to have first landed: head towards Strangford, then left down Myra Road; cross the main Strangford road and turn left at the first fork; at the bottom of the hill, take the track on the right to the shore. The easiest way to find the last St Patrick site, Struell Wells, is to return to Downpatrick. Take the Ardglass road southeast, turn left just past the hospital, then right down a narrow track into a secluded rock-faced valley and you’ll come to the wells. The waters here, believed to be the wells referred to in early accounts of Patrick’s mission, have been attributed with healing powers for centuries. In 1744 Walter Harris described the scene: “Vast throngs of rich and poor resort on Midsummer Eve and the Friday before Lammas, some in the hopes of obtaining health, and others to perform penance.” The site contains a couple of wells, one for drinking and another known as the eye well whose waters are supposed to have curative powers, and men’s and women’s bathhouses. Mass is still said here on midsummer night, and people bring containers to carry the water home with them. **The Lecale Way** The Lecale Way is an almost forty-mile waymarked walking tour of the peninsula starting in Raholp and running to Strangford and thence around the coast to Clough and onwards to Newcastle (maps available from the Downpatrick tourist office). If you’ve had enough of St Patrick and his seeming connection with nearly every landmark, alternative ways of exploring the peninsula are the nature rambles and horse rides available at the Quoile Countryside Centre just outside Downpatrick. **Newcastle** Newcastle, with its lovely stretch of sandy beach, is the biggest seaside resort in County Down – packed with trippers from Belfast on bank holidays and summer weekends – and, with Slieve Donard rising behind the town, it’s by far the best base if you want to do any serious walking or climbing in the Mourne Mountains. On busy days the main drag, with raucous rock bands performing outside the pubs, can feel like nothing more than a soulless strip of amusement arcades, fast-food outlets and tacky souvenir stores, but the town’s more sedate qualities can be appreciated when the trippers have gone. **Armagh city** ARMAGH is one of the most attractive places in the North, and the rich history of the city and its surroundings has plenty to keep you occupied for a day or two. The city offers cathedrals and museums set in handsome Georgian streets, and two miles west is the ancient site of once-grand Navan Fort. Armagh has been the site of the Catholic primacy of All Ireland since St Patrick established his church here, and has rather ambitiously adopted the title of the “Irish Rome” for itself – like Rome, it’s positioned among seven small hills. Paradoxically, the city is also the seat of the Protestant Church of Ireland’s archbishop of Armagh. **Road bowls** The sport of road bowls is popular in Holland and Germany and was once played throughout Ireland, but is now limited mainly to Cork and Armagh, where it’s also known as “road bullets”. The principle of the game is simple: a pair of rival contestants each propels a 28oz (800g) solid-iron ball along a course of country roads (usually about two-and-a-half miles long), the winner being the player who reaches the finishing line with the fewest number of throws. In practice, it’s a complicated business. The Armagh roads twist and turn, up and down, and bowlers are assisted by a team of camp followers, including managers and road guides who advise on the most advantageous spots to aim for and the force of the throw. Traditionally a male sport, it’s become increasingly popular with women, who’ve held their own championship since 1981. Roads around Armagh where you’re likely to catch sight of the game – usually on Sunday afternoons – include Cathedral Road, Napper Road, Blackwater Town, Rock, Tassa, Keady, Newtownhamilton and Madden roads. The most reliable information on forthcoming games is probably to be had in local pubs. The Ulster Finals are held in the city over two weekends in late June, with the All-Ireland Road Bowls Final in early August. **Loughgall and around** LOUGHGALL, a tranquil and pretty estate village about five miles west of Portadown (and the same distance north of Armagh along the B27), lies in the middle of apple-orchard country, beautiful in the spring, and is worth visiting mainly for its historical connections. Like many of its neighbours in Armagh’s rural north, Loughgall is strongly Protestant. It was three miles northeast of the village at Diamond Hill that the Battle of the Diamond took place in 1795, which led to the foundation of the first Protestant Orange Order at Dan Winter’s Cottage, in a nearby farmyard just down Derryloughan Road. Inside, you can see maps and relics from the battle alongside seventeenth-century furniture; the cottage roof still contains original lead-shot. **Ardress House and The Argory** Five miles or so north of Loughgall, two National Trust stately homes lie a few miles apart. Ardress House is a seventeenth-century manor house with ornate plasterwork by Michael Stapleton, a good collection of paintings, a sizeable working farmyard and wooded grounds. More enticing, however, is The Argory, a fine Neoclassical building dating from 1824 and set in 350 acres by the River Blackwater. The splendid grounds include very pleasant gardens, but it’s the house that’s the real attraction. Built of Caledon stone, its entrance hall features a fine, cantilevered staircase, and the rooms contain Victorian and Edwardian furniture among many other period items, including a fabulous cabinet barrel organ. The house is still lit by an original 1906 acetylene gas plant in the stable yard, and during the summer it stages musical events and organized garden walks. Tours provide entertaining anecdotes about the house’s erstwhile owners, the McGeough-Bonds. **South Armagh** Overshadowed by Slieve Gullion, the South Armagh countryside is among the most attractive in the North. Proximity to the border and a predominantly Catholic population resulted in this once being a nucleus of resistance to British rule. There’s much evidence of prehistoric settlement here, important ecclesiastical remains and plenty of traditional music. **The Ring of Gullion** Most of South Armagh’s attractions are concentrated in and around the area known as the Ring of Gullion, a naturally formed ring-dyke of low-lying hills that encircles (and predates) the mountain at its core. People have lived here for more than six thousand years, and there’s a rich heritage of remains and monuments. On the ring’s western fringe is the Dorsey Enclosure, two huge earthen banks and ditch ramparts dating from the Iron Age, running for a mile either side of the old route to Navan Fort. Elsewhere are numerous dolmens and cairns, Christian relics and monuments from the Plantation era. Slieve Gullion, which dominates the southeastern corner of County Armagh, is one of the most mysteriously beautiful mountains in the country. A store of romantic legends is attached to it, especially concerning Cúchulainn, the hero of the Táin Bó Cúailnge, who took his name here after slaying the hound (Cú) of the blacksmith Culainn. Due south at Glendhu is where Cúchulainn single-handedly halted the army of Queen Medb of Connaught, who was intent on capturing the great bull of Cooley. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, who founded the Fianna, a mythical national militia whose adventures are told in the Fenian Cycle, also appears in stories here. **The Mourne Mountains** The Mournes are a relatively youthful set of granite mountains, which explains why their comparatively unweathered peaks and flanks are so rugged, forming steep sides, moraines and occasional sheer cliffs. Closer up, these give sharp, jagged outlines; but from a distance they appear much gentler, like a sleeping herd of buffalo. The wilder topography lies mostly in the east, below Newcastle, although the fine cliff of Eagle Mountain (636m), to the southwest, is wonderful if you can afford the time and effort to get there, and the tamer land above Rostrevor has views down into Carlingford Lough that rival any in Ireland. In summer at least (winters can be surprisingly harsh), there are plenty of straightforward hikes in the Mournes that require no special equipment, with obvious tracks to many of the more scenic parts. There are also, of course, more serious climbs and climbing courses in the Mournes are run by the Tollymore National Outdoor Centre in Bryansford (wwww.tollymore.com), but they must be booked well in advance. **Walks in the Mournes** The Mourne Mountains offer some beautiful walks close to Newcastle, as well as plenty of more serious hiking routes throughout the range, including the Newcastle Challenge Trail, a 44-kilometre waymarked hike, split into five sections, starting and finishing in the town. There’s also an annual walking festival (wwww.mournewalking.co.uk) over three days at the end of June, featuring a variety of lowland and mountain walks, rambles and hikes. The climb up Slieve Donard, just south of Newcastle, is the obvious first choice. Although at 850m it’s the highest peak in Northern Ireland, the ascent is a relatively easy one on a well-marked trail that starts three miles out of town on the Annalong road at Bloody Bridge and ends at the massive hermit cell on the summit; from here the views across the whole mountain landscape are quite spectacular. For gentler local walking, there are several pleasant parks created from the estates of old houses in the vicinity. The nearest is Donard Park (free access) on the slopes of Slieve Donard. There’s a good meander along the River Glen from Newcastle town centre to the park, and if you keep following this path uphill you’ll emerge on the other side and eventually come to the Saddle, a col between the two mountains of Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh. If you want to carry on further into the mountains from here, a good route is via Trassey Burn towards the Hare’s Gap, where minerals have seeped through the rock to form precious and semiprecious stones – topaz, beryl, smoky quartz and emerald – in the cavities of the Diamond rocks (hidden behind an obvious boulder stone on the mountainside). Around this point in spring, you might hear the song of the ring ouzel, a bird that migrates from Africa to breed in these upland areas. Two miles inland from Newcastle, along the Bryansford road, Tollymore Forest Park is considerably bigger and better equipped than Donard, and has a campsite. The park creeps up the northern side of the Mournes, and its picturesque trails wind through woodland and beside the river. You enter the park by one of two ornate Gothic folly gates – there are more follies in Bryansford nearby – and there’s an information kiosk in the car park. Castlewellan Forest Park is also inland about five miles further north, outside the elegant market town of Castlewellan. The estate lies in the foothills of the Mournes, and a two-and-a-half mile trail from the entrance leads to the highest point in the forest, Slievenaslat, providing panoramic views over the mountain range. A wonderful arboretum, dating originally from 1740 but much expanded since, is the forest park’s outstanding feature: the sheltered south-facing slopes of its hills, between the Mournes and the Slieve Croob range, allow exotic species to flourish. If you’re planning on more serious hiking in the Mournes, heights worth chasing include Slieve Binnian, beyond the Hare’s Gap, reached through the Brandy Pad passes by the Blue Lough and Lough Binnian; Slieve Commedagh, with its Inca-like pillars of granite; and Slieve Bearnagh, up to the right of the Hare’s Gap. Also, try and cross the ridge from Slieve Meelmore to Slieve Muck, the “pig mountain”, descending to the shores of Lough Shannagh, where there’s a beach at either end – useful for a dip, though the water’s freezing. In the panorama beyond the Hare’s Gap, the places not to miss are the eastern slopes of the Cove Mountain and Slieve Lamagan. If you’re sticking to the roads, all you can really do is circle the outside of the range, though there is one road through the middle, from Hilltown to Kilkeel. **The Orange Order and the marching tradition** Ireland’s oldest political grouping, The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, was founded in September 1795 following the so-called Battle of the Diamond, which took place in or near Dan Winter’s farm near Loughgall. The skirmish involved the Peep O’Day boys (Protestants) and the Defenders (Catholics) and was the culmination of a long-running dispute about control of the local linen trade. The Defenders attacked an inn, unaware that inside the Peep O’Day boys were armed and waiting. A dozen Defenders were killed, and in the glow of victory their opponents formed the Orange Order. The first Orange Lodge march in celebration of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne took place in 1796, and they’ve been happening ever since. The Boyne is the Loyalist totem, even though the actual battle at Aughter that ended Jacobite rule did not take place until the following year. William of Orange is their icon, despite the fact that his campaign was supported by the pope and most of the Catholic rulers of Europe, and that William himself had a noted reputation for religious tolerance. For Protestant Ulster, the Boyne came to represent a victory that enshrined Protestant supremacy and liberties, and the Orange Order became the bedrock of Protestant hegemony. Between 1921 and 1969, for example, 51 of the 54 ministers appointed to the Stormont government were members of the Orange Order; at its peak, so were two-thirds of the Protestant male population of the North. The Loyalist “marching season” begins in March and culminates in celebration of the Battle of the Boyne on July 12, followed by the Apprentice Boys’ traditional march around the walls of Derry on August 12. Most Loyalist marches are uncontentious – small church parades, or commemorations of the Somme – but it can’t be denied that some of them are something other than a vibrant expression of cultural identity. Marching can be a means by which one community asserts its dominance over the other – Loyalists selecting routes that deliberately pass through Nationalist areas, for instance, or their “Kick the Pope” fife-and-drum bands deliberately playing sectarian tunes and making provocative gestures such as the raising of five fingers on Belfast’s Lower Ormeau Road (where five Catholics were shot dead in 1992). Though Loyalist marches have tended to be the flashpoints for major disturbances in recent years, not least in the late 1990s at Drumcree near Portadown, it shouldn’t be forgotten that the marching tradition is common to both communities. Around three thousand marches take place throughout Northern Ireland each year and, although the vast majority are Loyalist parades, a significant number are Nationalist. The latter include the St Patrick’s Day (March 17) marches of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Irish National Foresters, and commemorative parades and wreath-laying ceremonies by Sinn Féin and other Republican bodies on Easter Monday and various anniversaries.