

# The West



## 26: Galway City

As the unofficial capital of the west of Ireland, Galway city has a personality of its own, wholly unlike Ireland's other major cities. There are no Georgian streetscapes like Dublin, no castles like Limerick, no grand parades like Cork, and no Viking towers like Waterford.

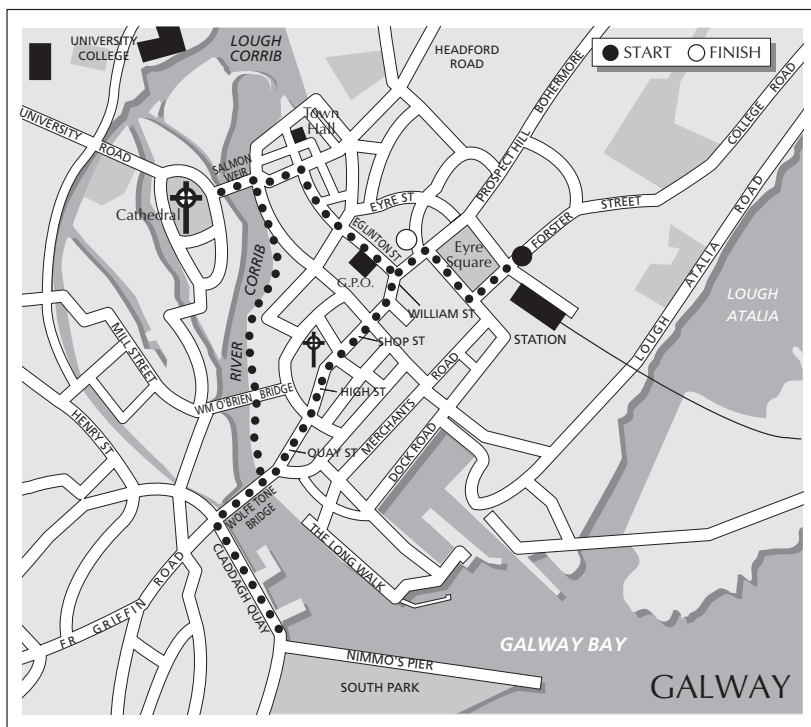
Influenced by its remote location amid rocky lands at the head of Galway Bay and the River Corrib, Galway is small and compact, with narrow streets and a style of cut-stone architecture not usually seen in other Irish cities. Galway (pronounced *Gawl-way*) takes its name from the Irish language *Gaillimh*, meaning 'stony', and specifically a 'stony place' or 'stony river'.

Like the rest of Ireland, Galway has been shaped by history, but a history that is unique to its remoteness. The earliest printed references to the area date back to 1124 and describe it as a 'Gaelic hinterland'. Although not conquered by the Vikings like Ireland's other major cities, Galway was invaded by the Anglo-Normans in the thirteenth century. The de Burgos (Burkes) founded a settlement beside a ford on the River Corrib. By 1270, strong stone walls had been added and a great medieval city grew up inside the walls.

Because of its position on the Atlantic, Galway emerged as a thriving seaport for wine, spices and fish, and developed a brisk trade with Spain and other European countries during medieval times. The Galway docks hummed with the arrival of ships from foreign lands. Even Christopher Columbus is said to have landed at the port of Galway, en route to his historic voyage across the Atlantic to 'discover' a New World.

In the fourteenth through mid-seventeenth centuries, Galway was a powerful city state. It became known as the 'City of the Tribes', because of the influence of fourteen wealthy merchant Anglo-Norman families who settled here, ruling the town as an oligarchy for many years. Each of these families (named Athy, Blake, Bodkin, Browne, Darcy, Deane, Font, French, Joyce, Kirwan, Lynch, Martin, Morris and Skerret) had its own street and mansion or castle, with stone-faced designs. Remnants of the buildings and the stonework remain today.

Like the rest of the country, Galway's independence and prosperity was cut short in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by English rule, with final blows coming during the Great



Famine of the 1840s. Two developments helped Galway to rebound – the foundation in 1848 of Queen's College (now officially National University of Ireland – Galway, also known as University College Galway), infusing into Galway all the youthful vibes of a university town; and the establishment of a permanent rail link with Dublin in 1854, reinventing Galway as a true hub of the west.

Growth has been the city's buzzword ever since. Happily, it has been a tempered growth, allowing Galwegians to prosper in the twenty-first century while still preserving their rich

heritage. Although the medieval walls have almost disappeared and the city has spread out in all directions, there is still a core of fourteen streets founded by the original tribes. This area, the heart of the city, holds many landmarks that still bear the names of some of these families, such as Lynch's Memorial Window, Blake's Castle, and the Browne Doorway.

Yes, Galway has a unique personality – well aged, yet ever youthful; rich in tradition, yet always embracing innovation. It's a Renaissance city in the truest sense.

## FAST FACTS

Travel Information Office

**GALWAY TOURIST OFFICE**, Forster Street, Galway (tel. 091 537 700). Open all year.

### TRAVEL INFORMATION ONLINE:

[www.irelandwest.ie](http://www.irelandwest.ie)

### TELEPHONE AREA CODE:

The telephone area code for all numbers in the Galway city area is 091, unless indicated otherwise.

## MAJOR EVENTS

**GALWAY EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL** – Focusing on medieval, renaissance and baroque music, dance and spectacle, this festival presents concerts, dances, workshops and street performances by internationally acclaimed ensembles.

Information: Máiréad Kavanagh, Dún na Mara Drive, Renmore, tel. 086 306 6221 or [www.galwayearlymusic.com](http://www.galwayearlymusic.com). (Middle of May)

**GALWAY ARTS FESTIVAL** – Founded in 1978, this two-week festival is Ireland's largest celebration of the performing and visual arts, bringing a wide variety of international artists to Galway while at the same time showcasing local and national culture. The programme features music, song, drama and dance in the streets, at theatres, in public places and at pubs, plus literary and children's events throughout the city. Information: Elizabeth McDonagh, The Black Box,

Dyke Road, tel. 509700 or [www.galwayartsfestival.ie](http://www.galwayartsfestival.ie). (Last two weeks of July)

**GALWAY INTERNATIONAL OYSTER FESTIVAL** – Over 100,000 native oysters are consumed during this three-day event in Galway city. Founded in 1954, it is Ireland's longest-running festival, drawing visitors from all over the world to Galway for the start of the oyster season. The highlight is the Guinness World Oyster Opening Championship and the selection of the 'Oyster Pearl' (a female beauty contest), followed by a programme of parties, a gala ball, concerts, street entertainment and more. Information: Ann Flanagan, tel. 527 282 or [www.galwayoysterfest.com](http://www.galwayoysterfest.com). (Last weekend of September)

## GALWAY CITY WALKING TOUR

Duration: 2–3 hours plus stops

Walking is the best way to know Galway – streets are narrow, distances are short and much of the core of the city is pedestrianised (but do wear comfortable walking shoes and watch out for uneven pavements, slender footpaths, and some cobbled areas). Start a tour at Galway's rail and bus centre, **Ceannt Station**, Station Road. Turn left and walk half a block to the front entrance of the **Great Southern Hotel**, a lodging landmark dating back to 1845 and well worth a visit or an overnight stay in its own right. The hotel overlooks **Eyre Square**,

the city's focal point. Originally a market area known as Fair Green, it was given its current name in 1710 when presented to the city by then-Mayor Edward Eyre who had inherited this grassy patch of land from his father.

Now a pedestrian park, Eyre Square is the city's playground, with pathways and benches, lined by colourful flowerbeds and statuary. Take a few moments to reflect at the **Pádraic Ó Conaire Statue**, erected in honour of a Galwegian (1882–1923) recognised as one of Ireland's great short-story writers in the Irish language; or stroll beside **The Browne Doorway**, a fine cut-stone doorway and window, now free-standing and framed in cement, but once the entrance to the mansion belonging to one of Galway's fourteen tribes. There are several carvings on it, including two coats of arms dated 1627, and belonging to the Brownes and the Lynches. Known locally as 'marriage stones', they commemorate the union of two families. Many other city buildings hold similar sets of carved stones with family names.

The adjacent **Quincentennial Fountain**, erected in 1984 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Galway becoming a city, consists of sheets of iron, mounted to depict the Galway area's distinctive sail boat, the Galway Hooker.

On the west side of Eyre Square is the **Eyre Square Shopping Centre**, one of many such developments in this shop-happy town. This multi-level complex is

unique because it includes a section of the city's restored medieval wall. On weekends, markets are held here.

From Eyre Square, head westward to Galway's main thoroughfare, a street that changes its name five times – from **Williamsgate** and **William**, to **Shop, High**, and **Quay** streets, before it crosses the River Corrib and changes again. By normal standards for a main city street, it is extremely narrow, with traffic moving at a crawl most of the time. Happily, most of this corridor (from Shop Street through Quay Street) is pedestrianised during prime shopping hours (11am to 7.30pm)

As William Street becomes **Shop Street**, on the right is **Lynch's Castle** (now the Allied Irish Bank), one of the finest surviving town castles in Ireland, dating from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and former home of one of the fourteen original Galway tribe families. On the front is a large framed roundel bearing the arms of the Lynches, plus many decoratively carved windows and projecting gargoyles peering down from the roof.

From Shop Street, turn right onto **Church Lane**, to visit the **Collegiate Church of St Nicholas**, Lombard Street (tel. 564 648) the centrepiece of Galway's medieval heritage. It was founded in 1320, and it is said that Columbus prayed at this church before embarking on his transatlantic voyage. Restored and expanded over the centuries, this church has changed hands from Roman Catholic

to Protestant at least four times. Currently under the aegis of the Church of Ireland (Anglican/Episcopal) denomination, it is a showcase of many medieval church furnishings and fixtures, including the **Crusader's Tomb**, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century burial vault with a rare Norman-French inscription; a beautifully carved baptismal font, dating back to the sixteenth or early seventeenth century, with different designs on each side; a lectern with 'barley sugar' twist columns of fifteenth- or sixteenth-century vintage; and a free-standing *bénitier* or holy-water stoup, uncommon in Ireland and one of the most unusual features of the church, made in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Open daily, April–September. Admission: free

Return to Shop Street and make a right onto **High Street**. Notice the occasional decorative or arched-stone doorways and family crests of the fourteen original Galway names, now adapted and incorporated into the shop-front façades of Galway's commercial enterprises. On the left is **O'Maille's**, 16 High Street (tel. 562 696), a family-run tweed shop established in 1938. It became world-famous by producing the clothing for the classic film, *The Quiet Man*, and has done a brisk trade ever since. Next on the left is the Malt Arcade, a cobbled laneway from bygone days, and several doors along on the left is **Kenny's Book Shop**, 20 High Street (tel. 562 739), a family-operated bookshop and art gallery. A Galway fixture for over 50

years, this shop is a treasure-trove of old and new books, maps, prints, engravings and volumes about Galway history.

Next is **Quay Street**, the heart of Galway's colourful 'Left Bank', lined with interesting curio shops and cafés reflecting the latest hip trends.

On the right is **Kirwan's Lane**, one of the city's surviving medieval laneways. Just beyond is Jury's Inn, a 1990s addition to the Galway scene. It sits beside the remnants of seventeenth-century **Blake's Castle**, a fortified residence tower house that once belonged to one of Galway's fourteen tribes. Over the years, it has had many uses, ranging from a jail to a distillery and a fertiliser factory. The bar of the hotel preserves two stone carvings from the building – the coats of arms of the Lynch and Browne families, dated 1645 and displayed over a door and a fireplace.

Directly opposite Jury's is the **Fishmarket**, an outdoor area beside the River Corrib (sometimes referred to by the locals as the Galway river) which used to attract local fishmongers to sell their wares. This is the heart of the city's medieval quarter. Behind the market area is the **Spanish Arch**, built in 1594, and one of Galway's most-photographed landmarks. It was the focal point of the landing dock area where Spanish ships unloaded their cargoes of wine and brandy from their galleons in the heyday of trading between Galway and Spain.

Beside the arch, off Flood Street, is the **Galway City Museum** (tel. 567 641), displaying a collection of local memorabilia, photographs and documents. Open daily, May–September; and more limited schedule in off-season – phone in advance. Admission: €

On the opposite side of the River Corrib is **The Claddagh**, a residential area now, but once a small fishing village of uncertain origin and possibly older than Galway itself. It gets its name from the Irish language *An Cladach*, meaning ‘the sea-shore’. The original settlers were native Irish who spoke the Gaelic tongue, as distinct from the Anglo-Norman families within the walled city. The Claddagh residents, who made their living by fishing, sold their wares at the Fishmarket beside the Spanish Arch. They lived in small thatched cottages of mud walls, haphazardly arranged amid cobbled streets. Although they lived in poverty, they had one treasure. Legend has it that they originated the Claddagh ring, a wedding ring cast in the form of two hands clasping a heart with a crown at the top. Over the years, the ring has become a popular piece of jewellery for Galwegians and visitors alike. Although the world of the Claddagh fishing community came to an end in 1934 with the construction of a modern housing development, the tradition of the Claddagh ring lives on and thrives.

Cross back over the **Wolfe Tone Bridge**. From the front of Jury’s, take a right and walk along the side of the hotel. This is the beginning of **Riverside Walk**, a path that borders the east side of Lough Corrib. Walk north as far as the **Salmon Weir Bridge**, a popular landmark that allows people to stop and watch the salmon leaping upstream. Cross over the bridge to see one of the city’s newest buildings, the **Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas**, University and Gaol Roads (tel. 563 577), completed in 1965. Dominating the Galway skyline with its huge dome, it is a modern Renaissance-style edifice that is made of limestone and marble from local quarries and enhanced by the work of contemporary Irish artisans who designed the statues, stained-glass windows and mosaics. It sits on the site of the former city jail. Open daily. Admission: free

Cross back over the bridge and take a right to St Vincent’s Avenue. On the left is another of Galway’s newest additions, **Town Hall Theatre**, Courthouse Square (tel. 569 777), Galway’s major performing arts venue, formerly the town hall.

Cross over **St Vincent’s Avenue** to **St Francis Street**. Halfway up the block on the right is the **Franciscan Abbey**. The current building sits on part of a site that was occupied by an earlier friary founded in 1296. Continuing on, the street name changes to

**Eglinton Street**, a busy commercial thoroughfare, and the **General Post Office** is on the right. Straight ahead is **Williamsgate Street** and a left turn will bring you back to Eyre Square, completing the tour.

In addition, one of Galway’s top attractions is located outside town, beyond a walking tour route. If you do not have access to a car, it is less than a five-minute taxi or local bus journey away from Eyre Square.

Either way, head to the **Galway Crystal Heritage Centre**, Merlin Park, Dublin Road (tel. 757 311), aptly called a ‘museum of Irish crystal’. Step inside and be dazzled by the huge Georgian-style **Great Hall**, the reception area, decorated with intricate glasswork, crystal chandeliers, and a ceremonial staircase. Tours start with an audiovisual on the craft, followed by a tour of workshops, to see craftspeople design, etch and inscribe the delicate patterns and tracings. In addition, there are four other exhibits: **The Celtic Room**, housing scroll work of early artists; the **Hall of Tribes**, outlining the history of the great Galway families; **Boatbuilders’ Workshop**, focusing on the traditional boats of the west, including the Galway Hooker; the **Claddagh Village**, a prototype of the city’s famous old quarter, and birthplace of the Claddagh ring. To all of this, add a terrace balcony with sweeping views of Galway Bay. Open daily. Admission: €

## PAT’S PICKS

### RESTAURANTS

**THE COBBLESTONE**, Kirwan’s Lane (tel. 567 227). Tucked into one of Galway’s oldest lanes, this indoor/outdoor café is one of the city’s brightest stars on the cuisine scene, with emphasis on vegetarian soups, quiches and salads, as well as ‘beany shepherd pie’ or vegetable and walnut bake. Seafood and meats are also available, as is a wide array of baked-on-premises croissants, breads, muffins, cakes and cookies. On many evenings, proprietor Kate Wright hosts cooking classes after closing hours. Open for snacks and lunch, daily.

**CONLON’S**, 3 Eglinton Street (tel. 562 268), just off William Street. For fresh local seafood, head to this long-established restaurant (opposite the General Post Office), specialising in traditional fish-and-chips or wild Corrib smoked salmon, as well as oysters, scallops, mussels, crab and lobster. Take-out is also available if you feel like a picnic. Open for lunch and dinner, daily.

**GBC – THE GALWAY BAKING COMPANY**, 7 Williamsgate Street (tel. 563 087). It’s hard to match the value of this landmark shop-front restaurant for a snack or a full meal from morning till night. Freshly baked breads and pastries are featured here, as are Irish traditional dishes such as Irish stew and steaks, as well as quiches, crêpes, omelettes, salads and

real ‘tea-leaf’ tea. Downstairs is a coffee-shop, and upstairs is a full-service restaurant. Open daily.

**KC BLAKE’S BRASSERIE**, 10 Quay Street (tel. 561 826). Opposite the Spanish Arch and next to Jury’s Inn, this stylish restaurant is nestled in a fifteenth-century medieval tower house. The menu offers Irish dishes such as beef and Guinness stew and black-pudding croquettes, as well as international fare such as *sole meunière*, siki shark, and chicken fajitas. Open for dinner, daily.

**MALT HOUSE**, High Street (tel. 567 866). An ‘old Galway’ atmosphere prevails at this cosy whitewashed restaurant, positioned on a cobblestone alley off the main street. The menu features modern Irish cuisine, with emphasis on fresh seafood, including monkfish, lobster, prawns, scallops, mussels and Galway Bay oysters. Open for lunch and dinner, Monday–Saturday.

**MCDONAGH’S SEAFOOD HOUSE**, 22 Quay Street (565 001). Established in 1912, this seafood market-cum-restaurant is synonymous with fresh seafood. With a choice of settings – an informal fish-and-chips bar or a full-service restaurant, it offers the best of the local catch. Shellfish platters are a house speciality, as is barbecued or grilled salmon. Arrive early, though – this place is very popular and no reservations are accepted. Open for lunch and dinner, daily.

**MOCHA BEANS**, 2 Cross Street (tel. 565 919). Tucked beside Quay Street, this coffee house has an international ambience, and serves a choice of coffees and teas from all around the world. The menu also offers freshly squeezed juices, open sandwiches, salads, soups, bagels and more. Open for breakfast, lunch and snacks, daily.

**SCOTTY’S**, 1 Middle Street (tel. 566 400). Popular with university students, this casual café brings the flavours of the USA to Galway. The menu offers fresh salads, deli-style sandwiches, burgers and subs, with accompaniments of your choice – mayo, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, olives, peppers, onions and more. Ice-cream sundaes are a speciality. Open for lunch and snacks, daily.

## PUBS

**AN PÚCÁN**, 11 Forster Street (tel. 561 528). Located one block east of Eyre Square, and named after a type of fishing boat, this old fashioned nautically themed pub has been a mecca for Irish traditional music in Galway for over 50 years. The nightly sessions usually start at 9.30 or 10pm. A talented mix of local musicians plays here and travelling musicians are always welcome.

**BUSKER BROWNE’S**, Cross Street (tel. 569 402), at Kirwan’s Lane. Housed in two of Galway’s oldest buildings – a slate house dating back to 1615, and a former convent – this multi-room pub offers lots of

old-world atmosphere in a choice of seating areas, snugs and alcoves. Traditional Irish music is the norm, but Dixieland jazz is also played as background to Sunday brunch.

**THE CRANE**, Sea Road (tel. 587 419). Although this landmark Victorian-style pub is not in the middle of town, it always draws a steady flow of serious practitioners and followers of traditional music from near and far. Sessions are held on both the ground level and first floor every night. In addition, there is both step and set dancing three nights a week, and a singers’ club every third Saturday of the month. The décor lends itself to a festive atmosphere – brightly coloured walls, sturdy country furniture, and posters and photographs of Galway musicians and festivals.

**MCSWIGGAN’S PUB**, 3 Eyre Street (tel. 568 917). Located one block from Eyre Square, this pub oozes an authentic old-world atmosphere, thanks to a décor of brick, stone and wood-panelled walls, beamed ceilings, snugs, nooks and crannies, and timeworn ale posters. A unique focal point is an actual 10.5-metre (35-foot) tree, branching up to the first floor. Music is on tap on many nights.

**THE QUAYS**, 11 Quay Street (tel. 568 347). Dating back almost 400 years, this popular pub offers two bars, each with its own character – the Old Bar, with antiques, old clocks, polished timber and check-tiled floor; and The Claddagh, a spacious

split-level bar with authentic timber, brickwork and church artefacts, including a stained-glass window, pulpit and a series of arches. Traditional music sessions are held on Friday and Saturday nights year-round; and there is Irish dancing on Monday and Tuesday (June–September).

**TIGH NEACHTAIN**, 17 Cross Street (tel. 568 820). This old-world pub is housed in a seventeenth-century building that was once the townhouse of Richard Martin, the founder of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The décor reflects an earlier era – low-beamed ceilings, tiny snugs, alcoves, flagstone floors, open fireplaces, and walls lined with a complete collection of Galway Arts Festival posters. Traditional Irish music is played on Friday and Saturday, and folk/jazz on Sunday, and impromptu sessions can happen on any night.

**SNUG-GARAVAN’S**, William Street (tel. 562 831). Housed in the former home of a Spanish merchant, this place is two pubs in one. The entrance leads to the snug, distinguished by its huge medieval fireplace (3.7 metres by 6.7 metres /12 feet by 22 feet), granite walls, dark-wood beams, and cave-like atmosphere. Continue through a corridor to Garavan’s which has the feel of a spiffy saloon with contemporary luxury. Galwegians alternate between the two settings, depending on their mood.

## DIGRESSIONS

**CRUISING ON THE RIVER:** See Galway from a different perspective by cruising on the River Corrib on board the double-deck ship, the *Corrib Princess*. These narrated cruises last 90 minutes, taking in a variety of riverside sights, from historic ruins and castles to wildlife. Departures are from Wood Quay, daily, April–October. Information: Corrib Tours, Furbo Hill, Furbo, Co. Galway, (tel. 592 447 or [www.corribprincess.ie](http://www.corribprincess.ie)).

**ISLAND-HOPPING:** It seems that almost everyone yearns to visit the Aran Islands, three islands sitting 48 km (30 miles) out at sea where Galway Bay meets the Atlantic Ocean: Inishmore (*Inis Mór* – Great Island); Inishmaan (*Inis Meáin* – Middle Island); and Inishere (*Inis Oirr* – Eastern Island). Although the islands have been modernised in recent years, they are still far-flung outposts of Gaelic culture, language and lifestyle, with a resident population of just over 1,500 people. A regularly scheduled ferry boat operates services from Rossaveal (the shortest crossing – 40 minutes) or Galway City Dock (90 minutes); schedules vary according to season, weather and sea conditions. Tickets can be purchased at the Galway Tourist Office. Information: Island Ferries (tel. 568 903 or [www.aranislandferries.com](http://www.aranislandferries.com)); Inis Mór Ferries (tel. 566 535 or [www.queenofaran2.com](http://www.queenofaran2.com)); and O’Brien

Shipping (tel. 567 283 or [www.doolinferries.com](http://www.doolinferries.com)). Air taxi service to the islands is also available (flight time is less than ten minutes), depending on the weather, from Inverin, 26 km (16 miles) west of Galway city. Information: Aer Arann (tel. 593 034 or [www.aerarann.ie](http://www.aerarann.ie)).

**TOURS GALORE:** Tired of walking? Galway offers a wide array of all-day hop-on/hop-off tours and one-hour narrated sightseeing tours. See more than a dozen highlights of Galway city (Eyre Square, Salmon Weir Bridge, Galway Cathedral, Galway Bay, the Claddagh and more). Most tours operate daily, departing from the Galway Tourist Office on Forster Street or from Eyre Square. Reservations are not needed; pay on the bus or at the tourist office. Information: Healy Tours (tel. 770 066 or [www.healybus.com](http://www.healybus.com)); Lally Tours (tel. 562 905 or [www.lallytours.com](http://www.lallytours.com)); or O’Neachtain Tours (tel. 553 188 or [www.oneachtaintours.com](http://www.oneachtaintours.com)). In addition, these three firms operate sightseeing tours of Connemara and the Burren, as does Bus Éireann (tel. 562 000 or [www.buseireann.ie](http://www.buseireann.ie)), from mid-May to the end of September.