Given the recent achievements of title-holders Dundalk in Europe, the 2017 League of Ireland season could not have wished for a better start than the visit of record champions Shamrock Rovers to Oriel Park, ‘The Home of Football’.

Finishing behind Dundalk in the 2016 title race, and qualifying for the Europa League in 2017-18, Shamrock Rovers, Cork City and Derry City each have a significant fan base, too, matched only by supporter-owned Sligo Rovers on the west coast. For 2017, Derry play at Buncrana, up in Inishowen.

The domination of the domestic game by Dublin clubs – 17 titles for Shamrock Rovers, 11 for Bohemians, eight for St Patrick’s Athletic – has been consigned to the past. Since Ireland’s switch to summer soccer in 2003, almost as many provincial sides have been crowned champions, the first title win by Drogheda in 2007 still remembered by many at United Park.

For the intrepid groundhopper, Ireland is the perfect destination, with affordable, pay-on-the-day admission, bars at many grounds and an easy-going atmosphere at most matches. And while facilities may need improving, the game here isn’t a sanitised product played out for the profit of some offshore oligarch. This is football at its most raw and, possibly, romantic – what other reason could there be to visit Ballybofey, home of the once mighty Finn Harps?

The casual visitor might even discover a hidden talent, a Roy Keane or a Shane Long, before their inevitable flit over the Irish Sea.

The match-day journey alone might be even memorable, such as the coastline DART ride down from Dublin to Bray. Home of Bray Wanderers, the seaside resort is a goal kick over the County Dublin border into County Wicklow – but included here in the Dublin section due to ease of travel from the main transport hubs of the capital.

Recently promoted Limerick and 2015 promotees Galway United will both want to avoid any scrap for Premier Division survival in 2017. With the League being reduced to two groups of ten teams in 2018, three will drop down from the Premier and only the First Division champions be allocated a top-tier berth.

Station to station
There are half-a-dozen airports in Ireland with links to the UK and regular bus connections to surrounding towns. Direct services from Dublin Airport also run to most cities and main towns.

State-owned Bus Éireann has the most comprehensive and competitively priced public-transport network around Ireland, reaching areas bereft of any rail connection. Tickets can be purchased in advance, online.

Sister company Dublin Bus covers the capital, complemented by the Luas light rail.
and DART coastal train, operated by state-owned Irish Rail, Iarnród Éireann.

Rail travel is generally dearer and less extensive around Ireland, though this is changing. A line between Limerick and Galway opened in 2010, the journey between Dublin and Cork is now a comfortable experience and online ticket deals can be attractive.

Motorways connect Dublin with all major towns. Distances are given in kilometres and toll charges are paid in cash.

Tables & trophies
The League of Ireland consists of two divisions, Premier and First, of 12 and eight clubs respectively – though this will change in 2018.

At the end of the 2017 season, three teams will drop from the Premier to the First, with only the champions to go up. With a ten-club spread to be in place across the two divisions, it is not yet clear how the structure of each will operate from 2018 onwards.

For 2017, the old system remains in the Premier Division. Clubs play each other three times in a 33-game season.

The 2017 Premier Division champions gain access to the first qualifying round of the Europa League.

The winners of the FAI Cup join them – or the fourth-placed side nips in if the trophy goes to a team finishing above it. Ireland’s main knock-out tournament, currently sponsored by the Irish Daily Mail, was most recently decided by a dramatic late goal as Cork City overcame Dundalk in front of 26,400 at Dublin’s Aviva Stadium.

FAI Cup holders and LoI champions traditionally meet at the curtain-raising First Round of the senior FAI Cup. They are

The FAI Cup is decided over one-leg ties, including the semi-finals, with replays from the quarter-final stage onwards, extra time and penalties in earlier rounds. The 20 League of Ireland clubs enter at the Second Round stage, plus four teams from Ireland’s lower leagues, given a bye as the draw is made.

The three main regional leagues of Leinster, Munster and Ulster form a de facto third tier but there is no direct promotion or relegation with the League of Ireland, whose reserve sides compete at this level. The Ulster Senior League mainly features sides from County Donegal. Teams from these three regional leagues compete in their own knock-out tournament, the FAI Intermediate Cup, previously known as the FAI Qualifying Cup.

The 16 that reached the Fourth Round in the previous season’s competition go into the President’s Cup a week before the regular league season.

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joined by the four semi-finalists from the FAI Junior Cup, a wide-reaching amateur tournament involving some 600 teams.

Of these 20 clubs, four receive byes to the Second Round of the FAI Cup.

The final of the FAI Intermediate Cup and FAI Junior Cup are now both played at the Aviva Stadium.

There is one more knock-out trophy, involving the 20 senior teams and four invited from the lower leagues. The League of Ireland Cup, with its byzantine regional structure earlier on, is decided over a one-leg final. The winners do not qualify for Europe.

Season’s dealings
Ireland introduced summer football in 2003. The 2017 season kicks off on Friday, February 24, a week earlier than the year before to avoid a fixture pile-up in the autumn. The season runs until the end of October, bookended by the FAI Cup final on November 5.

The mid-summer break is also cut short by a week, and will run from June 3 to 15. Friday night football is now firmly established, games usually kicking off at 7.45pm. At least one match takes place on Saturday night and sometimes one on Sunday afternoon.

Entry level
At most grounds, admission is cash-only at the turnstiles, prices around €15, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for children.

Shamrock Rovers, St Patrick’s Athletic, Dundalk, Galway, Cork, Derry and Bray Wanderers offer advance sales for individual matches, either online or from the ticket office/club shop.

Availability is rarely a problem and pay-on-the-night is the norm. Visiting supporters usually have their own turnstile and area of the ground.

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The digital travel guide for football fans, liberoguide.com is the most up-to-date resource, city-by-city, club-by-club, to the game across Europe and North America. Using only original photos and first-hand research, taken and undertaken over five seasons, liberoguide.com has been put together to enhance every football weekend and Euro night experience. From airport to arena, downtown sports bar to hotel, liberoguide.com helps you get the best out of your visit to football’s furthest corners and showcase stadiums.
Dublin

Dublin is where 50,000 gather to roar on Ireland’s national side in a modern arena chosen to co-host Euro 2020. Across town from the Aviva, half-a-dozen clubs, four a century or more old, strive to attract 3,000-plus crowds in a two-division, 20-team domestic league.

Attempts to increase gates are gradually succeeding but not helped by the popularity of England’s Premier League and dominance of Gaelic football. It wasn’t until 1971 that Ireland’s national team started to share Lansdowne Road with its rugby counterparts.

Until then, Dalymount Park had been the home of the round-ball game, hosting its first match in 1901 between Dublin’s most enduring clubs, Bohemians (the Bohs) and Shelbourne (the Shels, currently in the First Division). Unfit to host competitive internationals after the national side had gained mass support from the late 1980s onwards, the Dalymount was abandoned to its remit of hosting the Bohs.

With no Dalymount, no Lansdowne Road after its demolition in 2007, and the Aviva three years away from being built on the same site, Ireland’s soccer team needed a stadium. Other towns have rarely been an option. Though Dundalk, Cork and Waterford broke the Dublin monopoly on the domestic league from the 1930s onwards, the national side has only played four home games outside Dublin since the first in 1924.

In a seminal decision, temporary permission was granted for soccer to be played at Gaelic football stronghold Croke Park.

Across town, another stadium saga had long been unfolding in south Dublin. While the Bohs had been formed near the North Circular Road in 1890, Shelbourne and Shamrock Rovers hailed from southside Ringsend. This simple north v south dynamic was skewed when the former Ringsend residents were forced to groundshare northside Tolka Park from the late 1980s onwards. For Rovers, it followed the controversial sale of their revered Glenmalure Park in southside Milltown.

Ireland’s most popular and most titled club, Rovers remained homeless for more than 20 years as development of...
a new stadium in Tallaght, south-west Dublin, stalled.

Making up Dublin’s Big Four, St Patrick’s Athletic share southside loyalties with Shamrock Rovers. Irish champions in 2013, FAI Cup winners in 2014, never-relegated St Pat’s are based at Richmond Park, Inchicore, in south-west Dublin, bringing tifo colour and choreography to Dublin derby games. These same fans were the first to protest when a potential groundshare with Shamrock Rovers at Tallaght was mooted in 1996.

Construction started on Tallaght Stadium in 2008. Set near the terminus of the light rail line from town (and direct from St Pat’s, prompting the term ‘LUAS derby’), the new arena witnessed Cristiano Ronaldo’s debut for Real Madrid in a friendly that July.

A year later, Manchester United strode out against a League of Ireland XI before a newly opened and packed Aviva.

The main home games for Ireland’s successful qualification campaign for Euro 2016 attracted 50,000 crowds, as the domestic league improved. Summer football, Friday night games, the supporter-focused FanPoweredFootball campaign and promotion by league sponsors Airtricity (‘Real Football, Real Fans’) have all helped to raise gates.

Real fans you’ll find at Bray, way down the coast on the DART rail line. Strictly in County Wicklow, bordering on Dublin an easy hop away, the venerable Carlisle Grounds is home of former FAI Cup winners Bray Wanderers. Set close to the sea and a short stroll from the DART station, it has been a sports venue since 1862.

Bearings

Dublin Airport is 10km (six miles) north of the city. Dublin Bus Airlink 747 leaves every 10-15min for Heuston rail station (off-peak journey time 50min) via the main bus station, BusÁras (off-peak journey time 30min) near Connolly rail station. Allow more journey time in rush hour, especially when coming from town.

Tickets are €6 single/€10 return. The multi-transport Leap Card (€5 plus €5 credit) is valid but offers no savings on the airport bus. It does offer reductions on all other Dublin buses, the LUAS light-rail line and DART & commuter rail lines. On the bus, tell the driver your destination for him to deduct fare once you touch into the ticket machine. Journeys over 13 stages are a flat €2.60. On the LUAS and Dublin short-hop DART & commuter rail zone (including Blackrock and Bray), touch in and touch off as you board and alight.

For the rest of the year, there is plenty of choice within walking distance of the national arena and its DART station an easy hop to and from the city centre. Lansdowne Road lodgings such as Ariel House and Butlers Town House offer old-school hospitality in lovely historic properties.

In the new Docklands development, still walking distance from the Aviva, The Marker is the suitably upscale, contemporary hotel, with spa and cool bar, where FC Barcelona stayed before the pre-season game with Celtic in July 2016.

Note that rooms are booked early around the Aviva Stadium and the city centre for rugby weekends in February and March.

Visit Dublin has a database of hotels at www.visitdublin.com/dublin-city-hotels.

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Just over the river Dodder from the stadium, the family-run Sandymount is another reliable and convenient choice.

Nearer to town but still only a stroll from the Aviva, the Landsdowne Hotel garners loyal repeat custom thanks to the Quinn family welcome. Its Den Bar tends towards the oval ball – note the largest collection of rugby ties in the world.

Beside the aircoach bus stop south of town, a 15-minute walk from Landsdowne Road, the landmark, 502-room Clayton Hotel Burlington Road was completely refurbished in 2014.

In the same family as the Ballsbridge Hotel, the maldron group runs a number of mid- and upper-range hotels at key locations in downtown Dublin, as well as five minutes’ walk from Tallaght Stadium, where you’ll also find the Glashaus, all sleek and contemporary but affordable.

For an authentic Dublin pub experience combined with an affordable, comfortable room, O’Donoghue’s is perfect. The greatest names in Irish music have all played in the illustrious bar below.

On the other side of the street is the most famous hotel in town, The Shelbourne where the Free State constitution was drafted in 1922. Here you can book a genealogist, a therapeutic spa or table at The Saddle Room restaurant. Its Horseshoe Bar is equally renowned.

If you’d rather stay an easy stagger from the many pubs of Temple Bar, then the Blooms Hotel is a handy mid-range choice while the Temple Bar Hotel, itself combines contemporary comfort with live music in its bar every night of the week. Nearby, the refurbished Fleet Street Hotel is also handy for a bar-hop.

Beer

Pubs are why people come to Dublin – which is why the Temple Bar area on the south bank of the Liffey is mobbed every night. For TV football, the party-centric Trinity Bar has a huge screen while O’Neills in nearby Suffolk Street is a more traditional bet.

In the heart of Temple Bar, the Auld Dubliner always gets mobbed on big-match weekends while the Bad Ass Temple Bar is now more pub-like than when Sinéad O’Connor worked here back in the day.

Back on the south side, further down towards St Stephen’s Green, Sinnotts is mobbed on big-match nights, with 14 large screens. Between Pearse station and Merrion Square, The Square Ball on Hogan Place is a relative newbie, a trendy spot that goes big on rarer beers while showing TV sports and providing shelfloads of board games.

North of the river, you’ll find a more international style of sports bar, such as the antipodean Woolshed, with three vast screens and 15 smaller plasma ones, and The Living Room, which shows almost every league known to man and whose outdoor screen is claimed to be Europe’s largest. The 3 Spirits, Dublin’s first Brazilian bar, is lined with screens for soccer watching – the food can be hit and miss, but that’s not why you’re there.

A fairly recent addition to the sport pub scene, up in Phibsborough, The Back Page comprises a chatty front bar, a larger back one featuring a wall-length mural dedicated to Italia ‘90, an alcove casually scattered with stacks of cult soccer publications (Austrian Ballester, anyone?) and an astroturf-decked garden and picnic area. Screens abound.  

IRELAND 2017 Dublin

www.liberoguide.com/dublin
Bohemians

Ireland’s oldest league club still in continuous existence, **Bohemians** are based at equally venerable Dalymount Park in Phibsborough.

Eternal rivals of Shamrock Rovers, The Bohs are all about longevity and tradition. Owned by its members since being founded at Phoenix Park in 1890, the club played its first game at Dalymount in 1901, against long-term neighbours Shelbourne.

Last winning the title in 2009, Bohemians secured their future when Dublin City Council purchased Dalymount and announced a €20 million phased rebuild.

Ireland’s national football stadium for more than half a century, Dalymount is in dire need of a rebuild. This is exactly what it will be getting, with a realigned plastic pitch, a new main stand and seating behind each goal.

With planning still ongoing – the adjoining faceless Phibsborough shopping centre also needs addressing – The Bohs play at what was a 40,000-capacity stadium. Here Brady and Giles made their Ireland debuts and Beckenbauer, Gullit and Paolo Rossi played international matches.

Today’s capacity is around 4,000 and only the newest, main Jodi Stand is in full use, roofed and all-seated. Away fans in small numbers will be accommodated here – for derby games with Dublin clubs, the open seating in the Des Kelly Carpets Stand, aka the Shed End, is allocated.

The old-school feel is accentuated by the floodlights, installed at Highbury in 1951 and shipped to Dublin a decade later.

**Transport**

Several buses run to Phibsborough from the city centre. **No.4** (direction Harris-town) and **No.9** (direction Charlestown) leave from diagonally opposite the Savoy Cinema on O’Connell Street and take 10-15min to reach Phibsborough Shopping Centre. The **No.46A** stops 50 yards further up O’Connell Street at Cathal Brugha Street and continues to St Peter’s Church, closer to Dalymount’s main entrance, accessed down a narrow alleyway from the North Circular Road.

These services run every 15-20min, the **No.4** hourly Sun.

**Tickets**

Tickets are available online at club site bohemianfc.com for all home games.

Pay-on-the-night admission is at the main entrance through the alleyway off the North Circular Road, near St Peter’s Church.

Prices are set at €15, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for under-12s.

**Bars**

Traditional pubs have been in place at Doyle’s Corner by Dalymount Park for over a century. **The Bohemian** [66 Phibsborough Road] was built for owner John Doyle in 1907. Facing it at No.160, **John Doyle’s** is similar in style and heritage and has TV football.

Beside Doyle’s at No.159, **The Hut** dates back to 1852 and does honest pub food of beef stew, roast lamb and the like.

On match nights, three bars operate under the main Jodi Stand. With its three large-screen TVs, jukebox and pool table, the **Members’ Bar** is open to all. It also operates Friday and Saturday nights, and Sunday lunchtimes. For home fans and neutrals, the **Phoenix Bar** puts on post-match live acts and DJs. Renovated in 2017, the **Jackie Jameson Bar** is a more comfortable spot for Bohs fans.
Bray Wanderers

Could there be a more enchanting introduction to Irish football than Bray? A glide down the coast from Dublin on the DART rail line, it sits a goal-kick from the County Dublin-Wicklow border, fronted by a row of beachside pubs and restaurants, facing the Irish Sea.

Right by Bray (Daly) DART station, the Carlisle Grounds has hosted sport since 1862, the wonderfully named Bray Unknowns the main football club here in the early 1900s. Formed in 1922, local rivals Bray Wanderers claimed Leinster League honours in the 1950s before the two clubs merged in 1973. Twelve years later, Wanderers joined the League of Ireland.

FAI Cup wins in the 1990s took The Seagulls to Trabzon and Zürich but perhaps a greater achievement has been maintaining top-flight status since 2005. In 2015, amid a quite absurd managerial merry-go-round and fan protests, Wanderers still finished above the relegation zone.

Home supporters otherwise gather in the covered seated stand on the Seymour Road town side of the ground. Opposite, away fans on the uncovered Railway Side are close to the DART station. Banking behind each goal provides a picturesque backdrop rather than spectator accommodation. Officially, capacity is 7,000 but in practice only the 3,000-plus seats will be in use.

Transport

Bray (Daly) is 45min from Dublin’s main train terminal of Connolly, via Tara Street and Pearse stations, on the DART line. Trains run every 15min. The last service back to town is currently 11.20pm. From Bray (Daly) station, head right and the ground is straight ahead.

Tickets

Tickets are available online (bray-wanderersfc.ie/tickets-info) for up to three home games in advance. General admission is otherwise pay-on-the-night, €15, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for accompanied children under 12.

Shop

On match nights, the club shop on the railway side of the Quinsborough Road end sells Seagulls badges, pennants, scarves and T-shirts, plus green-and-white home and away shirts, shorts and tracksuits.

Bars

Bray’s pre-match bars and restaurants bask in a seafront location that makes a trip down to the Carlisle Grounds such a worthwhile venture.

Pick of the bunch, The Porterhouse sits the other side of the Sea Life centre, offering beers from its own brew-pub empire that started here shortly after Wanderers gained promotion to the League of Ireland. Now with sister operations across Dublin, London and New York, this original branch remains a favourite, with live bands and TV sport.

Back towards Dublin, the Harbour Bar dates back to 1872 and has been patronised by celebrities filming at Bray’s Ardmore Studios. Bar, lounge and snug, with cozy spaces upstairs, it’s a multi-room operation with regular live music.

Nearer to the ground, the Hibernia Inn offers sea-facing seating in summer while, alongside, the Ocean Bar & Grill is more a spot for a sit-down meal, beer-battered cod, say.

If it’s just fish and chips you’re after, then Capri by the station sources its cod from local suppliers daily – there’s plenty of room to sit down and devour.
St Patrick’s Athletic

The pride of Inchicore, west Dublin, St Patrick’s Athletic won the league at their first attempt in 1952 and have never been relegated since.

Often capable of stellar performances in Europe – a 0-0 draw at Celtic in 1998 stands out, plus more recent wins over teams from Sweden, Russia and Bosnia & Herzegovina – St Pat’s are also the last side from Dublin to lift the Irish title.

Behind the 2013 win and other notable achievements at Richmond Park, both as a player and manager, Liam Buckley serves as an exemplary figurehead at this well run, community club with a solid fan base.

St Pat’s are suitable for staging European fixtures since supporters clubbed together to fund the installation of the Patrons’ Stand in 2013 – a block of open seats behind the Inchicore End goal – Richmond Park has a capacity of 5,340. More than half of that is seating, 1,800 in the Main Stand nearest to Emmet Road.

One half is allocated to visiting supporters, nearest the Shed End, in block A. If more space is required, say for the LUAS derby with Shamrock Rovers on the same light-rail line, away fans are placed behind the ground opposite, tucked in behind terraced housing.

Transport

The quickest way to Richmond Park is to take the LUAS red line to Goldenbridge (25min from Busáras by Dublin bus station, 10min from Heuston station). Walk over the canal, taking Connolly Avenue to the end. It veers left to meet Emmet Road, with the ground opposite, tucked in behind terraced housing.

Tickets

Tickets are sold during the week of the game from the office at 125 Emmet Road near the Richmond House pub, and on match night itself. It’s €15 for adults, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for accompanied under-12s. No children are allowed in otherwise.

Shop

An outlet for St Pat’s merchandise opens by the main stand on match nights, selling home and away tops, scarves, hats and tracksuits, plus DVDs of recent triumphs.

Bars

Three key pubs line Emmet Road. Nearest the ground, venerable Richmond House/McDowell’s was taken over by the club in 2006 and flies the flags of St Pat’s outside. Inside, it’s pretty standard, with surprisingly few red-and-white souvenirs or paraphernalia.

On the same side of the street at No.97, Coffey’s has the space to contain a pool table, DJ decks at the back, old 45s on one wall and Celtic, United and Villa shirts on another – Paul McGrath is still a hero around Inchicore.

Opposite, arguably the best choice pre- and post-match is Tom Tavey’s at No.118. More bar than traditional pub, it features a large mural signalling St Pat’s affection and, somewhat bizarrely, a framed programme and match ticket from the 1963 FA Cup Final. Three Irish internationals – Dunne, Cantwell and Giles – played for Manchester United that day although there’s no story behind the display, discovered when clearing out some old junk.

Tom Tavey’s

Richmond Park

IRELAND 2017 St Patrick’s Athletic

www.liberoguide.com/st-patrick’s-athletic
Shamrock Rovers

Shamrock Rovers are Ireland’s most titled team. Rescued from dissolution by their fans who now own the club, The Hoops returned to their spiritual home of south Dublin, moved into the new-build Tallaght Stadium and won back-to-back Irish titles.

Rovers have since been overshadowed by Dundalk, who recently bettered the Dublin club’s Europa League group-stage achievement of 2011.

Average gates, too, have dipped below Dundalk’s. Rovers now look to former midfielder, 32-year-old Stephen Bradley, as the manager to bring the title and crowds back to south Dublin.

Transport

Tallaght is at the end of one branch of the LUAS red line, directly linked to Heuston Station (30min journey time) and the bus station, Busáras (45min).

Make sure the train is going to Tallaght and not Saggart, the other branch – the line divides at Belgard shortly before. From Connolly station, it’s a 2min walk round the corner to Busáras.

Trains run every 5-15min until midnight, 11pm on Sun & bank holidays.

From the Tallaght stop, head towards The Square shopping centre – the stadium is straight ahead.

Tickets

The ticket office is near the club shop on Kiltipper Road, beside the car park.

On a home-match week, it opens noon-4pm. The club also distributes online (www.shamrockrovers.ie/tickets/2017-match-tickets) on a match-by-match basis.

There’s pay-on-the-night general admission from a kiosk also behind the main stand at €15. Seniors and students are charged €10, under-14s €5.

Shops

The Shamrock Rovers Megastore (Mon-Sat noon-4pm) behind the main stand carries home shirts, away shirts, even third shirts, plus hooded tops, scarves and hats. On match nights, another outlet sets up at the car park end of the stadium.

Bars

Tallaght is a new-town suburb, all hotels and shopping centres – you won’t find the kind of traditional pub that you would around Dalymount or St Pat’s.

The main pre-match haunt is the bar at the Maldron Hotel, Stir, accessed through the restaurant of the same name, which has had the good grace to create a Rovers area in one corner. Team line-ups from the 1940s and 1950s, pennants from games with Real Madrid and Hibernian, and a photo of Alex Del Piero in a hooped shirt are all on display.

Retail strips between the LUAS stop and the stadium contain chain outlets. On Cookstown Way, the family-run Blazin’ Grill is the nearest to the ground, with a ‘Shamrockers Gather Here’ sticker and the floodlights in view. Steaks and seafood are its stock-in-trade. Nearby, the more bar-like Aussie Outback is a BBQ spot serving monumental burgers and standard draught lagers. Spicy Mexican eaterie Perios Grill has seats outside in summer.

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The council-owned Tallaght consists of two stands, East and West along each sideline. Behind the goals, temporary seating can be installed for any showcase European fixture. Capacity is otherwise an all-seated 6,000.

Atmosphere is provided by the most raucous home fans in the East Stand. Away fans are allocated one side of the main West Stand, sections H-J on the corner of Kiltipper Road and the dual carriageway, opposite the Maldron Hotel.

Transport

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Ballybofey
Few football fans outside Ireland know where Ballybofey is – or why they might have to find it. Older Everton, Derby and Aberdeen supporters, though, will remember the name of Finn Harps, generous opposition on random European adventures in the 1970s.

The Harps are based in Ballybofey but, as their badge suggests, represent County Donegal as a whole. Way up in Ireland’s top left-hand corner, Ballybofey rivals Derry in the North-West Derby, one of the most colourful in Irish football. Matters came to a head at a 2003 relegation play-off. Derry had been in the top tier since 1987 – Finn Harps were looking to rejoin the elite. An absurdly late equaliser from Kevin McHugh, later to join Derry, gave rise to his infamous greyhound impression in celebration, mocking the opposition. As inflatable sheep floated over Derry’s Brandywell, a hint at Harps’ fans rural pastimes, The Candystripes maintained Premier Division status with an extra-time winner.

Back hosting top-flight football since 2015, Ballybofey – one Main Street, one bus stop but no train station – is, in fact, two towns in one. The river that divides Ballybofey from neighbouring Stranorlar gives its name to Finn Harps. The capacity at dilapidated Finn Park is roughly equivalent to the population of the town it serves.

A new stadium is slowly being built over the Finn in Stranorlar but it’s now ten years since planning permission was granted.

Bearings
Bus Éireann runs services to Ballybofey from Sligo (every 2hrs, 90min journey time, €12 single) and Derry (hourly, 1hr journey time). Sligo has good connections with Dublin, with hourly buses (4hr journey time) and regular trains (3hr journey time) but there’s no way of getting back to the capital via Sligo from Ballybofey after an evening game. Via Letterkenny, you can leave Ballybofey at 10.30pm and reach Dublin at 5am but it means a 3hr stopover. All bus connections between Dublin and Ballybofey (4-5hr journey time, €15) require one change, at Letterkenny, Lifford or Donegal Abbey Hotel.

Ballybofey bus stop is by McElhiney’s store/Butt Hall Centre on Main Street. There’s a taxi office (087 262 0446) near the Villa Rose Hotel.

Bed
Go Visit Donegal (govisitdonegal.com) has a database of accommodation across the county.

Ballybofey has two high-standard hotels. By the Finn, Jackson’s is a four-star with a heated indoor pool, sauna and gym, plus the Garden Restaurant. Nearby, the four-star Villa Rose also has its own spa and restaurant, Fara’s.

Further along Main Street, Rockvale House offers wallet-friendly B&B digs. All six rooms are en-suite.

Beer
Anyone’s first port of call should be Barrett’s, opposite the Villa Rose, an honest haunt for hard-drinking sports fans.

Further down Main Street, Harleys cheers Bar likes a good party and puts on DJs. Opposite Alexander’s store, J McLaughlin’s is a regular local, handy for a quick jar.

Behind its bright tangerine exterior, Bonner’s Corner Bar shows live sport and offers micro-brewed beers from independent Bog Hopper from Muff.

Nearby on Glenfin Street itself, McKelvey’s is another live-match spot, with DJs on Saturday nights.
**Finn Harps**

A long-lost romantic name on the European football scene, fan-owned Finn Harps are from Ballybofey, with a supporter base across County Donegal.

Though it’s been a while since the likes of Derby and Everton notched up double-digit aggregate scores against them, The Harps are at least back in the top flight. In 2015, dramatic late winning goals, first against UCD, then after extra-time against Limerick, gained the Donegal side a first promotion in eight years.

The setting for these victories was run-down Finn Park, the club’s home since before the glory days. It is hoped that in another eight years, any future triumphs will take place at the new stadium being built over the river Finn at Stranorlar, Ballybofey’s adjoining town that houses the local schools and churches.

Back in Ballybofey, Finn Park is a short walk from Main Street, where the buses come in. The ground is effectively one main stand, partly filled with seating, allocated to all spectators except in cases such as the derby with Derry or any play-off game. Around the main stand are open sides – if segregation is required, then away fans stand in the uncovered River End and/or Gantry Side opposite the main stand. Some home fans still like to occupy the narrow section of open terracing at the Town End, backed by residential housing.

**Transport**

Buses from Letterkenny, Donegal, Sligo and Derry pull in at McElhinneys store/Butt Hall Centre on Main Street. Head for the Villa Rose Hotel then turn next left down Navenny Street. The ground is about 200 yards on the left.

**Tickets**

The club has a simple policy of pay-on-the-night from the gates on both Navenny Street and Chestnut Road. It’s €12 in, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for secondary pupils and €3 for under-12s. If you’d like a seat, then it’s an extra €3 once you’re inside.

**Shop**

A modest selection of blue-and-white souvenirs is available from the portakabin outlet near the home Town End on match nights.

**Bars**

With Finn Park so close to Main Street, and Ballybofey so compact, any of the half-dozen pubs and bars in town is a handy stroll pre- and post-match.

The two nearest Finn Park, on Navenny Street itself, are also the most convivial choices. The first one you come to, Heeney’s U Drop Inn, has been family-run for the best part of 60 years. Today Michael runs a tidy but eminently friendly ship, part bar, part restaurant, with an extensive menu featuring chargrilled burgers and steaks, and framed photos from Finn Harps history around the large flat-screen TV.

Further down, right by the ground, the ever popular Barca Bar has been serving Harps and away fans for years, a lively, honest drinking haunt with occasional live acts and a superfriendly staff.

A visit to Finn Park is not complete without sampling its famous soup, dispensed from beside the clubhouse by the main stand. There’s more hot food available at the Gantry Side – handy for away fans exposed to the elements.
Cork

Ireland's second city of Cork has long been successful at national level in hurling and Gaelic football but its soccer history is one of short-lived clubs wresting occasional silverware from the clutches of Dublin.

There has been a team from Cork in the League of Ireland almost every season since its inauguration in the early 1920s. But this has involved eight clubs in all, including Cork City, formed in 1984, Irish champions in 1993 and 2005, and runners-up in 2016.

City have embraced professionalism, summer football and all-seated spectatorship. It hasn't always been smooth, with complex shenanigans needed to extricate the club from financial disaster in 2010, but the Leesiders have been exemplary representatives of Irish football in Europe. Bayern Munich, IFK Gothenburg, CSKA Kyiv have all left Cork without a win.

The hourly train from Dublin Heuston takes 2hr 30-45min, cheapest online single €20. The last one back is at 8.20pm – and it's not direct. There's a bus every 2hrs (journey time 3hr 45min, cheapest online single €13) – the last one back is 6pm.

Cork Taxi (+353 21 427 22 22) is a reliable local firm.

Bed

Cork's hotels are clustered near the river, in the city centre. The Gresham Metropole is a cut above, a four-star with access to a pool, sauna and gym. Just on the other side of MacCurtain Street, the Hotel Isaacs Cork is a handy mid-range option with equal (if paid) access to a health centre. Nearby, the Brú is a contemporary hostel with private rooms as well as dorms, a hopping little bar that shows big-screen sports and live music most nights.

With views over another side of the Lee, the Imperial Hotel combines centuries of tradition with a quality spa and upscale dining.

Convenient for the bus station, Jurys Inn is reliably upper mid-range.

Beer

With plenty of tourists and students, Cork is awash with pubs and bars showing sports. Almost all, though, will prioritise a Gaelic football game over English Premier League action – with the welcome exception of SoHo, a contemporary spot with a panoramic rooftop deck and terrace overlooking the main drag of Grand Parade. SoHo also sells tickets for Cork City games.

Nearby Costigan's has a covered smoking area with a TV showing live games – plus plenty of other screens.

Also traditional, Jim Cashman's is located on the edge of Cork's Huguenot Quarter, close to a selection of decent restaurants.

On the north side of town, convenient for the train station, The Shelbourne is a handy option with all-day TV sport and food.

Busy in term-time, the student-friendly Washington Inn also brings in punters with its HD big-screen TV sports action.
Cork City

Twice league champions, runners-up from 2014 to 2016, Cork City are one of the biggest clubs in Ireland in terms of support, professional status and infrastructure.

In 2015, fan-owned Cork attracted the highest average league gate, boosted by a near 7,000 crowd for the visit of Dundalk, their nearest provincial rivals in terms of attendances and recent silverware.

In 2016, Cork gained revenge, former Dundalk striker Seán Maguire scoring the winner to lift the FAI Cup for the Leesiders.

All-seated and all-covered, Turners Cross is the most impressive soccer stadium in Ireland outside Dublin. A sports ground since the 1890s, 'The Cross' was home to Cork Celtic until the late 1970s before Cork City took it over in 1986.

Not considered part of the ambitious club’s future, it was abandoned for unloved Bishopstown in 1993. By 1996, all but bankrupt, City returned and within a decade began to develop it. Now all-seated, Turners Cross comprises four stands: Donie Forde houses the press and family sections, opposite the Derrynane Road Stand, where visiting fans are allocated two sections nearest the St Anne’s End.

Curragh Road, built in 2007 on The Shed terrace, remains home to the Rebel Army. Capacity is 6,900.

Transport

Turners Cross is too far to walk from either Kent rail or Parnell Place bus stations. Bus Nos.226 and 226A that run between the two every 30min call at Evergreen Road, reasonably close to Turners Cross stadium.

From the city centre, and stopping closer, the No.203 runs every 15-30min to Curragh Road (Turners Cross), journey time 15min. Buses leave from St Patrick’s Street, near the Father Mathew statue, by Marks & Spencer.

Tickets

Advance tickets are available at the club shop in the Douglas Village Shopping Centre on the outskirts of town, as well as from the SoHo bar/restaurant on Grand Parade and The Beer Garden pub at Turners Cross.

Tickets are also distributed online through Ticketmaster (www.ticketmaster.ie).

On the day, ticket huts open at the main entrance on the Curragh Road. Visiting supporters have a separate outlet by the St Anne’s Park entrance.

There’s an across-the-board pricing system of €15, €10 for under-18s, €5 for under-13s and seniors.

Shops

Souvenirs are sold at the club shop in the Douglas Village Shopping Centre. There’s also a match-night outlet at the Curragh Road end of the ground.

Bars

There’s a handful of pubs along Evergreen Road a reasonably short stroll to the ground.

The party-centric Evergreen Bar at No.35 shows TV football while nearer the ground, the Mountain Bar is a traditional spot with horse racing its focus.

Closer still at No.10, The Beer Garden has the best selection of beers, decent, good-value food and a pool table. It’s also an outlet for match tickets.

Long closed, the Turners Cross Tavern has been sold and should be under new ownership soon.

Right by the ground, between the main Donie Forde Stand and home end on the Curragh Road, the Horseshoe Inn is invariably packed on match nights.

liberoguide.com 15
**Derry/Buncrana**

Despite overwhelming difficulties, football has survived, even thrived, in **Derry**, second city of Northern Ireland. After a gap of 13 long years out of the senior game, **Derry City** have been competing with teams from south of the border in the **League of Ireland** since 1985.

For **2017**, the Candy Stripes are based further north of the border, way up into County Donegal in the Republic. **Buncrana** in Inishowen hosts Derry’s home games at **Maginn Park** while City’s **Brandywell Stadium** undergoes a £7 million redevelopment. The arrangement may extend for the year.

The situation depends on progress at the club’s home on Lone Moor Road, close to landmarks such as the Free Derry Corner and the Bloody Sunday Monument.

Football has been played here since 1900. Derry City moved in shortly after their foundation in 1928.

It is not yet clear where Derry will be hosting Europa League fixtures in summer.

**Bearings**

**Buncrana** is 24km (14.5 miles) north-west of Derry via the A2/R239, a drive of 40min.

**City Cabs Derry** (+44 28 7126 4466) quotes £16 for the journey. For a Buncrana cab, **West End Taxis** (074 936 2198) is based near the ground.

**John McGinlay** runs two buses every day to **Buncrana Supervalu store** on Cockhill Road from **Dublin Hugh Lane Gallery/Parnell Square North** via **Dublin Airport and Derry Water Street**, overall journey time 4.5hrs. The last one back is at 4.30pm. A single ticket is €20, return €30, just turn up and pay.

**McGonagle** runs the No.956 service from **Derry Buscentre** in Foyle Street to **St Mary’s Road** in Buncrana, close Maginn Park, hourly up to 6.10pm, two buses on Sundays. **Ulsterbus** (No.181) has two services a day, Mon-Fri, the last one at 5.40pm.

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**For Dublin-Derry, Bus Éireann** (No.33)/**Ulsterbus** (No.U274) have 5-6 busses a day, journey time 4hrs. There’s a midnight service back from the Ulsterbus depot, Foyle Street.

On the other side of the mall, the **Bentley** is a six-bar complex, one that shows matches. **The Diamond** is one of two Wetherspoons in town.

For an old-school community pub, **The Derby** on Great James Street is a revered spot with TV football.

Across the Foyle, near the train station, the **Glen Bar** (28 Dungiven Road) has become a real football haunt with two big screens and a full schedule.

**Bed**

**Go Visit Donegal** (govisitdonegal.com) has hotel information for Buncrana.

In Buncrana, upscale **B&B St Columb’s House** is closest to Maginn Park. Nearby **Lake of Shadows** is a lovely mid-range choice with its own bar and restaurant.

In Derry, the four-star **Maldron** is close to the bus station, with 90 rooms, a gym and sauna. Its **Lyric** bar shows TV football. Also nearby is superior **B&B Townhouse No.8**.

Waterfront four-star **City Hotel Derry**, with a pool and gym, offers attractive weekend breaks.

**Saddler’s House** on Great James Street is convenient, comfortable and affordable. Breakfast is a feast.

**Beer**

For bars near Maginn Park, see **Derry City**.

In Derry, pubs surround the Richmond Centre mall. Football is screened in one of the three bars that comprise the historic **River Inn**, revamped in 2016.

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Derry City

Derry City are a club apart. The Candy Stripes of the Brandywell have been crowned champions on both sides of the border, their acceptance into the League of Ireland in 1985 coming 20 years after winning the title in the North.

Currently the supporter-owned club is having to skip over the border again, playing home matches at Maginn Park in Buncrana, 15 miles north-west of Derry, while the Brandywell is treated to significant redevelopment.

Meanwhile, European football beckons. League of Ireland titles, in 1989 and 1997, FAI Cups and high-place finishes have already brought Benfica, Gothenburg and Paris Saint-Germain to Derry. Nobody is yet sure where home ties in the 2017-18 Europa League will take place.

As for domestic fixtures, it’s looking like lakeside Buncrana for all the 2017 season. Capacity at Maginn Park is 2,500. It’s not yet clear what the arrangements will be for away supporters – or, with no public transport provided, for home fans either.

**Transport**

At press-time, Derry City confirmed that there were no special transport arrangements in place for the 24km trek to – and, more to the point – from Buncrana. Details of bus services during the day from Dublin and Derry are given in the Derry/Buncrana section, as well as taxi numbers.

Buses drop off at St Mary’s Road – you need parallel Lower Main Street parallel to it, turning right at the kebab shop past the Bank of Ireland into Maginn Avenue. The main entrance to the ground is first left after 200 metres, the street that becomes Cluain Mhuire.

At present, the only options back after an evening game for those without a car are to stay in Buncrana (hotel recommendations in the Derry/Buncrana section), cadge a lift or get a taxi.

**Tickets**

Advance sales will still be available online through ticketmaster [www.ticketmaster.ie/Derry-City-tickets/artist/36067].

The 2016 prices for tickets at the Brandywell were £12 for a seat and £10 to stand, seniors and students paying £9/£8, under-14s £5/£2.

Pay-on-the-night will still continue in 2017.

**Shop**

Merchandise should still be available on match nights at Maginn Park and through the club website [derrycity.fc.net]. Among the replica shirts and pin badges, you’ll find a copy of Gary Ferry’s book ‘30 Years of Derry City’ and a DVD of the club’s European adventure in 2006.

**Bars**

Two pubs stand on the Maginn Avenue side of Main Street, either side of the turning. The Atlantic Bar dates back to 1792 and attracts a louder, party-minded crowd, while the low-roofed orange-fronted Cottage Bar (13 Lower Main Street) has a friendlier local atmosphere, with an older clientele.

Better yet, across the street in bright, Big-Bird yellow, Roddens (4 Upper Main Street) is a funky little place with regular live music.

Back in Derry, football-focused bars around the Brandywell should still open for business through 2017. These include the Celtic Bar where Elmwood Street meets Stanleys Walk, Mary B’s at 42 Elmwood Terrace and the Brandywell Bar on Brandywell Road. The Bluebell Bar at 130 Lecky Road is another Candy Stripe haunt.

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Drogheda

Representing one of Ireland’s most historic towns, Drogheda United are a fairly modern construct. Halfway between Dublin and the border with the North, Drogheda didn’t take to football as quickly as local rival and fellow railway hub Dundalk.

Running out in claret and blue, Drogheda United were created from a merger in 1975. On their badge, the star and crescent are a heraldic reference to King John, who granted Drogheda its charter in the late 1100s. The colours and emblem have allowed the fan-owned club – nicknamed The Drogs – to twin with Turkish side Trabzonspor.

A quick, easy and convivial hop from Dublin, Drogheda returned to the top-tier fold in 2016, an achievement welcomed by many a travelling fan.

Bears
Drogheda MacBride is a main stop on the Dublin-Belfast line and trains from Connolly (40min-1hr, fast service €17 single) are regular. The last one back is 10.05pm – United Park, way north of MacBride, is at least a 30min walk.

The bus from Dublin Talbot Street (No.100X 1hr journey time, No.101 1hr 20min) is more frequent and cheaper (€6.65 single). The last one back is 9.30pm but there’s a night service at 1.45am. Drogheda bus station is nearer the river and 10min closer to the ground. Inter-town buses run between the bus station and the hospital by the ground, last one back at 11pm.

Tony’s Taxis (freephone 1800 606 070) is long-established and centrally located on Stockwell Lane.

Bed
Tourist resource drogheda.ie has details of local accommodation.

The nearest lodging to United Park is Windsor Lodge, a neat, well run guesthouse on North Road. It’s past the stadium heading out of town, so it’s convenient for the ground but not for pubs and stations.

Halfway to town, Scholar’s Townhouse Hotel on King Street is as old-school as its 1867 construction suggests – think afternoon teas and fine dining.

In town, the Westcourt on West Street is also spiffy but contemporary, with boutique rooms, the West29 RestoLounge and cocktail spot Barroco, where TV football is shown.

Its competitor, the waterside d hotel in the Scotch Hall centre, is similarly four-star and gastro-focused, with soccer screened at in-house pub Wm Cairnes.

Nearby, the Spoon & Stars is a handy budget choice, a hostel/guesthouse mix run by a friendly couple.

Beer
Bars abound. In a little hub on Cord Road, behind North Quay, Sarsfields is a great place to start, with big-screen sports, craft brews and a beer garden. McHugh’s opposite is a more rough-and-ready live venue.

On the same stretch, The Admirals on Shop Street is a traditional spot for football watching. Clarke’s on Peter Street dates to 1900 and feels reassuringly lived-in.

Down by the river, Cagney’s on Dyer Street makes a convincing case for best bar in town, lively, well run and with big-screen soccer. Offering waterside views, nearby Brú is more bistro, with a cocktail bar upstairs.

On Dublin Road, Barlow’s Railway Tavern is handy for TV football, affordable drinks, pool and, of course, the train station.

Welcome to Drogheda

www.liberoguide.com/drogheda
Drogheda United

Irish champions in 2007, Drogheda United failed to kick on after falling foul of the Revenue Commissioners, going part-time and nearly going out of business. They also dropped plans for a new stadium.

United Park, home of the club’s namesake non-league predecessors formed back in 1919, remains cramped and outdated, and a long trek from Drogheda’s bus and train stations on the south side of the Boyne.

It sprang to life last autumn when Drogheda held on to overcome Cobh Ramblers and Wexford in tight promotion play-off games for a return to the Premier in 2016.

Supporter-owned Drogheda are always capable of springing a surprise – such as the 2012 League of Ireland Cup victory at Shamrock Rovers and runners-up spot in the league the same year.

Unable to host the subsequent European tie at United Park, Drogheda had to switch the home leg to the Tallaght Stadium in south Dublin. A battling 0-0 draw with Malmö was commendable – but United Park is in need of investment.

The main stand, providing covered seating for home fans, occupies the middle third of the Windmill Road side nearest the halfway line. To one side is a long clubhouse, to the other, covered standing for away supporters nearest the north goal by Cross Lane. Opposite on the west side is a mix of covered and open seating and standing. In theory, the ground should hold 5,000 – in its current configuration and condition, it’s 2,000 with 1,500 seats.

Transport

United Park is a 35min walk from Drogheda train station, 25min from the bus station, 20min from town centre. The nearest bus stop is Drogheda Hospital, 5-8min journey time from the bus station. Buses include the No.182 to Monaghan (Mon-Sat hourly, Sun every 2hrs, last one back 7.30pm) and the No.190 to Trim (hourly, last one back 11pm, 10pm on Sun). The No.100 runs hourly day-time, the No.189 every 2hrs.

A taxi from the town-centre rank on Peter Street should cost €6.

Tickets

Admission on the night is €15 on the Windmill Road side, €12 for seniors and students, €10 for under-14s. Through the turnstiles to the West Stand on Cross Lane, it’s €12, €10 and €5.

There are no advance or online sales.

Shop

A modest selection of merchandise should be available on a match night.

Bars

If you’re walking up from the town centre, at the junction of North Road and Windmill Road, Mother Hughes is a handy pitstop. Drogs fans gather around its pool table and fire in winter – there’s a beer garden in summer. TV sport is a major focus.

The closest pub to the ground, also handier if you’re coming by bus, is The Windmill House, by the stadium car park behind the main stand. In place for a century or more, it has long served both United Park and Lourdes Hospital. On match nights, home and away fans gather to sink pints of Carlsberg, watch sport and take advantage of the beer garden in summer.

There’s no bar within the ground itself. 🔊
Dundalk
Halfway between Dublin and Belfast, Dundalk is Ireland’s soccer town. While the rest of the Republic goes in for Gaelic football, hurling and rugby, Dundalk displays the lilywhite shirts of its local soccer team across town. Barber shops, grocery stores and pubs bear the three mythical martlets of current Irish champions Dundalk FC.

The Lilywhites were the first to break the capital’s monopoly on the domestic game, and are now Ireland’s most titled club outside Dublin.

Dundalk’s Oriel Park is considered the Home of Football. This venerable ground once hosted Celtic, Spurs and Liverpool in major European fixtures. With Dundalk now forging ahead in Europe further than any Irish team before them, more and more foreign visitors will be taking the convivial train journey up the coast from Dublin Connolly station.

Bearings
From Dublin airport, an hourly Bus Éireann service takes 1hr 15min to reach Dundalk’s Long Walk station (online €9 single/€13 return), right by central Market Square.

The train from Dublin Connolly runs every 1-2hrs, journey time 1hr, online single €20, online return €30. Dundalk (Clarke) station is a short walk from Oriel Park – Long Walk bus terminus is around 15min.

Dundalk town centre is compact. If you need a taxi, call Sevens on 042 93 77777.

Bed
Dundalk Tourist Office has details of local hotels and B&Bs at louthholidays.com.

Close to Oriel Park, across Carrickmacross Road, the Innisfree Guest House offers comfortable rooms in an Edwardian townhouse.

On the town centre side of the train station, Glen Gat House is another welcoming and affordable lodging while round the corner, the Lismar is a B&B with serviced apartments.

The main hotel in the town centre is the old-school Imperial, recently put up for sale at €1 million-plus but currently still accepting guests in its 50 rooms and Parkes sports bar downstairs. If you’re barhopping along Park Street, you couldn’t be better placed.

Beer
Anne Street and Park Street are lined with pubs and bars. From the railway station end, Jockeys focuses on racing but has a back room for football. Quality home-made food is another bonus. Across the road, the Big House/McGuinness also goes big on TV sport – though sadly its beer signs (Harp, Macardles) are nods to a moribund local industry.

On the same side, popular Brubakers is more bar-like and keeps longer hours. Alongside, Russell’s Saloon is a tasteful revamp of a much-loved old bar, with craft and German beers.

Craft brews are also served at The Bar Tender that recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. Nearby stands M Courtney’s, an old-school pub barely changed since the 1800s.

Corner sports bar Jimmy’s proudly displays Dundalk shirts in the windows. On the other side of the road, the Phoenix features traditional music. Below the Hotel Imperial, Parkes Bar is still regular haunt for sports-watching students – though any hotel sale might change this.

In a quieter part of the town centre, McKeowns is a great spot for sports and communal imbibery.
Dundalk FC have boldly gone where no other Irish team has gone before. Ambitious young manager Stephen Kenny has transformed the Lilywhites. Astonishing results in both European competitions in 2016 took the Irish champions to within touching distance of potential Champions League match-ups with Barcelona, Real Madrid or Juventus. The subsequent win and draw in the group stage of the Europa League represent unprecedented achievements for any League of Ireland club.

Three days after taking Zenit St Petersburg to the wire in the Europa League, Dundalk sealed a third consecutive Irish title. While staging major European fixtures in Dublin – 30,000 witnessed the 2016 Champions League play-off with Legia Warsaw at the Aviva – Dundalk consider revered Oriel Park as the Home of Football.

Since the much-needed 2005 revamp, capacity is 4,500, 3,000 seated in the stands facing each other across a FieldTurf artificial pitch. The Main Stand is nearest Carrickmacross Road with turnstiles for home and away fans, visiting supporters accessing standing and seating places through the gate furthest from town.

The South Side, aka The Shed, has also covered seating. Oriel Park now meets UEFA requirements for an overall 3,000 within any given ground.

There are also standing places at each end. Transport Oriel Park is less than ten minutes from Dundalk (Clarke) train station – turn right up to Kennedy’s and the main road, then right again. The stadium is on the same side of the road as the pub, past the petrol station.

Tickets Cash-only tickets are available on the day at the turnstiles on Carrickmacross Road, €20 (€15 discounts) for the Main Stand, €15 (€5–€10) elsewhere. Although there are no online sales, advance purchase is usually available in the week running up to match day.

Shop A merchandise outlet opens on match days below the town end of the Main Stand, with items such as Jim Murphy’s recently published Dundalk miscellany ‘C’Mon the Town’ among the replica shirts, scarves and hats.

Bars Kennedy’s, aka the Railway Bar, has been in place for generations. Set at the junction of station walkway and Carrickmacross Road, it has been modernised by the current management, and is now a comfortable and spacious place to watch the game on the big screen, warm yourself by one of two fires and tuck into a home-made meal – Dundalk manager Stephen Kenny is a regular diner.

A photo of his team is posted by the bar, lined with taps of Peroni, Carlsberg and Hop House 13 lager. Old prints of Dundalk also feature. A beer garden opens in summer.

At the ground, the Lilywhite Lounge under the Main Stand and Enda McGuill Suite open on match days and for special occasions. Drinks are also served at the Town Bar outlet by the merchandise shop at the station end of the Main Stand.
Such is the high profile of sport in Galway that an FAI commission insisted that Ireland’s fourth city be represented in the League of Ireland. This was in 2012. Galway United, headed by CEO Nick Leeson of Barings Bank infamy, had collapsed with five-figure debts. The club had last won significant silverware, the FAI Cup, in 1991.

Yet this was Galway, home of showcase horse racing, hurling and GAA. Surely there should be a flagship soccer club? There was an emotional pull as well. Galway’s own Eamonn Deacy, an FAI Cup winner in 1991, a League champion with Aston Villa in 1981, died of a heart attack in 2012. The Terryland ground where Deacy had played would take his name.

So, local Mervue United, who had battled to a promotion play-off in 2013, were downgraded, as were Salthill Devon, and Galway FC were created. A year later they won promotion and became Galway United.

Today’s Eamonn Deacy Park, surrounded by fields on Galway’s northern outskirts, is a prime club ground, done out in Tribesmen maroon. Galway’s central Eyre Square is the hub for trains into Ceannt station and local and national Bus Éireann services. Other companies use the coach terminus on nearby Forster Street.

Bus Éireann runs the No.20 (4hr 20min) and X20 (3hr 20min) hourly from Dublin Busáras (£10.50 single), last service back 9.30pm. GoBus and CityLink are quicker (2hr 30min), slightly dearer and return earlier. Both offer direct services from Dublin Airport.

For limited transport options to the ground 25min walk away, see Galway United. Big O Taxis (091 58 58 58) is based on Eyre Square.

On the walk from station to stadium, the 20-bed Woodquay Hostel is handy for nightlife.

By Ceannt station, the Meyrick is a classic railway hotel, spiffy and modernised.

Bars fill the city centre, particularly a hub fanning out from Cross Street.

Old-school Dew Drop Inn (aka Myles Lee) on Mainguard Street is always busy, particularly for live sport. Seven Bridgestreet is more contemporary, with match action on big screens, quality food and a live agenda.

Over the river on Dominick Street, landmark Monroe’s has been providing live music and sport for generations.

Near Eyre Square, The Cellar on Eglinton Street fills with drinkers, diners and football-watchers, with music five nights of the week. The Skeff is a local institution, nine sports screens in six bars, DJs, burgers and late cocktails. It also has 24 en-suite guestrooms and a whiskey cellar.

Across the square, An Púcán is a prime spot for sports, with two drop-down projectors and late-night live sounds.

This Is Galway (thisisgalway.ie) has an attractive hotel database. On Headford Road nearest the ground, Menlo Park is a nice four-star known for its Bar Beoga - the trendier Nox offers live sport and burger deals. The nearby Maldron houses a six-room spa and the Point Bar for sport-watching in comfort.
Galway United
Reformed in 2013, renamed in 2014, Galway United can trace their roots back to 1937 – and Galway Rovers. Based at Terryland Park – today’s Eamonn Deacy Park – Rovers only joined the League of Ireland 40 years later. Fittingly, Deacy, later an Irish international and title winner with Aston Villa, scored the first senior league goal there.

Rovers only began challenging for honours after a name change to United in 1981. This golden period was capped by the FAI Cup win of 1991, with Deacy back in the fold.

Even with a new main stand at Terryland Park, the club then slumped, mired in debt. Despite the efforts of the Galway United Supporters Trust, the senior team folded.

Soon after, Deacy died suddenly. The ground was renamed with a testimonial visit by Villa.

As Mervue United moved in and moved up the First Division table, plans were afoot to revive a single, flagship club: Galway FC.

Immediately promoted to the Premier, the club reclaimed its past by adopting the name United.

Playing on an award-winning pitch, the Tribesmen have maintained top-flight status though average gates hover just over 1,000. Capacity is 5,000, 3,300 seated in two facing covered stands, away fans occupying the Scoreboard End sectors of the North Stand with their own ticket office and turnstiles.

Transport
The ground is a 25min walk from town via Dyke Road. From stop 2 on Eyre Square, the No.407 bus runs half-hourly/hourly eve to the Menlo Park Hotel (Coolough Road stop). From there, it’s still a 10min walk, but it’s handy for the hotel bar, even post-match – services back to Eyre Square run past 11pm.

A taxi from Eyre Square shouldn’t be more than €6.

Tickets
Advance tickets are available online at ticketmaster.ie and during the day of the match from the office on Dyke Road. On match nights, turnstiles open here and, for away fans, at the north-east corner of the ground.

Admission is €15, €10 for seniors, students and unwaged (ID required), €5 for under-12s.

Shop
Near the ticket window, a club shop on Dyke Road opens on match nights, selling bobble hats (remember those?), scarves, pin badges and replica tops, home (maroon), away (white) and third-choice (black).

Bars
With the ground way up on Galway’s north outskirts, near a retail park, there’s little by way of pubs and bars. Hotels within a reasonable walking distance, such as the Menlo Park and Nox (see Galway Bed) compensate with bars open to non-guests.

Two venues on Woodquay at the northern edge of the city centre serve as pre-match pitstops. Formerly The Goalpost and a more downbeat spot for sports fans, The Caribou is now all craft brews and funky furniture. Nearby McSwiggan’s runs a decent restaurant and serves affordable Guinness.

Key place in town is United sponsors The Dáil Bar in Middle Street, with memorabilia on display and football on TV. There’s regular live music, DJs at weekends and a full menu. Players and management are known to drop in for meet-the-fans evenings.
Limerick means Munster rugby. Towering over the ever-changing skyline of Ireland’s third largest city, Thomond Park is revered in the oval-ball game. Soccer’s 2016 First Division champions Limerick FC were last based here while Markets Field, a sports ground since the 1880s, was being rebuilt.

Another new development in this dynamic estuary hub of gleaming hotels and offices, Markets Field reopened in 2015. Spiritual and now sole home of a club that has changed names four times but retains its foundation year of 1937 on its badge, Markets Fields previously witnessed two title-winning seasons 20 years apart.

The second in 1980 granted a glamour European Cup tie with Real Madrid, the home leg staged in Dublin. A year later, Southampton came to Limerick, shortly before The Super Blues’ controversial move from their southside sanctuary.

**Bearings**

A frequent Bus Éireann service runs from Shannon Airport (Expressway journey time 30min, single €7) and Dublin (3hr, single €11, last one back 8.45pm). Rival Dublin Coach (€10) is half-hourly, last one back 8.45pm, night service at 1.45am.

The regular train from Dublin Heuston (single €10–€13, last one back 8.45pm) takes 2hr 15min, changing at Limerick Junction at Tipperary, with 3-4 direct services a day.

Bus and train terminus Colbert on Parnell Street is close to the city centre and 10min from Markets Field. Bus Éireann also runs local routes.

**Treaty Cabs** (061 415 566) is based near Colbert station.

**Bed**

Website limerick.ie has local accommodation details. Limerick’s contemporary hotels reflect the city’s new dynamic, while everyone else has had to up their game.

Those near Colbert, such as independent, superior three-star Pery’s, are handy for Markets Field. The boutique George houses a notable Italian restaurant.

Round the corner, the five-star Savoy provides luxury lodging, dining and spa treatments. Swish waterfront Absolute offers all three with contemporary touches. The nearby riverside Pier provides match-days specials in its Quays Bar. Across the water, the four-star Strand has a pool and multi-venue dining.

By Shannon Bridge, modern, mid-range Limerick City houses the main sports bar in town, McGgettigan’s. Alongside, the Clayton Limerick overlooks the Shannon from its panoramic heated pool.

**Beer**

Rugby-focused pubs abound, with TV soccer also featured. On Upper Denmark Street by the Milk Market bar hub are traditional favourites Nancy Blake’s and Flannerys, where the modern bar screens sport and a roof terrace catches the sun. Mother Mac’s is a new craft-brew pub in a 1787-dat ed building. Smyths offers live match action, drinks deals and music.

On nearby shop-lined Cruise’s Street, Charlie Chaplin’s (No.42) is centrepiece by TV sport though manned by enthusiastic bouncers after dark.
Limerick FC
First Division champions in 2016, Limerick FC are looking forward to a first full season in the top tier back at Markets Field. Keeping faith with Martin Russell as manager may prove the key to survival with the big boys. A league champion as a player on both sides of the border with Portadown and St Pat’s, Russell has been in place since July 2014 and seen many changes at Markets Field.

Away from their spiritual home for over 30 years, The Super Blues are now the anchor tenant at the 3,000-capacity stadium, reopened in June 2015 after a €4.5 million redevelopment.

It’s a huge investment in a football club whose home town is rugby mad – and whose last league title was won back in 1980.

Founded in 1937, the same year that greyhounds starting racing at the former Gaelic games ground near Colbert station, Limerick have often struggled to bring in consistent revenue. Name changes – City, United, 37 – reflect frequent financial disarray.

But, unlike at Munster rivals Cork, there was always one soccer club representing Limerick.

At Markets Field, its fans gather in the main all-seated North Stand and the standing Popular Side opposite. Away supporters are allocated the West Terrace, backdropped by Ireland’s tallest church tower atop St John’s Cathedral.

Transport
Markets Field is on Garryowen Road, conveniently close to Colbert. Exit the station right, then right again after 250 metres down Sexton Street. Follow it to the end – at the junction, head for The Horse & Hound bar, then keep going down Mulgrave Street, turning first left into Rossa Avenue. The ground is at the other end. Allow 15min. It wouldn’t be more than €8 in a taxi.

Tickets
Online sales are for season tickets only.
Admission is paid on the night, €15 to sit in the North Stand, €12 to stand on the Popular Side and, for away supporters, on the West Terrace. Seniors and students pay an across-the-board €10, under-12s €5.
Corporate seats are available for €20 and €13 respectively, under-12s charged €7.
Away fans have their own ticket outlet on a corner of Mulgrave Street.

Shop
On match nights, a club shop is set up near the main stand, with a modest selection of shirts, scarves and baseball caps.

Bars
The classic pre-match meeting spot is Jerry O’Dea’s Bar at 17 Mulgrave Street, known to sponsor occasional matches and organise meet-the-players sessions with fans.

Closer to the Markets Field, and somewhat more rough and ready, The Track Bar on Greenhill/Garryowen Road is a hangover from the days when there was greyhound racing at the ground. Next door, busy Fuscoe’s is ideal for pre-match chips.

If you’re looking for a quieter pre- or post-match pint, then the Square Bar at 6 St John’s Square behind the Cathedral is a handy find, and flies flags for Limerick FC.

Finally, The Horse & Hound at the corner of Mulgrave Street and Cathedral Place does decent pub food and provides a convenient stop-off to or from Colbert station.
Sligo

Facing out to the Atlantic from its vantage point on Ireland’s west coast, the county town of Sligo has long flown the flag for football rather than rugby or GAA – surfing is also a major activity these days.

Run as a people’s co-operative, Sligo Rovers have a fan base that extends across the North West and beyond. Support at the age-old Showgrounds, the club’s home since its foundation, is colourful and choreographed, visual and vocal. It will have impressed visitors from Trondheim and Trnava, here for European fixtures relatively recently.

Football was first played here at Forthill Park in the 1890s between teams of British Army soldiers stationed nearby. There are still pitches there today. After watching these early games, locals formed Junior teams such as Sligo Town and Sligo Blues.

In 1928, Town and Blues became the Reds of Sligo Rovers, nicknamed thereafter as The Bit o’Red, in fact. Six years later they joined the League of Ireland – in 1937 they became the first club from outside Leinster to win it.

Bearings

Sligo’s train and bus stations are at the junction of Lord Edward Street and the N4 dual carriageway that links with the M4 motorway and the M50 around Dublin. You arrive south of the river Garavogue, a short walk to the town centre and even shorter to the Showgrounds. Six buses run daily from Dublin (4hrs, €14 single). If you’ve come for an evening kick-off, there’s a service back at 1am. The train from Dublin Connolly is quicker (3hrs) but more expensive, cheapest advance singles €18, regular price around €25. The last service back is 7pm, the first in the morning 7am.

For a cab call Sligo Taxis on 086 121 9111.

Bed

Sligo Tourism (www.sligotourism.ie) has a database of local accommodation.

The best-located lodging for the Showgrounds is the landmark four-star Great Southern Hotel, a classic former railway hotel by the bus and train stations, with a pool, gym and sauna, and the Orient Express bar. The family-run Railway Hostel offers dorm beds, twins and doubles.

In the town centre, the newly renovated Sligo City Hotel encourages football-weekend stays with its Quays bar/restaurant. Nearby chic, contemporary Glasshouse, lapped by the Garavogue, offers cocktails in the upper-floor View Bar and award-winning cuisine.

Beer

Cavernous riverside Fiddler’s Creek is the main Rovers bar in Sligo, big on TV football, live entertainment and homemade food at its adjoining restaurant.

To carry the night on, cross the footbridge over the river to the Garavogue Bar, Sligo’s prime party spot, with big-screen sport as well as DJs, live acts and cocktails.

Don’t leave Sligo without visiting Hargadon’s, part pub, part wine store, part Michelin-praised restaurant, all dark wood and dating back to 1868. Alongside on O’Connell Street, Tricky McGarrigle’s is a local focal point for music.

Round the corner on Wine Street, The Swagman is football-friendly and late-opening, with a beer garden and the occasional BBQ. Craft brews, too.

IRELAND 2017 Sligo

www.liberoguide.com/sligo
Sligo Rovers

Community-run Sligo Rovers have a fan culture second to none in Ireland. Rewarded relatively recently with a league title and FAI Cup, these fans provide the venerable Showgrounds with colourful displays in the club’s signature red.

Rovers, aka The Bit o’Red, were galvanised in 2012 by ex-QPR defender Ian Baraclough. A full house here of 5,600 saw his side beat St Pat’s to lift Sligo’s first Irish title for 35 years. A year later, a heartstopping climax to the FAI Cup final saw Sligo lead Drogheda 2-1, get pegged to 2-2 then win 3-2. Things have calmed down since – though not, of course, in the Jinks Avenue Stand, half a riot of red created by the Forza Rovers ultras, half competing away support. Opposite, the main stand is similarly covered and all-seated. At the Volkswagen-sponsored Railway End, a further 1,300 open seats brings the total to 4,000. Beyond tower the peaks of Benbulbin – you’re in Sligo country.

The Showgrounds are three-sided – the former home Shed End is now an open space.

Transport

The Showgrounds are near Sligo’s train and bus stations. Cross Lord Edward Street, walk up Wolfe Tone Street, turn right at O’Neill’s and continue up Church Hill. The ground is five minutes ahead. Don’t approach via Lord Edward Street – this sends you round the houses into the Treacy housing estate before re-emerging further up Church Hill at Mooneys bar.

Tickets

Advance purchase is usually for European matches and title deciders. Pay cash at the turnstiles on Church Hill – separate for home and away fans. Admission is €15, €10 for seniors and students, €5 for under-12s.

Shop

As you enter through the turnstiles, you’ll see a match-day shop to your left, stocking replica shirts, scarves and sundry souvenirs.

Bars

If not rushed for time before kick-off, cross the busy N4 dual carriageway to the left of the station exit for Donaghy’s, the bar attached to award-winning restaurant Coach Lane. Plastered in battered bric-à-brac, old Bovril and Colman’s Mustard signs, a Rovers scarf here and there for good measure, the bar gives pride of place to a Ryder Cup bib signed by Paul McGinley.

Rafferty’s, the station bar opposite the bus ramp, is fine to slake a post-journey thirst, though it might be worth holding out until O’Neills sports bar at the corner of Wolfe Tone Street and Church Hill. Around a large main bar and cosier lounge with a pool table, no position is too much of a stretch to clock a TV screen with Sky Sports News on stream. Bonus points for the Mona Lisa clad in Rovers scarf.

With no alcohol at the ground, Mooneys is the designated and thankfully spacious supporters’ bar, just past the turnstiles on Church Hill. A treasure trove of signed jerseys, scarves, pennants, like any good Irish pub, it features an old bike hanging from the ceiling. Waiting at the bar allows you to brush up on Rovers history from the newspaper murals painted on the wall.