With 2018 champions Dundalk losing manager Stephen Kenny after the most successful period in the club’s history, Cork City keen to wrest back the title and Waterford FC revived under ambitious owner Lee Power, the League of Ireland Premier Division is perfectly poised for 2019.

The domination of the domestic game by Dublin clubs has been consigned to the past. Since Ireland’s switch to summer soccer in 2003, almost as many provincial sides have been crowned champions.

With the promotion of University College Dublin in 2018, the ten-team top division features four clubs from the capital. Since the days of the A Division in 1921-22, Shamrock Rovers are record champions – but last won the title in 2011.

Fellow Southsiders St Patrick’s Athletic hired Rovers legend Harry Kenny as coach to get the Inchicore side back in Europe. While the redevelopment saga of venerable Dalymount Park drags on, Bohemians remain mired in mid-table.

Renamed after influential club captain Ryan McBride, who passed away suddenly in 2017, Derry City’s Brandywell Stadium is now redeveloped, with an impressive main stand and a 3G artificial pitch. Local support is equally passionate in Sligo, though major silverware has not been won since the last-gasp FAI Cup win of 2013.

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 some 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?

Seven grounds, including Waterford and Dublin’s Tallaght and UCD Bowl, will be hosting the Euro Under-17 Championships in May 2019, a total of 32 games, including qualification for the Under-17 World Cup in October.

Station to stadium
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. 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 ten clubs each.

Alongside, the Lol runs four youth divisions, at U19, U17, U15 and, as of 2019, U13 levels.

At senior level, at the end of the season, the team bottom of the Premier swaps places with the winners of the First. Runners-up play off with ninth-placed finishers from the Premier over two legs, home and away. Extra-time and penalties decide if aggregate scores are level.

Clubs play each other four times in a 36-game season.

The 2019 Premier Division champions gain access to the first qualifying round of the Champions League 2020-21. Runners-up play off with ninth-placed finishers from the Premier over two legs, home and away. Extra-time and penalties decide if aggregate scores are level.

The 2019 Premier Division champions gain access to the first qualifying round of the Champions League 2020-21.

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 yet another meeting of goal Cork City and Dundalk in front of a 30,000-plus crowd at Dublin’s Aviva Stadium.

FAI Cup holders and Lol champions traditionally meet at the curtain-raising President’s Cup a week before the regular league season.

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 First Round of the senior FAI Cup. They are 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, aka EA Sports Cup, with its four-pool regional structure earlier on, is decided over a one-leg final. The winners do not qualify for Europe. Current holders Derry City are far and away record winners.

Season’s dealings
Ireland introduced summer football in 2003. The 2019 season kicked off on Friday, February 15 and runs until the end of October, bookended by the FAI Cup final on November 3.

There’s a short mid-summer break the weekend of June 21-22.

Friday night football is now firmly established, games usually kicking off at 7.45pm. One evening fixture is often reserved for Saturday while Monday can be used for midweek rounds.

Kick-off times in the First Division are also Friday 7.45pm, with the occasional Saturday night fixture. Longford Town prefer 7.30pm, Cobh Ramblers 7pm.

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, Cork, Derry and Waterford offer advance sales for individual matches, either online or from the ticket office/club shop.

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

Welcome to liberoguide.com!
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. 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 bars 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.

Though Bray Wanderers, down the coast from Dublin on the DART rail line, were relegated in 2018, the capital has four teams in the top flight for 2019 thanks to the promotion of UCD, based at University College Dublin in Belfield, south Dublin.

**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.

Other buses into the city from the airport are the Nos. 16 and 41 via Drumcondra, and the 24hr aircoach to the centre (€7 single, €12 return, €6/€11 online, every 15min, 30min journey time).

**Airport Taxi** (+353 1 290 9090) quotes €24 for the city centre. For a taxi in town, call NRC on +353 1 677 2222.

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

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

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.

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 Lansdowne 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 Lansdowne 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’Neill’s 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 shelloads 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 Ballesterer, anyone?) and an astroturf-decked garden and picnic area. Screens abound.
Aviva

The Aviva is Ireland's national stadium, the home of its soccer and rugby teams whose associations share 50-50 ownership of this gleaming arena.

Unveiled in 2010, venue of the Europa League final a year later and for four fixtures for Euro 2020, the Aviva stands on the site of the old Lansdowne Road ground that performed the same function until its closure in 2006.

Impressive in appearance, its undulating, translucent roof designed to allow maximum light to the pitch without obstructing surrounding residences, the Aviva comprises five tiers, the fourth dedicated to corporate spectators.

Sponsored by insurance company Aviva for a reported €40 million-plus sum, the €400 million-plus stadium opened in 2010 with the visit of Manchester United – who had also been the first team to play football at Lansdowne Road against Waterford in 1968.

Tickets and entrances are colour-coded: purple on the corner of Herbert and Lansdowne Road, blue, orange and green via Shelbourne Road. It may be an idea to familiarise yourself with the geography beforehand because being stuck on the narrow waterside pathway is no fun.

For away fans, there's no pedestrian access down the narrow streets and cul-de-sacs behind the North Stand furthest from the DART line. Head for the red-ticket entrance from Bath Avenue.

Transport

The stadium is right by Lansdowne Road station on the DART line (every 15min Mon-Sat, every 40min Sun) with a direct link from Connolly (10min), Tara Street (6min) and Pearse (5min) stations.

Bars

By the banks of the Dodder, there's a row of three pubs on Merrion Road – just cross over the water and head up Shelbourne Road for the stadium a 7min walk away. Paddy Cullen's goes big on pub food and TV football. Attached, Mary Mac's is lined with screens for sports action. Century-old Crowe's at No.10 has been linked with rugby for generations.

On Pembroke Road, that forks off from Shelbourne Road, the Den Bar downstairs from the Lansdowne Hotel is again more rugby-focused but offers a relaxing spot for a pre-match Guinness. More spacious but not as authentic, The Dubliner nearby at the Ballsbridge Hotel is closer to the stadium.

More contemporary in vein, The Gasworks in the Galway Bay Brewery family is an excellent pre-match choice, with a score or more choices of beer on tap in an urban-style bar, decent food and a pool table. It's about 100 metres from the main pre-match bar hub that orbits around Slattery's.

At the junction of Bath Avenue, Shelbourne Road and Haddington Road and Grand Canal Street Upper, Slattery's is the busiest of the many establishments that surround the Aviva, its glassed-in terrace packed before the game. On Bath Avenue, the former classic stadium pub The Lansdowne has gone gastro – but The Old Spot is still used on match days as a drinking haunt.

Along Haddington Road, Ryan's Beggars Bush sets up for mobbed match days with a large outdoor area, three indoor bars, a barbecue and TV screens everywhere.
IRELAND 2019 Bohemians
www.liberoguide.com/bohemians

Bohemians
Ireland’s oldest league club still in continuous existence, Bohemian FC 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 northside 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 Harristown) 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 (bohemianfc.com/?page_id=10770) 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 over-65s and students, €5 for under-12s.

Shop
Merchandise available on match nights includes a selection of club badges, scarves, home shirts and tracksuit jackets.

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.
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.

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 east goal, too. The most vocal home support is in the St Pat’s half of the Main Stand and on the narrow open Carmac Terrace opposite.

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 over-65s 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 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.

IRELAND 2019

St Patrick’s Athletic

www.liberoguide.com/st-patricks-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 been overshadowed by Dundalk, who have since 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, 34-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 (https://shamrockrovers.ie/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.
Promoted back to the Irish Premier in 2018, University College Dublin are based at the huge campus in Belfield, south of Dublin city centre.

Since 1983, the Students have operated the same as any other football club in Ireland’s top two divisions, on a semi-pro basis, although a college scholarship scheme similar to the American model has allowed the likes of Joe Hanrahan to make their mark. In 1984, the striker came close to creating a sensation when UCD, making their European debut, nearly notched a late equaliser at Everton. A 1-1 draw would have sent the Students through on away goals.

In 2015, UCD made an unexpected return to Europe after 30 years thanks to their Fair Play record in 2014. A single goal in each leg by Ryan Swan was enough to see off multi-titled Dudelange of Luxembourg before second-flight UCD kept Slovan Bratislava to a late 1-0 win in Slovakia.

Swan scored again in the home leg at the UCD Bowl but by then the record Slovak champions were already 2-1 up. Two stoppage-time goals then skewed the aggregate score to 6-1.

Three years later, UCD returned to the Premier after a league showdown with Finn Harps ended in a 1-1 draw, Conor Davis scoring another crucial goal in the title-winning campaign.

Of decent enough standard to host Europa League football, the UCD Bowl is shared by the university’s soccer and rugby teams. It consists of one main stand, with open seating and grass banking either side of the central covered area. Half the capacity of 3,000 is seated.

Visiting supporters are allocated a few hundred seats furthest from the turnstiles and ticket hut.

Transport
The UCD Bowl is on the other side of Stillorgan Road from the RTÉ studios. The nearest bus stop is the next one down, Donnybrook, Belfield Court. From D’Olier Street (stop 335), just over the Liffey from O’Connell Street in town, bus Nos.39A and 145 takes 25min to reach it – nearby stop 334 is where you catch the No.66A that also comes this way from the city centre. From Lower O’Connell Street, bus No.11 takes you down Clonskeagh Road to stop 860/UCD, the other side of the campus.

If you’re coming from the airport, aircoach 700 stops at the UCD Slip Road, one after RTÉ, journey time 50 minutes.

Tickets
Admission is sold on the day from the turnstiles, €15 for adults, €10 for seniors and non-UCD students, €5 for under-14s and UCD students. This entitles you to sit in the main stand or stand behind either goal.

Shop
A modest selection of souvenirs is usually available behind the main stand on match days.

Bars
Open every day until 11pm at least, the Clubhouse Bar alongside the Student Centre is just other side of the car park from the main stand. The TV screens set up over the bar counter are tuned to sport.

Basic hot and cold refreshments are otherwise available by the main stand on match days.
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, 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). Siigo 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 McElhineys store/Butt Hall Centre on Main Street.

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 McElhineys 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 wrestling 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 2017 and runners-up behind Dundalk the last four of five seasons.

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, CSKA Kyiv have all left Cork without a win.

**Bearings**

Cork Airport is 6.5km (four miles) south of the city. Bus Éireann Nos.226 and 226A run every 30min to Parnell Place station in town (lowest fare €5 single online), journey time 30min. They also stop at Evergreen Road, near Turners Cross and terminate at Kent Station, Cork’s train hub.

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 4 27 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

League champions in 2017, runners-up from 2014 to 2016 and again in 2018, 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 2017, Cork gained revenge, winning the title with a 0-0 draw in front of nearly 6,000 home fans.

All-seated and all-covered, 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.

Now smart and urban, the Turners Cross Tavern shows TV matches and offers upscale pub food.

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.
Despite overwhelming difficulties, football has survived, in fact 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. After a £7 million redevelopment, City’s Brandywell Stadium, close to landmarks such as the Free Derry Corner and the Bloody Sunday Monument, reopened in 2018. Football has been played here since 1900. Derry City moved in shortly after their foundation in 1928. Nine years later, and a 7,700-capacity Brandywell is attracting gates of 3,000-plus. The stadium has also taken the name of former club captain Ryan McBride, who died suddenly in 2017.

The ground also hosts home games of Institute FC, promoted from Northern Ireland’s second tier in 2018 to compete in the top division north of the border.

**Bearings**
Derry has its own airport 11km [7 miles] north-east of town. Currently Loganair and Ryanair provide links with London Stansted, Liverpool, Manchester and Scotland. A City Cabs taxi (+44 28 7126 4466) costs £11 into town.

Goldline Express bus No.234 runs every 2hrs to the Buscentre in town, journey time 30min. Other bus journeys require a 10min walk to Longfield, Eglinton, where you can pick up the Nos.143 or 152, run by Ulsterbus.

The waterfront Buscentre is in town by the Peace Bridge, the same side of the river as the stadium. The train station is across the Foyle. The hourly service from Belfast (£12.50) takes 2hrs.

**Belfast International Airport** is 92km [57 miles] away. Take Ulsterbus No.300a to the Europa Buscentre then Translink Goldline 212 to the Buscentre in Derry, overall journey time around 3hrs.

Translink Goldline Bus X3/X4 runs from Dublin Busáras to Derry (£11) seven times a day via Dublin Airport, journey time 4hrs.

**Bed**
Visit Derry (visitderry.com) has a hotel database with reservations via booking.com.

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**
Pubs surround the Richmond Centre mall. Football is screened in one of the three bars that comprise the historic River Inn, revamped in 2016. On the other side of the mall, the Bentley is a six-bar complex, one that shows matches. Formerly the Diamond Hotel, where Institute FC were formed in 1905, Granny Annies has revived this prominent space with live music, TV sport and communal banter.

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

The Oakgrove Bar (88 Bishop Street) has TV sport, live music and sells tickets for Derry games.

Across the Foyle, near the train station, the Glen Bar (28 Dungiven Road) shows games on two big screens.
**Derry City**

**Derry City** are a club apart. The Candystripes 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.

The ground sits near the Bogside, next to Celtic Park, home of Derry’s GAA team but also the first to stage soccer in town when St Colimb’s Court and Derry Celtic played here in the 1890s. Derry Celtic moved across to the Brandywell in 1900, before folding in 1913. Newly founded Derry City moved in 15 years later.

With the Brandywell close to chilling scenes of civil unrest during The Troubles, not least the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972, Derry City found themselves forced to play home games in Coleraine from 1971, before being reduced to Saturday-morning football for 13 years.

Large crowds greeted the return of football to the Brandywell in 1985, Derry having joined the League of Ireland south of the border.

The treble win of 1989, another league title in 1997, FAI Cup victories and high-place finishes have brought the likes of Benfica, Gothenburg and Paris Saint-Germain to the Brandywell, recently equipped with 3G artificial pitch and a new main stand, expanding capacity to 7,700.

The other major change to the ground since its redevelopment in 2017 has been in its name, the Ryan McBride Brandywell Stadium commemorating the club captain who died suddenly that same year.

Away fans enter through the turnstiles on Brandywell Avenue to Blocks A and B of the East Stand, facing the main one.

**Transport**

If you’re coming in by train, turn right out of the station, along the river to the bridge, then left at the roundabout up Abercorn Road. As it veers right, you’ll see the floodlights ahead. Allow 15 minutes altogether.

It’s about the same from the bus station – you won’t have to cross the river but cut through town. Head for The Diamond, right down Butcher Street by the Maldon Hotel, then left down Fahan Street, past Free Derry Corner. You’ll see the floodlights ahead.

**Tickets**

The club sells tickets online (derrycityfc.net/online-ticketing) to both home and away fans and distribute through outlets around town such as the Oakgrove Bar (88 Bishop Street).

On match nights, tickets are sold from the Long Tower Youth Club on Lecky Road, by the stadium car park, past the greyhound track.

Prices are set at £15, £12 for seniors and students, £4 (not available online) for 5-15s, under-5s free.

**Shop**

A basic range of red-and-white merchandise is sold from a hut by the main stand on match nights.

**Bars**

Sport-focused bars near the ground include the Brandywell Sports Bar where Brandywell Road meets Lecky Road and, nearby, The Bluebell Bar at 130 Lecky Road. Slightly further away, other Candystripe haunts include the Celtic Bar, the other side of Celtic Park where Stanleys Walk meets the end of Elmwood Street and, behind it, Mary B’s at 42 Elmwood Terrace, where Lone Moor Road meets Blighs Lane.
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.

**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. From 2012 to 2018, ambitious young manager Stephen Kenny 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.

Those arriving by bus to the Long Walk should head towards Market Square, past the pubs of Park Street and Anne Street, then towards the train station from the roundabout.

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.
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.

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](http://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.

**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. 
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 carriage-way 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.
The former soccer stronghold of Waterford welcomes the return of European football in 2019 after an absence of more than 30 years. Promoted to the Premier Division in 2017, flagship club Waterford FC claimed a fourth-place slot in 2018 to enter the Europa League. For ex-Ireland U-21 international Lee Power, this major turnaround confirms the faith he showed when taking over the moribund club in late 2016. Restoring the original name of Waterford FC, Power understood the pride felt by many older fans in the club that won six League of Ireland titles in eight seasons, between 1966 and 1973.

Bearings
Dublin Airport is 175km (109 miles) away. From Zone 11 Stop 2, a direct Bus Éireann Expressway coach takes 3hrs to Waterford bus station (every 2hrs, €20). The quicker service (2hr 45min) is less frequent.

The train from Dublin Heuston to Waterford Plunkett takes 2hrs, online tickets €16. Once arrived, walk over the bridge to town. Waterford bus station is by the city centre but a long walk to the stadium – use public transport or a taxi.

Local buses in Waterford run on the Ireland-wide Leap Card system (€10 including €5 travel credit), €1.68 deducted per journey, touch in when you board – or pay the driver around €2 cash.

Waterford Taxis (+353 51 33 10 33) have their own app and online booking, including airport transfers.

Bed
Visit Waterford (visitwaterford.com) has a hotel database.

Nearby, a row of B&Bs on the main road towards down includes The Hazelbrook, The Vee and St Albans.

Nearer the bridge, Dooley’s has been in the same family for 80 years. Nearby, affordable Sal’s is ideal for a drinking weekend – pub downstairs, hearty breakfast one floor up. The Anchorage is also good value. Alongside, mid-range Treacys comes with a spa, gym and heated pool.

On Bridge Street, the Fitzwilton is a contemporary choice.

Beer
Waterford has scores of drinking spots. On O’Connell Street, quality pubs attract a sensible but hard-drinking fraternity. There, the tremendous Tullys offers a buzzy contrast to the indelibly old-school Thomas Maher opposite.

The Hub is both the name of an Irish drizzerie with TV football, and the Bermuda Triangle of bars nearby, where John and Parnell Streets cross. Here the late-opening Kazbar offers TV sport and live music, while the Market Bar (11 John Street) opposite is a mecca to rock’s rich tapestry.

The best football bar in town is Alfie’s, just up Bridge Street over to Ballybricken. The decor offers a lesson in local football history, revered Irish internationals all depicted and framed.
Waterford FC

Enjoying their best league season since the 1970s and back in Europe after 30 years, Waterford FC have also reenergised their loyal fan base.

Behind this long-needed revival is owner/chairman Lee Power, who played in the same promising Ireland U-21 side as the man he quickly appointed as his Director of Football, Pat Fenlon.

Relegated in 1989, the then named Waterford United moved to the newly built municipal Regional Sports Centre in 1993, leaving former ground Kilcohan Park to the greyhounds.

Stuck out way south-west of town on the old main road to Cork, the RSC is one of Ireland’s best grounds despite its obvious use as an athletics stadium. Separating its two facing sideline stands from the football action, a running track is complemented by all the accoutrements of jumping and throwing events – there are no ends as such, just empty spaces.

Blues fans generate a noisy atmosphere in Block E at one end of the main stand on Cork Road. From its unveiling in 1993 until 2008, this old-school grandstand with its distinctive glass windshields held the stadium’s entire seating capacity of 1,300. With the opening of the lower but longer Tramore Road Stand, this figure rose to over 3,000, allowing for the accommodation of 5,500 spectators, including standing ones.

Up to 800 away fans can be allocated half the Tramore Road Stand, lively for the visits of Cork City and the bigger clubs from Dublin.

In May 2019 the RSC will co-host the European U-17 Championships. Later in the summer, it should witness Waterford’s return to European football.

Transport

The stadium is way south-west of town and too far to walk. The main service there is the No.360 which leaves Waterford bus station every 30min [from bay 7/8 by the bus shelter] and takes 10min. The nearest stop is the Kilbarry Centre behind the ground. If you’re on main Parnell Street in town, jump on any Cork-bound bus and touch in with your Leap card – ask the driver to let you off by the RSC.

Tickets

The club now has online purchase (waterfordfc.ie/tickets) for all upcoming home games.

Admission is otherwise a simple cash-only affair, the ticket office by the main entrance opening just over an hour before kick-off.

There’s an all-in-one price of €15, €10 for students and seniors, €5 for under-14s.

Bars

To the left of the main stand as you approach from the main entrance, the main match-day shop is a hut just large enough for a rail of replica shirts in blue, away tops of yellow-and-blue stripes.

There are no pubs near the ground. Fans gather at Norris’s Bar where Barrack Street, Slievekeale Road and Morrison’s Road meet. Of its two bars, one is covered in Waterford sports memorabilia.

The only outlet near the stadium is Rockin’ Joes aka Shake Dog, a burger-and-shakes joint done up like an American diner, on the main road by the Travelodge hotel.

There’s no bar at the ground, only hot and soft drinks, and filled rolls.