Acknowledgments

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The following sources were used for reference:

Discover Kilkenny by John Bradley (O’Brien Press, Ltd);
Frommer’s Ireland From $60 a Day by Mark Meagher (Wiley Publishing, Inc)
Kilkenny: A Touring Guide by Brian Fox and Pat Nolan (South East Tourism and Kilkenny Tourism)
Lonely Planet Ireland by Tom Downs, Fionn Davenport, Des Hannigan, Eilis O’Carroll and Neil Wilson (Lonely Planet)
Illustrated Guide to Ireland edited by Sandy Shepard (The Reader’s Digest Association Limited)

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You are about to experience Kilkenny, one of Ireland’s premier medieval cities and one of the country’s most enchanting inland towns. It once rivaled Dublin in importance and has played a continuous role in Ireland’s history. Today it is a bustling market town that fosters a thriving arts community.

This walking tour is designed to take you to each of the major attractions and also off the tourist path to many of the more hidden finds. You will learn much of Kilkenny’s history and stories and discover why it has been called the Marble City, the town of the Fighting Cats and the Artistic Heart of Ireland.

Expect the tour route to take a minimum of one hour to walk. Add in visits to Kilkenny’s many attractions such as the castle, cathedrals and brewery and you could extend the tour to last an entire day or more.

Several detours have been included along the way. These diversions will take you off the main track and allow you to explore even more of Kilkenny.

The tour begins at the Kilkenny Design Centre and ends at the nearby Butler House.

TIPS

- Wear comfortable walking shoes.
- Dress for the weather. In Ireland it is often better to wear a waterproof hooded jacket than to operate an umbrella.
- Ask for directions.
- Every effort has been made to provide easy-to-use maps and instructions, but the medieval web of streets can be disorienting.
- Kilkenny is considered a very safe town for visitors. However, it is important to remain aware of your surroundings.
- Read the tour prior to your walk to familiarize yourself with the sites and stories you are about to experience.
In 1177 Theobald FitzWalter was installed as Chief Butler of Ireland and given the title of Prisage of Wine by King Henry II. Such a privilege allowed FitzWalter to claim roughly 15 percent of all wine in Ireland.

Not surprisingly, the control of alcohol made the family extremely wealthy. In 1328, the Butlers were made Earls of Ormond and in 1391 John Butler purchased the castle in Kilkenny and a significant portion of the county.

In a time when the Anglo-Normans and the Gaelic Irish were severely segregated, John Butler was very effective in managing his Irish tenants. He spoke fluent Irish and worked to eliminate the Statute of Kilkenny, which forbade Anglo-Irish marriage.

In 1811 the crown bought back the right to the Prisage of Wine for about £250 million in today’s economy ($475 million). That money was used to extensively remodel the castle from its French château appearance to its current Baronial facade.

The 17th century saw many of the Butlers emigrate to Europe and America, while others served in Continental armies and were ennobled for their services. Variations of the Butler name are evident in Spain, Sweden, France (Boutler or de Butler), Austria and Germany (Buttlar) and Russia (Butleroff).

Through the years, the decline in rent revenue, the Irish battle for independence and the exorbitant costs to maintain the castle made Kilkenny a less desirable location for the Butler family. In 1935 the contents of the castle were auctioned off, and in 1967 the castle was given to the people of Kilkenny.
From 1277 until 1425, Kilkenny was a popular site for the English-ruled meetings of parliament and king’s council. In 1366 one of the most famous of these meetings was held. It came to be identified with the Statute of Kilkenny which had been passed at the meeting. The statute forbade any English settler to adopt an Irish name, wear Irish apparel or use the Irish language. Those of Irish blood were forbidden to live within the walls of any fortified town, and any settler marrying an Irish person was committing high treason.

As a result, Kilkenny was divided into three areas. Hightown included everything protected within the town’s walls; it was located on the highest ground and included the castle and significant commercial and government buildings. Irishtown extended northwest from the city. This was where a majority of the town’s citizens lived. Across the river to the east was St. John’s, named after the priory that was built there. This area was the last area to be settled.

**THE MARBLE CITY**

Marble quarried outside Kilkenny is noted for its black color and random splotches and rings of white that resemble drops of paint. A look around the city will reveal the marble’s appearance on numerous buildings, door frames and window jambs. Even the streets were paved with marble until the 1930s, which earned Kilkenny the title of Marble City. A local black limestone is also common and was the primary stone used for the old city walls and many buildings. However, the softer limestone lacks the notable white markings.
THE WITCH OF KILKENNY

One of Kilkenny’s most notorious characters was Dame Alice Kyteler (pronounced Kit-ler). The attractive and well-connected moneylender born in 1284 had survived at least three wealthy husbands; each dying under suspicious circumstances. When her fourth husband suffered from a mysterious illness in 1324, his children from a previous marriage suspected foul play and appealed to the Bishop to try her for heresy.

Despite being dismissed by town officials, most of whom were friends or relatives of Alice, Bishop Ledrede persisted. Alice used her influence to have him imprisoned in Kilkenny Castle for a spell. Finally, Alice and five others were tried for sorcery, consorting with demons, making potions and having intercourse with the devil.

Alice was found guilty and sentenced to be burned at the stake. She escaped and fled to Scotland, but her maid Petronilla, one of her accused accomplices, was burned in her place.

The case presented the first time witchcraft and heresy were linked and the first time heretics were presented as an organized group and thus, set off the witchcraft craze in Northern Europe. Modern medicine suggests the symptoms of her dying husband, an emaciated body, devoid of body hair, match those of arsenic poisoning.
THE HOLY SITES

Is it Catholic or Protestant?
The history of Christianity in Ireland is long and turbulent. Missionaries such as Saint Patrick brought Christianity to Celtic Ireland in the 5th century. In the 12th century, Catholic Anglo-Norman nobles took control of Ireland making it subject to English rule. By this time Ireland had become known as the “Land of Saints” and numerous monasteries were already formed.

In the 16th century, England’s Henry VIII broke from the Catholic Church and demanded all his subjects convert to the Protestant Church. Thus began centuries of fighting with the Irish. England prevailed and introduced severe laws that reduced the rights of Catholics. The enforcement of these laws varied between communities, but that changed when Oliver Cromwell arrived in 1649. Cromwell traveled the country closing, destroying and/or converting all Catholic churches by any means necessary. All monasteries were closed, and their contents seized.

In the 1790s, Catholics regained the rights to own land, vote, marry Protestants and practice law. Although 90 percent of the population was Catholic, the Protestant gentry maintained all positions of power. As a result, Catholics did not reclaim their churches, but built new ones instead. As a result, most Protestant Churches one visits in Ireland today were once Catholic.

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12. Saint Francis Abbey now houses the Smithwick Brewery (pronounced Smit-icks). The arch and alley named “The Ring,” which leads to both the friary and the brewery, is often called “Heaven’s Gate.” Established in 1710, the brewery is now owned by Guinness and brews Smithwick’s, Kilkenny and Budweiser beers. The monks of the Saint Francis Abbey are reported to have been expert brewers all the way back to the 13th century. A video presentation in the atmospheric basement offers free samples every afternoon in the summer months. Continue down Parliament Street to the stoplight.

13. Saint Francis Abbey is visible to your right when you reach the stoplight. Founded in 1232, it was desecrated by Cromwell in 1650. The abbey is located within the brewery complex, and it is recommended that those desiring a closer look should make prior arrangements with the brewery. After the intersection, you will cross a wide, inconspicuous bridge. This was the border between Hightown and Irishtown. Walk to the end of Parliament Street, cross Dean Street and take the steps to Saint Canice’s Cathedral. At the church gate you may choose to take a detour to visit the Bishop’s Palace.

14. Saint Canice’s Cathedral was built in the 13th century on the site of a 6th century monastery founded by Saint Canice. William Outlawe, son of the Kilkenny Witch, financed a new lead roof for the bell tower to avoid sentencing in his heresy trial. It collapsed shortly after in 1332, and in 1650 Cromwell’s troops used it as a stable. The round tower, built in 1100, is Kilkenny’s oldest building, and visitors are allowed to climb to the top. The climb is not for the weak or claustrophobic. From here follow the road back to Dean St. You may detour to Kenny’s Well or cross Dean St. and take narrow road to Abbey St.

15. The Bishop’s Palace was built as the Episcopal palace during the 1350s and remodeled in its current Georgian design in 1736. The building and its gates are currently being remodeled to accommodate the national headquarters of the Heritage Council. Adds 5 minutes roundtrip.

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Smithwick’s is brewed at Kilkenny’s Saint Francis Abbey Brewery
THE GUARDIANS OF THE CITY

For several years, Marty the Dominicat has guarded the courtyard of the Black Abbey. The friendly black and white tabby not only resembles a robed Dominican friar, but he is also named after Dominican St. Martin DePorres. People working in and near the abbey keep Marty fed. In return, he greets abbey visitors with a nudge and a purr.

Although his favorite spot is right outside the front door, Marty often patrols the stone coffins on display in the courtyard. The coffins were discovered among the ruins while the abbey was being renovated. It is believed that these coffins belonged to wealthy Norman settlers who felt that like stone homes, stone tombs were considered signs of distinction.

13 Marty the Dominicat watches over the Black Abbey

Old City Walls and Black Freren Gate provide a glimpse of the city’s old fortifications. About 1,450 meters of wall enclosed the seventy acres of land known as Hightown. The walls were built of local limestone. Black Freren Gate (Black Friars’ Gate) is the only surviving gate to the city. It was a minor entrance to Hightown and allowed the friars, who had their own keys to the city, to come and go as they pleased. The metal beams on the gate were recently added for preservation. Continue up Abbey Street and follow the path the monks would have used. Turn right on Parliament Street, and turn right again on New Building Lane.

15 The Black Abbey was built outside the city walls in 1225 and got its name from the black habits worn by the Dominican monks. In 1543, after the dissolving of all monasteries, it was converted into a courthouse. After 1650, it was left a ruin until being restored in 1866. The abbey contains contemporary and 14th century windows and its “L” shape floor plan results from new structures built over the north transept while the abbey was in ruin. Walk up Abbey Street to the arched entrance; notice the remnants of the medieval walls.

16 Old City Walls and Black Freren Gate

17 New Building Lane

Follow New Building Lane. It will merge with Abbey Street at the Black Abbey. Turn left on Black Mill Street.

DETOUR

14 Stone coffins outside The Black Abbey

Kenny’s Well, associated with Saint Kieran or Kenny, offers a pleasant walk through Irishtown. From St. Canice’s, follow Coach Road down the hill, cross Dean Street, turn right on Dean Street and take note of the homes with fine Georgian doors on your left. Stroll through the small patch of green space located near the roundabout before crossing Dominic Street. Kenny’s Well is located just beyond The Well Food Market on Kenny’s Well Road. The well once supplied water for the Black Abbey. The cell built around it is believed to date to the 8th century.

Adds 15 minutes
FIGHTING CATS OF KILKENNY

The source of the popular expression “fighting like Kilkenny cats” is unknown, but many theories exist on its origins. The proceedings of the meetings of Parliament and the frequent squabbles between Hightown and Irishtown have both been given credit. However, the most likely history stems from a sport common with the soldiers stationed here during a rebellion in 1798. Two cats were tied together at their tails and thrown across a line and left to fight their way free.

Commanders quickly banned the sport, but soon after, an officer on patrol heard a catfight and sought to confront the perpetrators. An offending soldier heard his approach and cut the cats free with a swing of his sword. When the officer arrived at the scene, only two bloody tails were dangling from the line. The misguided officer believed the cats had fought until only their tails remained and hence the famous rhyme was born:

There once were two cats in Kilkenny,
Each thought there was one cat too many,
So they fought and they hit,
They scratched and they bit,
Till excepting their nails,
And the tops of their tails,
Instead of two cats
There weren’t any.

SAINTS VICTORIA & ANATOLIA

Arranged for marriage to noble Roman pagans, sisters Victoria and Anatolia refused to marry and devoted their lives to God. Their angry suitors had them tortured in hopes of breaking their faith. Refusing to worship idols, the sisters were executed. Their guard, so moved by their example, converted before he too was executed. Legend states Victoria’s executioner was immediately struck with leprosy and died six days later, eaten by worms. The story is suspected to be pious myth.

St. Victoria’s wax-encased bones and a chalice of her blood were a gift from the Pope in 1845 in honor of the consecration of St. Mary’s Cathedral where the relics are now housed.
The Kilkenny Hunt Club was well known for boisterous evenings. Simon Morris, who was manager of the Hotel in the 1860s, recalls a particular night:

“A celebrated grey mare was the subject of discussion. A bet of £50 made by Mr. Courtenay, the owner of the mare dared that he would ride up the two flights of stairs, into the club room and jump over the screen.

Mr. Courtenay went to the stables and demanded the animal. He started on his perilous escapade, then up one flight of stairs, turned the landing and faced the second flight.

Not faltering, a slip of the iron hoofs on the brass protectors of the stairs caused every eye to strain, every heart to beat wildly.

The door was reached and the whole assembly at the banquet, with gaping eyes, beheld their equine guest. All the voices in the room were raised to stop the foolhardy venture. The leap was placed so he could jump it from the door, towards the front windows. Only now the imminent danger became apparent. Would the animal first clear the screen, then rush through the window and on to the street sixty feet below?

Servants shrieked; the mare’s own groom offered his last entreaty to stop his master. All to no purpose. The course was clear - AWAY! And the house reverberated from the shock. The mare well jumped it, but the stake was not won. She touched the screen in passing.

Again the screen was arranged. This time the position changed so to avoid the possibility of the animal bounding on to the street. The signal was given, and, with a noble jump, the grey mare cleared the screen, greeted with the shouts of an alarmed and amazed audience.”

Adapted from Hotels of Ireland by Frank Corr
WALKING SAINT JOHN’S

The suburb of St. John’s, known as “the continent” because it lies across the water from the rest of Kilkenny, provides a different perspective of the town. Although the area is primarily residential, walking St. John’s provides its own bit of history.

This tour begins in one of Kilkenny’s historic pubs, crosses the River Nore and gradually climbs to scenic Wind Gap. This tour takes about an hour (longer if you add Lacken Walk).

1. Tynan’s Bridge House Bar, located on a street once an exercise run for horses, has been around since the 18th century and in the same family since 1919. The front bar displays shelves, scales and memorabilia from the days when it doubled as a grocery and pharmacy. The U-shaped bar, tile floor, gas globe lamps and brass fixtures give a Victorian ambiance that makes this an ideal spot to enjoy locally-brewed Smithwick's or Kilkenny ales.

2. John’s Bridge connects St. John’s with the rest of Kilkenny and offers a picture-perfect view of the castle and the River Nore. Originally built after 1200, John’s Bridge was destroyed and rebuilt after the great floods of 1487 and 1763 (as was the Green Street Bridge to the north). The present bridge was the longest single span ferro-concrete (reinforced concrete) bridge in the British Isles at the time of its completion in 1910.

3. Kilkenny College began as grammar school established before 1539 beside St. Canice’s. It moved to this location in 1684 and served as a university for six months in 1690. The current building, built in 1782, was transformed into the County Hall in 1985. Its pupils included Jonathan Swift, 1667-1745, author of Gulliver’s Travels; historian Richard Stanihurst, 1547-1618; philosopher George Berkley, 1685-1753 and Admiral David (later Earl) Beatty, 1871-1916.

4. Wind Gap provides a view of the city very few tourists see. With views of the castle and St. Canice’s Cathedral, this panorama was common in 19th and 20th century paintings. Across the street from Wind Gap is the home of John Banim, 1798-1842. Considered “Ireland’s Walter Scott” Banim’s series “Tales by the O’Hara Family” provides a historic look at Kilkenny’s poverty and hierarchy in the 18th and 19th centuries. Banim is buried in nearby St. John’s cemetery.

5. Maudlin Castle, a name derived from Magdalene, guarded the entrance to the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene. The hospital dates back to at least the early 14th century, and the castle is all that remains. By 15th century, the hospital was funded by urban rents and the best room was reserved for the sovereign of Hightown.

6. Lacken Walk, located at end of the Wind Point viewing spot, takes you down a narrow, stepped path to Lacken’s Well and onward to a riverside path. It can be quite isolated, so use caution, especially on uneven terrain. The rustic nature trail becomes less manicured as you go; backtracking is necessary to return to Wind Gap.

7. St. John the Evangelist Church, built in 1908, was constructed with money willed by Martin O’Loughlin who emigrated and prospered in the gold mines of Australia. Built near the churchyard of an earlier St. John’s Church (the old cemetery is nearby), the building was extensively remodeled in 1984 and features Victorian tiles, beautiful windows, interesting organ pipes and visitors are encouraged to look for angels among the ornamentation.

8. St. John’s Abbey was built by Augustinian Monks in the 13th century and served as the parish church of the suburb of St. John’s. Because of its continuous run of windows on the east wall, it became known as “the lantern of Ireland.”
Jerpoint Abbey, built in the 12th century by the Benedictines, features unique stone carvings on the pillars of the cloister that provide a unique look at 14th and 15th-century life.

Kells Priory is a spectacular complex of ruins. Founded in the 12th century, this Augustinian priory offers an almost endless assortment of 13th to 15th-century buildings, walls and towers to explore. The best way to enter the priory is from the old mill located near the Kings River.

Kilree Abbey offers a quiet ruined church with a well-preserved round tower.

Kilfane Glen and Waterfall offers a picturesque walk through the gardens and a view of an artificial waterfall and rustic cottage.

Bennetsbridge, home of Nicholas Moss Pottery, has become a popular destination for Irish crafts.

Duiske Abbey was restored in the 1970s to create a medieval church that accommodates a modern liturgy. Local craftsmen paid special attention to medieval construction methods, going so far as using wedges and dowels instead of nails. The site includes a visitor center, gift shop and two high crosses.

Dunmore Cave, famous for a massacre that took place inside. Guided tours of this Duchas (Irish Heritage) site take visitors into the gaping mouth of the cave and share historic and geological story of the cave.

Distance to:
- Belfast 177mi (284km)
- Cahir 42mi (67km)
- Cashel 47mi (75km)
- Clonmel 32mi (52km)
- Cork 92mi (148km)
- Dublin 73mi (117km)
- Galway 107mi (172km)
- Killarney 123mi (198km)
- Limerick 70mi (113km)
- Rosslare 61mi (98km)
- Shannon 75mi (119km)
- Waterford 30mi (48km)
- Wexford 50mi (80km)