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In many ways, Dublin is just another cosmopolitan city, with its ethnic restaurants, hop-on hop-off bus tours and major hotel chains catering to the needs of the transient visitor. It is the most congested place in Ireland, holding more than one third of the islandâ€™s population of four and a half million people. But if you explore carefully, you can still capture some of its Irish essence when conversing with cabbies, seeing how the rawness of its turbulent political history unfolds at various historic sites, going to plays at the Abbey theatre and walking in the footsteps of James Joyce. Americans are still well loved in Ireland, even if often chastised for their political conservatism and unwillingness to engage in heated political or religious arguments.

Focus on the rich literary tradition of Ireland with a visit to the Writerâ€™s Museum. Here, Dublinâ€™s literary celebrities from the past three hundred years are brought to life through their books, letters, portraits and personal items. For James Joyce fans, from its location in a beautifully restored 18th century Georgian townhouse, the James Joyce Centre is another new attraction, seeking to inspire curiosity into the life and works of James Joyce through education, exhibitions, workshops, lectures, walking tours and special events. If there are Irish playwrights being showcased at the historic Abbey theatre, donâ€™t hesitate to end the day with a play and a dining experience at one of the plentiful restaurants around Oâ€™Connell Street. The Abbey theatre is Dublinâ€™s oldest and most well known, but arts and culture thrive in the City and seem more easily accessible and affordable than other major cities.

For many beer drinkers, the Guinness tour is the highlight of their visit to Dublin. You can learn how the Irish stout is a brewed, stock up on Irish souvenirs, and get a free tasting at the rooftop Gravity Bar.

Dublin is central in its location, and a good launching ground for trips to many other historic sites, in the local environs and even the surrounding counties. The high speed DART train which can whisk you up for a day trip to Belfast and Northern Ireland. For those who donâ€™t need terra firma at all times, Wales and the United Kingdom are just a long ferry ride away.

One not-to-be missed day trip from Dublin is to Newgrange and Knowth,in County Meath, one hour north of Dublin airport. One of Irelandâ€™s most visited heritage sites, the huge visitor center and parking area provide some indication of its popularity. In a country where so much history was loss to Cromwellâ€™s excesses and the recent civil war, the rebuilding of Newgrange to its Stone Age majesty is a marvel. Although Knowth has the more interesting carved stones, Newgrange makes up for it with its huge size and reassembled facade. Newgrange is a megalithic Passage Tomb, steeped in mystery and built about 3200 BC. The passage and chamber of Newgrange are illuminated only by the winter solstice sunrise. A shaft of sunlight shines through the roof box over the entrance and penetrates the passage to light up the chamber, making it the worldâ€™s oldest solar observatory. The dramatic event lasts for 17 minutes at dawn from the 19th to the 23rd of December, and tickets to watch this eerie moment on these days are very popular. At other times, the use of lighting and the imagination and lyrical voices of the storyteller guides describe the feeling of that moment of light on those few wintry days.

Not too far from Newgrange is the Hill of Tara, perhaps the most sacred place in Ireland and once its spiritual centre. It is also well known for the rally held by Irelandâ€™s freedom fighter, Daniel Oâ€™Connell, in his fight for liberation from the English. Sweeping views over the Boyne Valley add to

the atmosphere of this site and guides help you make sense of the hollows and mounds holding great spiritual significance for the early kings of Ireland. Standing at the top of the hill, looking out over the Valley and contemplating the rich history and culture of this small island is an appropriate way to end your visit.

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