

YOUR FIRST DAY AT THE RACES



IRISH HORSE RACING GUIDES



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Your First Day at the Races in Ireland

Everything a first-time racegoer needs to know, from what to wear and when to arrive to how the day actually works once you are through the gates.

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At a glance

RACECOURSES IN IRELAND

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DRESS CODE

No official dress code at Irish racecourses; smart casual is a safe choice

CHILDREN

Under 18s usually free with a parent or guardian (check each course)

TURNSTILES AT GALWAY

Open two hours before the first race

GAMBLING SUPPORT HELPLINE

1800 936 725 (GamblingCare.ie, 24 hours)

A day at the races is one of the easiest days out in Ireland to get right. You do not need to know anything about horses, you do not need to bet, and you will be surrounded by people who are happy to tell you what is going on. This guide covers the practical bits so you can relax and enjoy it.

1 What a race day looks like

Most Irish race meetings have seven or eight races, roughly half an hour apart, over an afternoon or evening. The rhythm is the same all day. Before each race the horses are led around the **parade ring**, where you can see them up close and watch the jockeys get their final instructions. They then canter down to the start, the race is run, and the winners come back to the **winners' enclosure** for the presentation. Then it all starts again.

Ireland has 26 racecourses, from big venues like Leopardstown and the Curragh to small country tracks that race only a few times a year. Some race on the Flat, some over jumps, and many do both. If you are not sure what that means, read our National Hunt vs Flat explainer.

2 Choosing your first meeting

For a first visit there are two good approaches.

- **A quiet midweek meeting.** Smaller crowds, easy parking, cheaper tickets and plenty of room at the parade ring. Ideal if you want to learn how it all works.
- **A festival.** Busier and louder, with music, food stalls and a proper sense of occasion. The Galway Races, the Listowel Harvest Festival and Killarney's summer racing are famous for the atmosphere as much as the racing.

Our Irish racing calendar shows what is on through the year.

3 Tickets

Buy online in advance where you can. Many courses charge less for advance tickets than at the gate: Galway, for example, offers an advance price that is €5 cheaper than buying on the day. Big festival days can sell out, so do not leave those to chance.

General admission gets you into the main enclosure, stands, bars and parade ring. Most courses also sell hospitality or restaurant packages if you want a guaranteed seat and a meal.

4 Bringing children

Irish racing is very family friendly. Many courses let under 18s in free when they are with a parent or guardian. The Curragh, for instance, offers free entry to under 18s on standard race days, though Classic days may carry a small charge for 13 to 18 year olds, and it has a playground and kids' zone. Galway admits children aged 17 and under free with a parent. Fairyhouse runs a family day with free entry for children on Easter Sunday. Always check the course website for the day you are going, as policies differ.

5 What to wear

There is no official dress code at Irish racecourses. Smart casual is the safe choice: what you might wear to a nice lunch out. The bigger question is the weather. You will be outdoors, often on grass, and Irish weather changes fast.

- Comfortable shoes you can walk and stand in all day. Heels sink into grass.
- A proper coat or rain jacket, even in summer.
- Layers for evening meetings, which get cold once the sun goes down.

Some festival days have best dressed competitions, such as Ladies' Day at Galway and at the Fairyhouse Easter Festival. You can dress up for these if you like, but nobody is required to.

6 Getting there and arriving

Each racecourse page on this site has specific directions, including any rail links or shuttle buses. A few general tips:

- **Arrive early.** Galway suggests arriving at least an hour before the first race; its turnstiles open two hours before. That gives you time to park, find your bearings and look around before it gets busy.
- **On festival days, expect traffic.** Big meetings bring in tens of thousands of people and local traffic plans are put in place. Public transport or an organised shuttle can save a lot of stress.
- **Plan your way home.** If you intend to have a drink, sort out a lift, taxi or public transport before you go.

7 Money and food

Card and contactless payment are widely accepted. Galway, for example, encourages contactless payment but also has ATMs on site. It is still worth carrying some cash as a back-up. Every course has bars and food, from burger vans to sit-down restaurants.

8 Betting: how it works on course

You do not have to bet at all, and plenty of racegoers never do. If you are curious, here is how it works, explained neutrally.

- **On-course bookmakers** stand in a line in front of the stands, usually called the betting ring, each with a board showing the prices they are offering. You tell them your horse and your stake, and they give you a ticket.
- **The Tote** is a pool betting system. All the stakes on a race go into a pool, and the dividend is shared among the winning tickets after a deduction. Galway, for example, lists Tote Ireland alongside off-course firms and independent bookmakers on site.
- **Each way** means two bets: one on the horse to win and one on it to be placed. The number of places paid depends on the race.

If you do bet, decide in advance what you are happy to spend, treat it as the cost of entertainment, and stop when it is gone.

Note

If gambling is causing problems for you or someone close to you, free confidential help is available. GamblingCare.ie runs a national helpline on 1800 936 725, open 24 hours a day, and the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland lists support services.

9 Making the most of the day

- **Watch a race from the rail.** Standing at the running rail as the field thunders past is something television cannot give you.
- **Spend time at the parade ring.** It is the best place to see the horses and the people who look after them.
- **Buy a racecard.** It lists every runner, the jockey, the trainer and the owner's colours, and makes the whole day easier to follow.
- **Talk to people.** Racegoers are a sociable crowd and are usually delighted to explain what is happening.

10 Where to go next

Once you have caught the bug, there is plenty more to explore. You can learn how racehorse ownership and syndicates work, look at jobs in Irish racing, or see where racehorses go after their racing careers in our guide to buying a retired racehorse.

Questions people ask

Is there a dress code at Irish racecourses?

There is no official dress code at Irish racecourses. Smart casual is a safe choice, with comfortable shoes and a rain jacket, as you will be outdoors on grass for most of the day.

Can I bring children to the races?

Yes. Many Irish courses admit under 18s free when accompanied by a parent or guardian, and some have play areas. Policies differ by course and by day, so check the racecourse website before you travel.

Do I have to bet?

Not at all. Plenty of racegoers never place a bet. If you choose to, set a budget in advance. Free support is available from GamblingCare.ie on 1800 936 725.

What time should I arrive?

Aim to arrive about an hour before the first race. At big festivals such as Galway, turnstiles open two hours before the first race and traffic builds quickly.

Sources

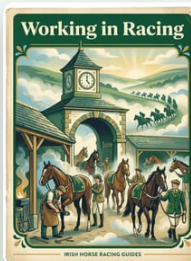
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Last reviewed 30 September 2026. Dates and details change, so check with the racecourse before you travel.



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