Ireland’s southernmost city – capital of the beautiful south west – is high on the Lonely Planet’s list of favourite cities in the world.

It’s a spirited, independent place. Cosmopolitan and creative too. And that’s hardly surprising. For Cork is an ancient maritime port that’s spent centuries trading with – and being influenced by – the wider world. And it’s a place of learning, with one of Ireland’s oldest universities at its heart.

Cork’s got the depth you’d expect from a European Capital of Culture – the galleries, museums and live performances, plus a packed events calendar, with more than 20 major festivals each year. And there’s a lively city buzz. But there’s also a no-nonsense warmth and an unpressured pace that makes you feel time is on your side here.

Nature has a hand in that. Cork was founded 14 centuries ago, on islands in an estuary, where the River Lee joins the world’s second-largest natural harbour. Waterways circle the city-centre, crossed by 22 bridges. Hilly neighbourhoods climb the river banks, stacked with colourful houses – and the University’s historic campus seamlessly connects to the city centre.

Between the grand Georgian parades and medieval alleyways of the central island is the centrepiece 18th century English Market. It’s loud, lively, and packed with flavour: Cork in a nutshell. The star of this indoor casbah – and of Cork’s great eating-out scene – is the local produce from this fertile region’s fields and seas.

To the south, the deep bowl of Cork Harbour, with its sailing races and regattas, is circled by some Ireland’s iconic places. At the harbour’s edge Cork’s port of Cobh, departure point for millions of emigrants, and the last calling point of the Titanic, is a place with a poignant history beneath its cheerful seaside feel.

East of the Harbour is Jameson’s distillery at Midleton: a pure taste of Ireland for millions around the world. To the North West lies Blarney and its castle, legendary home of Irish eloquence …

Just south again, on the Atlantic coast, is picture-perfect, smart Kinsale with its yachts, its pretty quayside, its narrow 18th century streets, its festivals and its gourmet cuisine.

Grounded, witty and irreverent, “The People’s Republic of Cork” likes to set itself apart from the rest of the country. Yet for all that, it’s an intensely Irish place to visit.