

Dingle Peninsula (Below left to right) Skellig Ring; Ross Castle, Dingle; Bog Village.

active travel

ENCHANTING Ireland



Driving Dingle and the Ring of Kerry By Wendy & Rob Lindsay

The old saying “Once is never enough” certainly applies to Ireland. There’s something about that beguiling land that entices one to return again and again. So on our most recent trip there, we decided to head out and discover more of the popular southwest.

The new motorway south from Shannon Airport made travel a breeze, and we were in Limerick in no time. Less than 20 kilometres out (along N20/N21) we passed through Adare. What a charming spot. With thatched cottages lining the main street and roses blooming everywhere, it’s little wonder Adare became the first place on our “Return To” list for next time.

In the southwest of Ireland, five great peninsulas jut into the sea. Our aim this time was to explore the two most northerly, driving out the Dingle Peninsula, around Dingle Bay, then on to the Ring of Kerry. We had been advised that spring and fall are the best times to drive the Ring to avoid the July/August crowd of tour buses and cars.

In Tralee, on the edge of town, the large working Blennerville Windmill marks the beginning of the road to Dingle. However, anyone doing ancestral research may wish to stop first at the Blennerville Visitor Centre to see its historic records, as it was a main emigration port during the Great Famine.

And for flower fanciers, Tralee also has a famous rose garden, which usually blooms until Christmas.

The highway carries on between the green-swathed Slieve Mish Mountains on the left and the sparkling sea on the right — a picture-perfect scene but for the rain.

Farther on, the highway crosses the peninsula, running down a valley between two mountain ranges. Small farms and fields neatly defined by hedgerows are reminiscent of a green patchwork quilt flung on the hillside.

Archeologists claim there has been habitation on the verdant Dingle Peninsula for over 6,000 years.



Delectable dinner at Moorings

Michael, of Sciúird Archaeological Tours, later unlocked these secrets for us, providing evidence of Neolithic Man, Celtic pagans, Romans and early Christians with just a glimpse at some of the 2,000 sites on the peninsula.

Rain storms had been dogging us all day, but just as we reached our lodging at Pax Guest House just outside the town of Dingle, the sun broke through, giving us the most splendid view over the fields and Dingle Harbour. However, from that distance we couldn't spot the town star, Fungi, a bottlenose dolphin who has chosen to live wild and free in Dingle Bay since 1983, much to the delight of tour boats and tourists.

Dingle, the only town on the peninsula, is a delightful collection of brightly painted houses and shops clustered along narrow, winding streets that lead down to the working boat-lined harbour. That evening we also discovered that it has an extensive choice for dining — from pubs to upscale restaurants — most featuring the area's famously fresh seafood. Irish whiskey ice cream was recommended as a delicious dessert — but we weren't able to find any. We did, however, window-shop and found some enticing little establishments that deserved a return trip.

From the coast road along Dingle Bay next morning, we had a splendid view across the storm-tossed waters to the brooding Macgillycuddy's Reeks, the highest mountain range in Ireland and the centrepiece of the Ring of Kerry.

Our first stop on the Ring was the Kerry Bog Village Museum near Glenbeigh. It offered a fascinating glimpse of Irish life from days gone by, when homes had thatched roofs and turf cutting was an essential skill for cooking and warmth. Owner John Mulvihill also introduced us to his prize Kerry Bog Pony and his pair of Irish wolfhounds — two species that were once endangered. Afterwards, we had a deliciously memorable lunch of wheaten bread, leek and potato

soup and the very best Irish coffee next door at the Red Fox Inn.

For a change of pace, we left the Ring route near Cahersiveen and caught the car ferry to Valentia Island. We drove its length, stopped at the excellent Skellig Experience museum and exited via the bridge into the delightful village of Portmagee. There, our harbour-view room at the Moorings had previously hosted the Irish prime minister — so we felt rather spoiled that night. Unfortunately, we were there on the wrong day to catch the céili — an evening of traditional music and dancing — in the adjoining pub. Nevertheless, it was rather nice to just loiter over one of the best dinners of the trip in the Moorings dining room.

Gerard Kennedy, the jovial manager/owner of the Moorings, told us of the Skellig Ring — an adventurous alternate route back to the Ring of Kerry — and the next morning found us on it, driving straight up the side of Bolus Mountain. It's a route where tour buses are not allowed and few tourists venture. In places it was like an open-air tunnel, in other places it twisted and turned, and in others the scenery was simply spectacular. It's a good road but not for timid drivers, for in some remote stretches, we felt we were alone with the sheep and crags. In one bay, we had absolutely the best view of the mysterious mist-shrouded Skellig Islands.

Returning to the Ring of Kerry, we were back with our fellow tourists, enjoying the natural beauty of coves, cliffs, bays, scenic cliff-top lookouts, and rugged countryside sprinkled with a few towns. We arrived at the edge of Killarney's lower lake in time for a guided tour of Ross Castle. With a storm raging outside, the stone fortress seemed in its element as we climbed the winding stone steps to the tower and our guide told us the legend of the castle's builder, O'Donoghue, rising from the lake on his white steed.

Our visit to nearby Muckross House and its gardens the next day provided a marked contrast in castles. Muckross is a palatial manor house, elegant and large enough to have hosted Queen Victoria and her entourage of 100. The house, its extensive grounds, the Muckross weaving studio, and a large, well-stocked gift shop will be worth another visit when we have more time.

Our last night was spent in the town of Killarney, which almost seems like the capital of the Ring of Kerry with street after street after street filled with hotels, most with at least

one tour bus in the parking lot. Dinner that night was at Bricin on High Street, recommended by the mistress of Killarney Lodge Guest House. We tried her favourite, boxty, for the first, but we hope not the last, time. It's an Irish potato pancake cooked on a griddle like a crepe and served with a choice of fillings. Apparently, there's an Irish saying that goes like this:

*Boxty on the griddle
Boxty in the pan
If you can't make Boxty
You'll never get a man*

On this trip, we discovered why Ireland reputedly has 1,000 shades of green, but despite the rain, it's the people we'll long remember for their charm, genuine hospitality and refreshing sense of fun. As the airport shuttle driver said with a wink and a grin, "To be sure, you didn't come to lie on the beach and get a tan. Now you'll have to come back and see us in the sunshine." You know, he's right. ■

Trip Planning

Tourism Ireland
416.925.6368 or discoverireland.com



Skellig Ring



Portmagee



Famine Village, Dingle