

Ireland's Mystic Islands

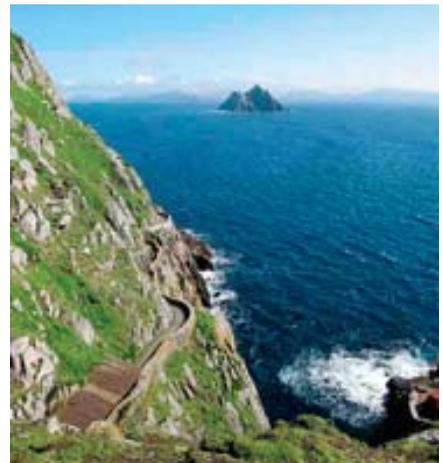
Island-hopping on
Ireland's west coast
can take you back
in time

By Wendy and Rob Lindsay

Long ago, when the earth was thought to be flat, Ireland was the limit of European civilization, its west-coast islands literally at the end of the world. Fraught with folk tales of daring monks and a pirate queen, these islands are an intriguing place to visit.

The Skellig Islands

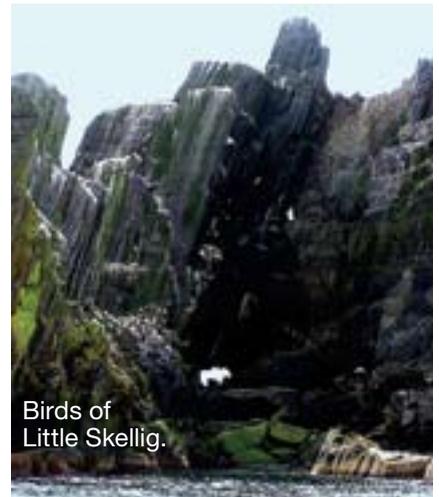
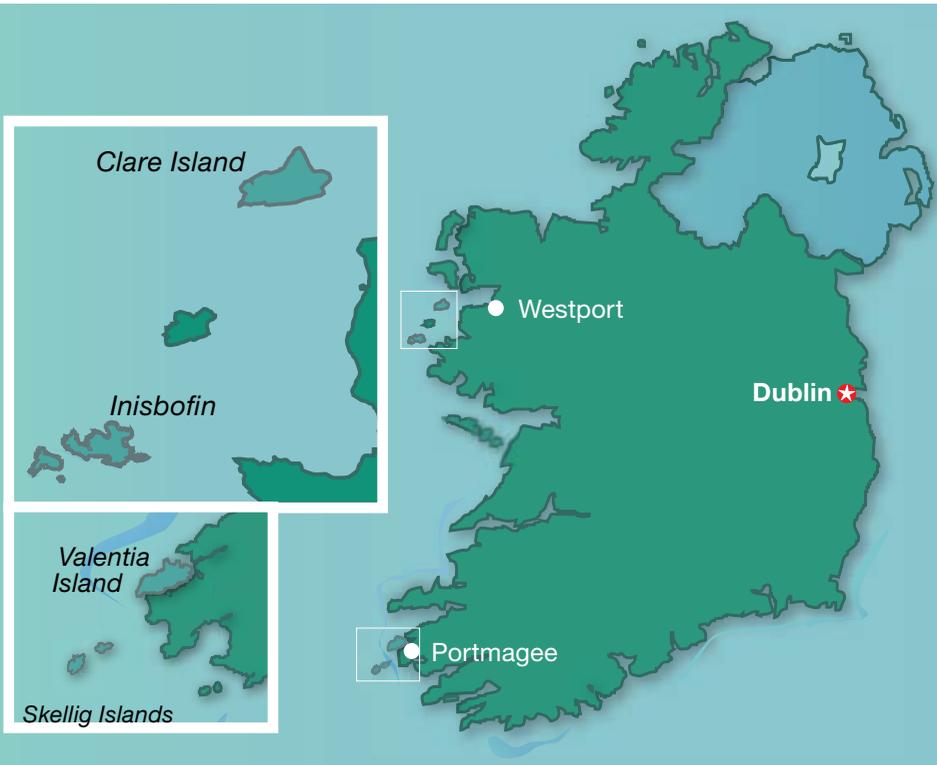
Perhaps the most mysterious of all are the Skellig Islands. Often shrouded in mist and cloud, these two wild, bleak, shark-tooth-shaped islands rise from the sea just over 10 kilometres (six miles) off the Iveragh Peninsula, near the Ring of Kerry. The smaller island, Little Skellig, is a preserve for northern gannets. The larger, Skellig Michael, is home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site: around the sixth century, an independent group of monks carved and chiselled a hermitage into the summit of one of the island's two peaks, where it has clung for 1,500 years. It's thought that from 12 to 15 monks lived and worshipped in the six stone beehive huts and boat-shaped chapel. Historians



Photos: Dreamstime (R. M. Hayman (cliffs) and Wavebreakmedia Ltd (beehive huts); Flickr/Padraig Moran (boat sculpture) and MWK Architects (stairs).

Skellig Michael is home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site.





Birds of Little Skellig.



Puffins on Little Skellig.

still wonder whether the monastic life of tending gardens and goats, fishing, and praying on this inhospitable pinnacle above the raging sea was a life of penance, rebellion, or communion with nature at the edge of civilization.

When the seas are calm, tour boats bring a small number of able-bodied tourists to clamber up a ladder and walk some of the 2,300 steps chiselled into the rock to link the hermitage with three sea-level landing points. Fortunately, for stormy days like the one on which we visited, there is the excellent Skellig Heritage Centre on nearby Valentia Island. On a clear day, from the glass-walled coffee shop, you can see the Skellig rocks in the distance. Aerial photos, site maps, artifacts, and replicas give a good sense of the islands. A two-thirds' scale model of a beehive hut gives a good close-up look at the dry-stone building method (no mortar) that has withstood the test of time.

The hermitage rebuffed at least three Viking raids in the ninth century and everything the Atlantic could throw at it over the years, but finally the monks gave in to Church pressure to come ashore in the 11th century. The museum sells a large selection of books and photos for those wishing to learn more. The museum

Knightstown.



building itself, built inconspicuously into the hillside and featuring a grass roof, is an award-winning structure.

Valentia Island

We had come to Valentia Island by ferry after touring the lovely Dingle Peninsula and beginning the Ring of Kerry circuit. In less than 10 minutes, a little car ferry had carried us from Reenard Point, near Cahersiveen on the mainland, to picturesque Knightstown, the largest settlement on the island. The little shops and tea rooms were quaint and inviting. We next headed for the centre of the island to drive up Geokaun Mountain to see the amazing view of Ireland's southwest coast. Our view, unfortunately, was hampered by clouds and heavy rain, but we could imagine how spectacular it would look in the sunshine.

After our visit to the Skellig Heritage



Bridge between Portmagee and Valentia Island.

Centre, the director, John O'Sullivan, guided us to Telegraph Field, the historic point on Valentia's southern tip where Ireland and North America were joined by the first transatlantic cable. It's also a good spot to view the Skellig rocks. One photo can capture the ancient and the near-modern together.

After leaving the island via a bridge, we arrived in the fishing village of Portmagee. From our room at The Moorings, we enjoyed a harbour view and learned the Irish prime minister had recently stayed in our room. A sign in the pub announced an evening of traditional music and dancing, and we were disappointed to see that it would be after we left. We were loitering over one of the best dinners of the trip in The Moorings dining room when the jovial owner and manager, Gerard Kennedy, told us of the Skellig Ring—an adven-