

IRELAND**Walking in County Kerry****12 days**

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Day 1 Arrive in Dublin

Today we arrive in Dublin, Ireland's capital city.

Since its beginning around AD 988, Dublin has accommodated many diverse nationalities from the Vikings and English invaders, to sailors, traders and writers who settled and lived here over the centuries. Modern Dublin is being transformed by enormous changes brought about by the recent economic boom, though the city will always have a reputation as a great historical city, and its strong links with world literature and the arts are readily apparent.

Overnight in Dublin.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Dublin: City Tour

Today we have a guided WALKING tour of Dublin.

Our tour will likely begin with a visit to Trinity College and the Book of Kells. Founded by Queen Elizabeth I to "civilize" Dublin, Trinity College is Ireland's oldest and most famous college. You can walk in the footsteps of some of the college's noted alumni -- among them Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, and Samuel Beckett.

The Book of Kells is an illuminated manuscript that is a masterwork of Western calligraphy and is widely regarded as Ireland's finest national treasure. Transcribed by Celtic monks ca. 800, it contains the four Gospels of the New Testament in Latin. The decorations are all high quality and often highly complex. Some decorations can only be fully seen with magnifying glasses, although lenses of the required power are not known to have been available until hundreds of years after the book's completion!

Merrion Square warrants a stop in order to learn about Dublin's Georgian past. The square was laid out after 1762 and was largely complete by the beginning of the 19th century. It is considered one of the city's finest surviving squares and the best-preserved Georgian era residential architecture. It also contains a statue of Oscar Wilde, who resided in No. 1, Merrion Square from 1855 to 1876. Also nearby are several government buildings and cultural institutions.

Our tour continues to St Stephens Green, a leafy and peaceful oasis located at the top of Grafton St, the main street and commercial heart of Dublin, popular for shopping and people watching. We will stroll down Grafton and enter the area of Temple Bar, located on the south bank of the River Liffey, with its well-preserved medieval street pattern and narrow cobbled streets. It is promoted as "Dublin's cultural quarter" with many pubs and a lively nightlife.

Onto St. Patrick's Cathedral, the largest church in Ireland. Unusually, Dublin has two cathedrals belonging to the Church of Ireland, which act effectively as co-cathedrals. The site of St. Patrick's Cathedral is said to be the earliest Christian site in Ireland, where St. Patrick baptized converts. The present building was built between 1191 and 1270. For friends of world literature this is a pilgrimage and a must -- Jonathan Swift of "Gulliver" fame was Dean and is buried in the cathedral.

Overnight in Dublin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Dublin - Tralee - Dingle

This morning we travel by train to Tralee (+/- 4 hours), the capital of County Kerry. From here we transfer by road the short distance to Dingle, a harbour town once fortified and steeped in history. Dingle was once notorious for being the location for the country's bouyant smuggling trade, it also served as a base for trading with Spain and France. These days though, people flock to Dingle for its vibrant social scene; traditional Irish music, dancing and a vast array of restaurants, many of which specialise in seafood for which the town is famous.

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This compact town is a great place for browsing through numerous craft shops and enjoying the lively ambiance.

This afternoon we strike out on a two-mile walk along the harbour shoreline, over the rocks and sheep pastures to the harbour entrance. We may catch a glimpse of "Fungie," the famous dolphin who has been entertaining the town's visitors for more than a decade. The large male porpoise seems to prefer the company of people to that of the passing schools of his own kind, enjoying nuzzling up to snorklers and frolicking about in the wakes of the "dolphin watch" tour boats.

We'll have a close look at Hussey's Folly, a squatty, castle-like tower made of stone and a relic of the famine years of the 1840's. It was the idea of Edward Hussey, who paid for the construction. The sole purpose of the project was to give employment to relieve some of the distress caused to locals. The building had no special purpose.

Overnight in Dingle. Milltown House Guesthouse (or similar).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 The Dingle Way to prehistoric Ring Fort

The Dingle Way is one of over 30 long-distance walking trails. Situated in the south-west of the Ireland, the walk completes a circuit of the Dingle Peninsula, starting and finishing in Tralee, the capital of Kerry. The entire trail is 179km long and takes an adult who is reasonably fit an average of 8-9 days to walk.

Today's walk commences at Ventry Harbour. Several small rivers feed into the sea along the strand and are crossed by bridge. This sandy section lasts for around 2.5km before coming back to firmer terrain. This stretch of the Dingle Way passes spectacular scenery on all sides as the trail skirts the base of Mount Eagle. At 160m above sea level, the view over the Atlantic gradually starts to include the Blasket Islands as the trail rounds Sleat Head. A curious feature that distracts from the view to the sea is the remnants of clochans -- more commonly known as beehive huts. The mountainside is littered with them in various stages of ruin.

The last part of this stage finds the trail back on the main road for 3km before descending towards a picturesque pier that has become a true icon of Ireland through its depiction on numerous postcards. The next turn to the right leads to the nucleus of Dunquin. The continuation of trail ahead leads to the heritage centre, where the full poignant story of the Blasket Islands can be appreciated.

We return to Dingle.

DAY SUMMARY: Distance - 9.6 km / 6 miles. Ascent - 183m / 600 ft.

Overnight in Dingle. Milltown House Guesthouse (or similar).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 5 Mount Brandon Area

Today we travel by coach through scenic Connor Pass. As it swings towards the south it rises at the side of a large valley formed by glaciers that came from a semi-circle of coums or corries in the surrounding mountains. From the top of the pass there are breathtaking views in fine weather of lowlands, mountains and sea.

We return to Dingle via an old walking path over the Brandon Range through Mullaghaveal. This may have been used as the route to the workhouse in famine times. The hill takes its name from Saint Brendan "The Navigator", who legend suggests climbed to the summit around AD 530 to see the Americas, before setting sail for them.

DAY SUMMARY: Distance - 11km / 7 miles. Ascent - 251m / 825 ft.

Overnight in Dingle. Milltown House Guesthouse (or similar).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Dingle - Sneem - Portmagee

Today's coach transfer takes us along the northern and southern shores of Dingle Bay and continuing on the renowned route, the Ring of Kerry, to Sneem. Sneem is immaculately kept, with traditional buildings, pubs, restaurants and craft shops, painted in an array of beautiful colours. On the village green there is a sculpture of former President of Ireland, Cearbhall O'Dalaigh who had lived in Sneem.

We continue to Portmagee, or Magee's Port as it was formerly known. The name comes from Captain Theobald Magee, a notorious 18th century smuggler. Having served in the army of King James as an officer, Magee 'retired' to a life of merchant shipping between France, Portugal and Ireland. Thanks to the intricately chisled coast around the Southwest, his trade in contraband spirits, textiles and tea and tobacco was extremely hard to police and therefore extremely profitable.

Overnight in Portmagee. The Moorings Guesthouse (or similar).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Skellig Rocks

A visit to the Skellig Region would not be complete without a visit to the Skelligs World Heritage Site. Today's full day boat excursion* takes us to Skellig Michael, the larger of the two islands and the site of the world's finest example of an early Christian monastic settlement. The monastic complex lies 12km off the coast on a rocky pinnacle and dates to the 6th or 7th century. The monastery survived for about six centuries before being abandoned in the 13th century. The monastic enclosure consists of six beehive-shaped huts of mortarless stone construction, two oratories and a church. According to annals, the Vikings raided in 812 and 823 and found an established community.

The overall experience is quite amazing, to be standing 220 metres above the rocks looking down at the rough sea and letting the wind fill your lungs with fresh air.

* If weather conditions are unsuitable, we will walk to the beautiful Bray Head on Valentia Island with superb views of the Skellig Islands. Valentia island is rich in wild and marine life, standing stones, sub-tropical flora and also the location of the first transatlantic cable. Visit Knightstown and Valentia grotto in the Slate quarry. Discover the ancient Ogham standing stones dotted around the island. In the afternoon, visit an Irish chocolate factory!

Overnight in Portmagee. The Morrings Guesthouse (or similar).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Portmagee - the Kerry Way - Killarney

This morning we check out of our guest house in Portmagee and continue on the Ring of Kerry to Kells. From here we'll begin our walk along a leg of the Kerry Way with superb views over Dingle Bay and Rossbeigh Beach. This is an early Christian route and a medieval coaching road; we make a couple of detours to view archaeological artifacts and 4,000 year old rock art. We can also make a diversion to Rossbeigh Beach and maybe enjoy a brisk swim in the Atlantic.

We continue by road to Killarney, nestled just off the northern tip of Killarney National Park. Sites of interest in the town reflect it's strong religious and educational history. Killarney was a church foundation from the 5th or 6th century, and settlement began here from around 1500. This evening we'll have a walking orientation of Killarney and its colourful laneways, and historic buildings dating back to the days of the landlord.

DAY SUMMARY: Distance - 17km / 10.5 mi. Ascent - 300m / 1,000 ft.

Overnight in Killarney.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 9 Lakes of Killarney Boat Trip

Today we enjoy one of Ireland's best day trips on an open top boat through the three Lakes of Killarney. We finish our day by with a wonderful walk through the Gap of Dunloe, a beautiful glacial valley in the Macgillacuddy Reeks mountain range, which dominate the skyline of Killarney. The scenery all around the lakes is breathtaking and there are many viewing points.

This evening you can enjoy Killarney's many shops, restaurants, and pubs.

Overnight in Killarney.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Killarney National Park

Today's gentle walk through Killarney National Park allows us to experience the stunning lake and mountain scenery as well as the historical aspect of the park, with a visit of 19th century Muckross House, the Gardens, and the Traditional Farms, where guests walk back in time to a working 1930s farm.

We also visit Muckross Abbey, one of the major ecclesiastical sites found in the park. It was founded in 1448 as a Franciscan Friary for the Observantine Franciscans by Donal McCarthy Mor.

It has had a violent history, and has been damaged and reconstructed many times. The friars were often persecuted and subjected to raids by marauding groups.

The park also contains many natural features of national and international importance, such as native oakwoods and yew woods together with an abundance of evergreen trees and shrubs and a profusion of bryophytes and lichens which thrive in the mild Killarney climate. The native red deer are unique in Ireland with a presence in the country since the last ice age. Killarney National Park was designated as a Biosphere Reserve in 1981 by the United Nations.

Later we'll pop into a traditional Irish pub for a celebration of Irish music!

DAY SUMMARY: 10km / 6 miles. Ascent / Descent: None

Overnight in Killarney.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Killarney - Dublin

Today we return to Dublin by train (+/- 3 hours). Balance of the day at leisure in Dublin.

Overnight in Dublin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Departure

Departure from Dublin.

SLAN ABHAILE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast