

## History

The word *Scellig* means a rock, particularly a steep rock. The first reference to Skellig occurs in legend when it is given as the burial place of Ir, son of Milesius, who was drowned during the landing of the Milesians. A fifth century reference describes the flight of Duagh, King of West Munster, to the Skelligs. We have no means of knowing whether a monastery existed on the site at that time.

A monastery may have been founded as early as the 6th century but the first reference to monks on the Skelligs dates to the 8th century when the death of 'Suibhni of Scelig' is recorded. It is referred to in the annals in the 9th and 10th centuries and its dedication to Saint Michael, the Archangel, appears to have happened some time before 1044 when the death of 'Aedh of Scelic-Mhichil' is recorded. It is probable that this dedication to Saint Michael was celebrated by the building of Saint Michael's church in the monastery. The church of Saint Michael was mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis in the late 12th Century. His account of the miraculous supply of communal wine for daily Mass in St. Michael's church implies that the monastery was in constant occupation at that time.

In the 13th century a general climatic deterioration resulted in colder weather and increased storms in the seas around Skellig. This, together with changes in the structure of the Irish Church, signalled the end of the eremitical community on Skellig. The monks appear to have moved to the Augustinian Priory of Ballinskelligs on the mainland at about this time. The Prior of Ballinskelligs was referred to as the Prior of St. Michael's (*de Rupe*) implying that the site still formed an important part of their monastery at that time.

In 1578, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the island passed to the Butler family although the site continued to be a place of pilgrimage into the 18th century.

In the early 19th century the island was purchased by the predecessors of the Commissioners of Irish Lights in order to erect two lighthouses. They built the present east landing and built a road along the south and west side of the island to facilitate the construction of the two lighthouses situated on the west side of the island.

In 1880 the Office of Public Works took the monastic remains into State guardianship and commenced the repair of collapsed structures. Since that time the OPW has continued to repair and conserve the monastic remains. In 1989 the State purchased the island from the Commissioners of Irish Lights, with the exception of the lower (working) lighthouse. In 1996 the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

## Geology

The pinnacles of the Skellig Islands (Great Skellig, also known as Skellig Michael and Little Skellig), which rise 218m above the ocean, are formed from the durable Old Red Sandstone that also forms the backbone of the mountainous regions of South West Kerry and West Cork. These rocks began life as sediments deposited in the Devonian period some 400 million years ago. These rocks were subsequently altered in a period of folding and mountain building some 100 million years later. Sea level subsequently rose, forming the deep marine inlets of south-western Ireland and isolating the Skelligs from the mainland.

## Fauna and Flora

The Skellig Islands are two of Ireland's most important sites for breeding seabirds and are remarkable both for the size of their colonies and diversity of species. They support some of the biggest breeding populations of manx shearwater and storm petrel in the world. Other birds that breed on Skellig Michael include puffin, fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot, peregrine falcon, chough, raven, rock pippet and wheatear. Puffins can be seen on the island until early August every year. Little Skellig hosts the second largest colony of breeding gannets in the world and these can be viewed from the boat on the way to the island.



Grey seal haul out onto the rocky edges of the island and can be seen in the summer months. Rabbits and house mice can also be found on the island.

Due to its ornithological importance Skellig Michael is designated as a Statutory Nature Reserve, a Special Protection Area, and is a proposed Natural Heritage Area. Visitors are asked to please remember not to interfere in any way with the wildlife.

Much of Skellig Michael is composed of poorly vegetated habitats such as rocky sea cliffs and exposed rock. The vegetation that does occur is typical of highly exposed maritime conditions, limited by thin soil, steep ground, salt spray and high winds. Common plant species include Thrift, Sea Campion and Rock Sea-Spurrey, with patches of Red Fescue, Dock, Sea Spinach and Sea Mayweed occurring frequently.

## Getting there

Skellig Michael is 11.6 km from the mainland and is accessible by boat between the months of May and September, subject to weather conditions. Boats carrying passengers to Skellig Michael operate from Knightstown, Portmagee, Ballinskelligs and Caherdaniel. During the tourist season there is a guide service (located at the monastery) on Skellig Michael. On the mainland you can visit the Skelligs Experience on Valentia Island, just opposite Portmagee, where a visitor centre gives an insight into the island and its history.



## Visiting the Site

The seas can be quite rough and the weather unpredictable. So visitors should wear warm clothing and carry waterproofs. Visitors should also wear appropriate footwear for the climb as the steps can be slippery, particularly in wet weather. There are no toilets on the island and travellers should be aware that the trip in its entirety can be up to 6 hours. Visitors are advised to bring food and drink with them. Visitors are asked not to leave a trace of their visit on the island and bring back any litter to the mainland where it should be disposed of responsibly.

Visiting the Hermitage on the South Peak is discouraged as those without climbing experience could get into difficulties.

## Health and Safety

Skellig Michael is a precipitous rock and there are about 600 steps on the ascent to the monastery. **Any person with health issues should consider carefully before visiting the site. Visitors are requested to give serious consideration before deciding to bring small children to the island. If young children are brought they should be under strict supervision at all times. For safety reasons, and to minimise disturbance and damage to seabird breeding habitats, visitors must remain on recognised visitor routes while on the island. In order to protect the wildlife, dogs are prohibited from the island. Visitors should comply with all Safety Notices on the island. The Guides are the official monitors on the island and their instructions, particularly in relation to safety, must be complied with at all times.**

# Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry

World Heritage Site

VISITOR'S GUIDE



Comhshaoil, Oidhreacht agus Riailtas Áitiúil  
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



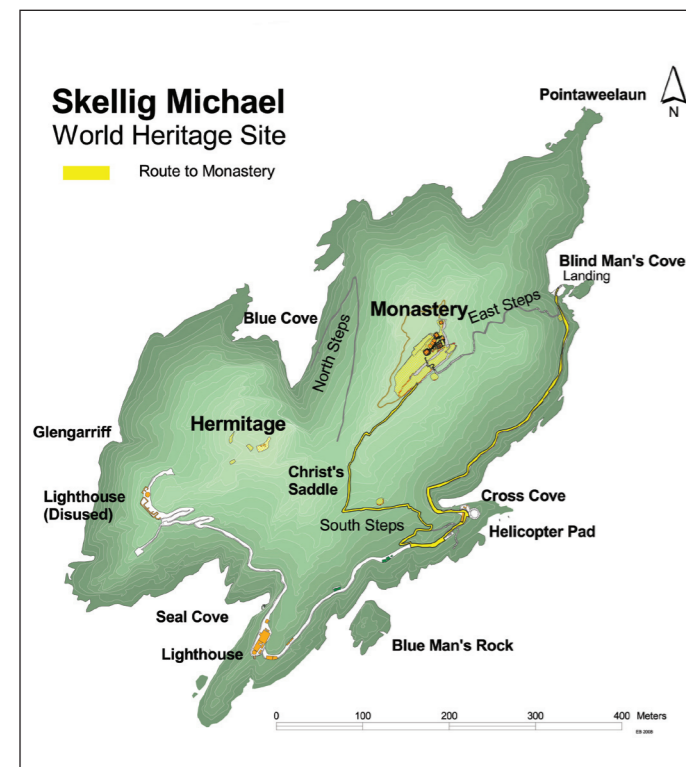
# Skellig Michael

## A World Heritage Site

### Introduction

Skellig Michael, comprising a well preserved monastery and a remote hermitage perched on a rock in the Atlantic, is the most spectacularly situated of all the early medieval Irish monastic sites. The island's isolation has helped to preserve and protect the monastic remains, allowing the visitor to marvel at the remarkable achievements of the monks. Skellig Michael is also an internationally renowned site for breeding seabirds with its steep rock slopes and cliffs providing nesting places for a variety of seabirds. It is this combination of cultural and natural history which imbues the island with a strong sense of beauty and spirituality.

When inscribing the site on the World Heritage List in 1996 UNESCO described Skellig Michael as a unique example of early religious settlement which illustrates, as no other site can, the extremes of Christian monasticism.



### Your visit

Your visit begins at Blind Man's Cove. The landing can be difficult in windy weather and caution is advised when disembarking from the boat. There was an original monastic landing at this point but it, and the lower 40 metres of steps, were removed in the 1820s in order to construct the present landing and the lighthouse road. Leaving the landing, you walk along the lighthouse road that skirts the south side of the island, gradually ascending as you go. After about 300 metres you reach Cross Cove where you can see guillemots, fulmars and razorbills nesting on the cliffs. You pass under the wooden canopy and, just past the helicopter pad, you can see below you another of the original monastic pathways up to the monastery. From this point you continue for about 50 metres to the beginning of the steps to the monastery. Here, if you look westward along the lighthouse road, you will see the lower of the two lighthouses, the only one still operational. The road is closed to the public from this point forward.

As you ascend the steps, after about 30 metres you will see a large vertical piece of bedrock known as the Wailing Woman. From the Wailing Woman you continue your ascent, following the steps as they rise steeply to the right, bringing you to Christ's Saddle – an area of flat ground between the two peaks of the island. Visitors are encouraged to consume any food they have brought with them in this area. The South Peak, which rises above you on the left as you arrive on Christ's Saddle, is the location of a hermitage built by the monks on the steep slopes and narrow ledges. This area poses challenges to those without climbing experience and visitors are discouraged from exploring it without prior permission (see Health and Safety section below). Images of the terraces, oratory and other structures on the South Peak may be viewed on [www.worldheritageireland.ie](http://www.worldheritageireland.ie).



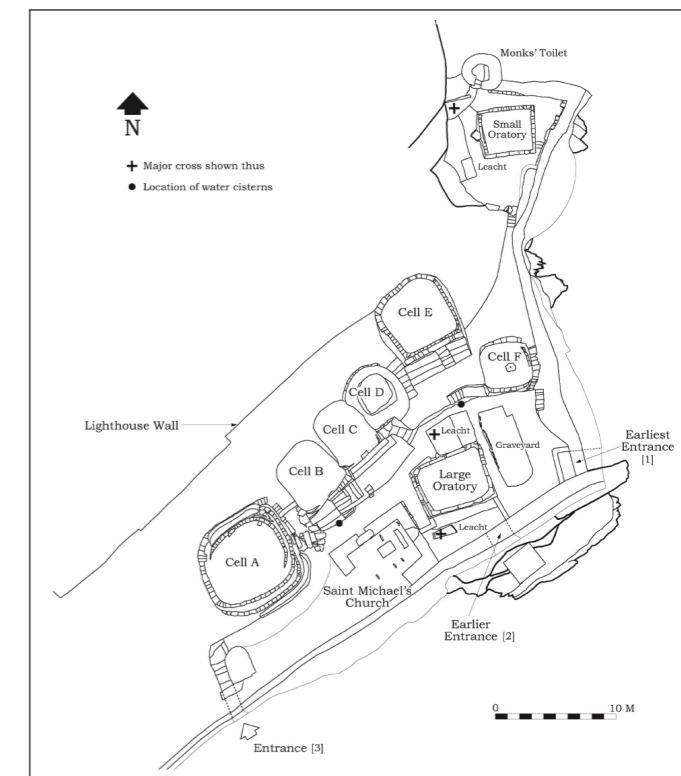
On your left, as you look at the South Peak, there is a small cave modified by the monks. Visitors will see a cross cut into the rock on the right hand side of the entrance. In front of you there is a fence which prevents access to the North Steps. These steps are closed to the public.

From Christ's Saddle another steep flight of steps continues up to the monastery. About half way up, you can see a cross-inscribed slab on your left side. In windy conditions extreme caution is needed on these steps.

The current entrance to the monastery, opened in the 19th century, leads in to the Upper Monks' Garden – an open area surrounded by dry-stone walls. Visitors gather here to commence their guided tour of the monastery.

In front of you is the Lower Monks' Garden with steps leading down to one of the original entrances to the monastery. The walls in this area collapsed on several occasions in antiquity and the large stones visible in the garden are part of this collapse. At the eastern end of the garden the remains of a monastic cell or clochán (Cell G) can be seen with its entrance facing you.

Continuing through the entrance in the inner enclosure wall, you enter the core area of the monastery. The first and largest of the beehive huts or cells (Cell A) must have served a communal function for the monks, while the others (Cells B-F) were most likely the residential cells. The cells date from different periods and represent a unique record of the development of drystone construction throughout the early medieval period. Beneath the plinth upon which the cells stand are two cisterns that collected rainwater from the site and stored it for use. A third cistern exists west of Cell A, outside the area of the monastic buildings.



Saint Michael's Church, the only mortared structure in the monastery, was probably built in the 11th century and remodelled in the 12th century. Behind this is the Large Oratory which may have been built in the 9th century. This oratory is roughly contemporary with the majority of the Cells. Next to the oratory is a *leacht* with a large upstanding cross. Behind the oratory is a pair of conjoined *leachta* known as the Monks' Graveyard. Excavations on the east and south sides of the monastic enclosure have revealed the presence of two early entrances to the inner enclosure (see plan). These indicate periods of collapse and rebuilding during the occupation of the monastic site and give us an insight into the evolution of the monastery into the form we see today.

Behind Cell F a set of steps leads you to the Small Oratory Terrace which contains a second oratory, a small *leacht*, a cross and a latrine. Structures in this area are fragile and can be viewed by visitors, but direct access to the terrace is not allowed.

### Further Information

Further information on the Skelligs can be accessed on [www.worldheritageireland.ie](http://www.worldheritageireland.ie), [www.archaeology.ie](http://www.archaeology.ie), [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie) and on [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie).