

EUROPE



Located off the coast of Connemara in the westernmost part of Ireland, tranquil Inishbofin Island is popular as a summer holiday destination.

PHOTOS: MARK SISSONS/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Islands sit at the edge of the world

Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way offers historic charm and natural wonders

MARK SISSONS

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Perched on a gale-swept sandstone cliff high above the roaring waves, I stare into the oceanic abyss, trying to comprehend the audacity of courage it took for a small group of men to venture into these uncharted waters off the storm-ravaged southwest coast of Ireland nearly 1,500 years ago.

They were a brotherhood of Catholic monks — no more than a dozen — driven to search for a remote haven safe from persecution during Europe's Dark Ages where they could practise their religion in solitude and isolation. What they discovered was a pair of massive, uninhabited rocks, their sheer, jagged, pyramidal walls towering over 200 metres above the savage sea.

On the larger of the two islands — these monks called it Skellig Michael — they built their monastery. It remains still stand, an awe-inspiring testament to the power of faith to overcome almost insurmountable human hardship.

"At the time this was considered the end of the world," explains a local skipper who has agreed to take me out to Skellig Michael and its smaller sister island, Skellig Beag, which lie 12 kilometres off the Iveragh Peninsula in County Kerry.

"They believed that if you ventured any further you fell off the earth. This monastery was built to keep the evil spirits out of the rest of the unknown world. Since there were no written records we can only imagine how they survived out here," he says.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Incredibly — or perhaps miraculously — generations of monks survived by carving a precarious existence with their bare hands out of this desolate rock that offered virtually no soil to grow food.

Instead, they looked to the



From the harbourside village of Portmagee, Ireland, fishing boats take tourists across 12 kilometres of open ocean to reach the Skellig Islands. The crumbling remnants of many castles, such as at right, dot Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way, providing rich settings for many a legend and myth, while the Great Western Greenway, the longest off-road walking and cycling trail in Ireland, at bottom, spans 42 kilometres.

Skelligs' wild bird and sea life for hard-caught sustenance. Skellig Beag, home today to the world's second-largest gannet colony — numbering over 50,000 — became their hunting ground. So did the surrounding waters, where they harvested shellfish and occasionally seals, then considered to be the spirits of the sea.

Today, the monastic complex these intrepid monks built on Skellig Michael is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized as an outstandingly well preserved remnant of early Christian monastic architecture. It seems fitting that the latest Star Wars film was partly filmed here, the furthest off the edge of the known medieval world I dare venture while on the Emerald Isle.

Sacred stories

Setting out down the west coast of Connemara from the charming town of Westport in County Mayo, I explore part of Ireland's so-called Wild Atlantic Way — a 2,500-kilometre meander through nine counties and three provinces, making it the longest defined coastal touring route in the world. Awaiting me is a rich tapestry of social and cultural influences that have contributed to shaping this bewitching

coastline, as ruggedly picturesque as it is steeped in history and Celtic myth.

Inhaling the salty Atlantic air, I feel the proverbial wind at my back while cycling from Westport to Achill along the Great Western Greenway, the longest off-road walking and cycling trail in Ireland. With its bucolic setting overlooking Clew Bay, this staged route offers plentiful points of interest along its 42-kilometre length.

A fascinating detour is Croagh Patrick, Ireland's sacred peak, which dominates the landscape of West Mayo. Climbing what's known as The Reek is an ancient tradition, with pilgrims still flocking here from all over Ireland to make their way up its conical slopes all night to reach the summit at dawn.

Near the foot of this mythic mountain is Ireland's Famine Memorial, dominated by an eerie sculpture depicting a ship overflowing with skeletal souls. It's a stark testament to the horrors of that dark period of 1845-49, when over a third of Ireland's population perished from starvation, and many more died fleeing their homeland's calamity in overcrowded ships bound for salvation in North America.

Further along lies the Renvyle Peninsula, where the likes of William Butler Yeats and Oscar Wilde mined much literary inspiration. Its castles, ancient forts, crumbling monasteries and long stretches of serene sandy beaches recall a romantic era that still feels largely unchanged since their time.



At Curragh Castle, I'm told the stirring story of Grace O'Malley, Ireland's infamous 16th-century Pirate Queen of the West who regularly raided and sacked these parts. The subject of countless traditional songs and poems, O'Malley famously once sailed to England to petition Elizabeth I but refused to bow before the monarch because Liz didn't recognize her as the Queen of Ireland. Given her homeland's centuries-long animosity toward its domineering neighbour it's little wonder the O'Malley legend is so enthusiastically recounted to this day.

Land of the White Cow

"Blueberry is too push for a scene," a seasoned scene-baking content judge declares at the Bia Bo Finne, a food festival that serves as an annual fall cornucopia of all things local and edible on Inishbofin Island, a popular holiday retreat 30 minutes by ferry off the coast of Connemara. "They only belong in muffins and pancakes," she sternly adds.

Derived from the Irish name Inis Bo Finne — Island of the White Cow — Inishbofin is home to just 160 hardy souls during its long, windy and wet off-season. In summer it swells with cottagers and day-trippers, eager for a taste of traditional rural life in a setting reminiscent of the Richard Harris film *The Field* (filmed in nearby County Galway).

After attending shoreline foraging, fish-filling, butchery and cooking demonstrations by chefs from all over Ireland, I step out

into Inishbofin's auric late afternoon light for a meditative stroll. A shower has just passed, leaving shafts of light and a glistening rainbow in its wake.

One of the most westerly points off the Irish coastline, Inishbofin is tailor-made for long, leisurely tramps along its kilometres of rolling pasture lands, dotted with sheep and secluded coves. Reaching the island's western edge as twilight descends, I watch the ominous Atlantic stretching toward the darkening horizon like a rippling blanket of blue-grey. Perhaps those ancient mariner monks once stood here too, dreaming of attaining solitude and serenity somewhere out there between the devil and the Wild Atlantic Way.

Getting there

WestJet offers seasonal service from Vancouver to Dublin via Toronto from May to late October. Irish Rail has convenient connections from Dublin to Western Ireland. Visit irishrail.ie for information.

Getting around

Connemara Wild Escapes offers multi-day walking, cycling and adventure tours of the Wild Atlantic Way. Visit connemarawildescapes.ie. Killarney-based Mor Active Tours offers day trips to the Skelligs, as well as regional itineraries. Visit moractivevents.com.

For more on the Wild Atlantic Way, check out ireland.com/wildatlanticway.

