

When I think of the quintessential Ireland, my mind can't help but wander to the rugged Dingle Peninsula. Here, farming and fishing really are a livelihood, not just something dreamed up for the tourist. The peninsula is scattered with ancient Celtic sights, pre-historic ring forts, beehive huts, monastic churches, and endless fields of forty shades of green.

Dingle, the peninsula's largest town has about 1,500 residents who work as fishermen, farmers, or in the tourism industry. From Main Street, at the upper end of town, several small streets spill down the hill to the harbor. Each of these streets is lined with brightly painted businesses, shops, and a multi-

tude of pubs. The harbor is scattered with twenty or so fishing boats and the docks are littered with all the stuff necessary to haul in a day's catch "fresh off the boat" and transport it to local restaurants.

Regardless of where you stay in Dingle, you are never more than a ten minute walk from the town center. Plan to enjoy an afternoon to roam the quaint craft shops and local stores. There is also a very easy path out to the mouth of the harbor where you might get a glimpse of Fungie, the local celebrity dolphin. Dingle is loaded with very good restaurants featuring locally sourced food that is delicious. Finally, don't miss out on the pubs for a pint and "trad" music! (traditional music)

Gaeltacht is a word in the Irish language meaning "Irish-speaking region." The Irish government recognizes these regions where the Irish language is the predominant language, the vernacular spoken at home. These regions were officially recognized in the 1920's as part of a government policy to restore the Irish language.

Since 2005 there has been a growing controversy over this little town in western Ireland. In Irish, it is known as *An Daingean* yet the anglicized version (Dingle) is well known by locals and tourists. Actually, most towns and locations in Ireland have an *Irish* name and an *English* name. This is because the island of IRELAND and the IRISH PEOPLE were occupied by the English from 1542 until 1922. During these centuries, the English tried to impose their customs, cultures and language on the Irish people.

Since the early 1990s, Dingle has become a tourist destination. The folks of Dingle make their living off of tourism and count on it as a significant source of income. Consequently, the name DINGLE has become sort of a trademark for the destination. So you can imagine why, when in 2005, the Irish government went around changing all the signs in *Gaeltachts* to IRISH, the folks in Dingle became upset with the loss of their town's name recognition.

So, during the next few days, when you are in Dingle, notice the *IRISH* and *ENGLISH* names... Strike up a conversation in the pub. Enjoy the Irish people and have fun learning something about their culture, history and customs.



A view of Dingle town from the harbor.

NO! It's
DINGLE!



DINGLE TOWN

Dingle Town is a delightful place to spend an afternoon. There are a number of souvenir shops lining the sidewalks offering typical Ireland memorabilia, but more important are the craft shops, woolen mill outlets, crystal shops, and local merchants offering specialized “Dingle” or “County Kerry” products.

HARBOR AREA

Lining the road that runs along the harbor are a number of quality shops, pubs, restaurants and recreational outfitters. The Dingle Bay Hotel and Pub lies along this walk offering fine food, trad and folk music, and a warm welcome. Nearby is Out of the Blue, my favorite place for fresh-out-of-the-blue seafood.

Across the street is the docklands and harbor pier. This entire harbor area was constructed in 1992 by pumping sand from the harbor to reclaim land lost to the seas over the past centuries. Take a walk out onto the paved dock and get a look at the workings of fishermen and their boats. Notice how the harbor is secluded from the ocean by a small inlet out to your left. Notice too, the huge mountains in the distance, beyond the harbor entrance. These are situated on the next peninsula to the north, the famous one, known as the “Ring of Kerry.” Finally, looking directly across the harbor is an old stone tower. This structure, known as Eask Tower, constructed in 1847, was a project “made up” to provide work in the days of famine.

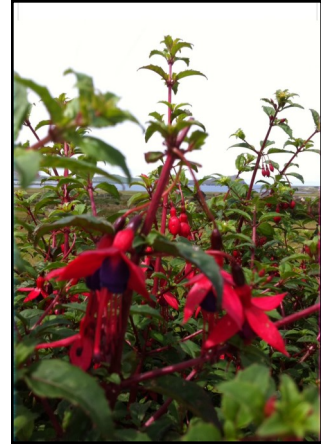
Standing on the dock, turn and face the town. Up until 1953, the road running along the harbor and the shops beyond were once the loading docks for the narrow-gauge railway that ran from Dingle to Tralee. Looking left, the road following the harbor is known as Strand Street and later turns into “The Mall (St.)” as it nears the small bridge crossing the bay.

TAKE A WALK

The easiest way to walk to the top of town is by following the route outlined below. It prevents a steep climb up Green Street and presents an orientation to the town.

Beginning at the “old round-a-bout” near “The Kerry Woolen Mills”, head up the street known as “the Mall.” A sign pointing to “Conner Pass” and “An Daingean” notes the correct street. Pass the **Police Station** on the left (marked by the two red brick pillars) and a white cross on the right. The **white cross** was placed in memory of local victims who died in the 1916 Uprising. Farther along enjoy the lush gardens on the left, the **monastery** on the right (denoted by the stone walls and white crosses), and the **Guinness** distribution center. Just before the “Courthouse Bar” you find the stone façade of the **County Courthouse**. Once an enclave for the British rule, it is now just a place where the judge drops by once a month to adjudicate simple cases.

At the pink “Bridge House,” turn left and cross the “small bridge” (that’s actually the name it’s known by) and walk up “Main Street.” The white sign states “An Lar,” or town center in Irish, so head that direction. Pass the colorful “**An Droicead Beag**” pub and the green and white “Dingle Pub.” Walk slightly uphill through Dingle’s commercial district. Along the way you will find hotels, B&B’s, plenty of pubs, a supermarket, hardware stores, specialty shops, and St. James (Anglican) Church.



Area Highlights:

Dingle Town

Dingle Harbor

Slea Head Driving Tour

Blasket Island Center

Trad & Folk Music

Conner Pass

High Street

Out of the Blue Seafood

Global Village

O’Flaherty’s Pub

Bambury’s B&B

Dingle Bay Hotel

Turn left at Green Street (the first street at the top of the hill). Before you do, notice the “Global Village Restaurant” one of Dingle’s many Irish fusion restaurants.

Walking downhill on Green Street, you will encounter lots of shops, St. Mary’s Church, the local library, boutiques, and more pubs/shoe shops and hardware stores. At the bottom of Green Street, take a right to visit the harbor front shops and the Dingle Bay Hotel. Taking a left brings you past the supermarkets, O’Flaherty’s Pub, and back to the “old round-a-bout.”

Now, go out and experience Dingle on your own!



WALKING ACTIVITIES AROUND TOWN

Walk along the Harbor—I like to assemble a picnic at one of the supermarkets and take an easy stroll along the harbor. From the “old-round-a-bout” head east towards Bambury’s B&B. Turn right and walk down the road beyond the Skellig Hotel to the Coast Guard station. From there it is an easy and flat walk through pastures to the mouth of the harbor. The stone tower was built for no purpose, other than looks, in the 19th century. A few minutes beyond the stone tower is the lighthouse and a steep cliff dropping into the sea. Along the way are endless fields of green just begging for a nap or a picnic. When you get to the tower, keep an eye out in the harbor for sightseeing boats trying to lure “Fungie” in for a photo opportunity. Most likely, you’ll catch sight of him too!



Slea Head Drive and the Blasket Islands

The Slea Head Drive is a circuitous route beginning and ending in Dingle. Along the way, you'll find some of the most beautiful scenery in Ireland, as well as some of its most ancient and historical sites.

One of the first sites along the way is the Dunbeg Promontory Fort, one of the several ring forts found in Ireland. Some believe this particular ring fort may date back to as early as the 6th century BC. Evidence suggests that it could have been a defensive post, but could also just have been a home for the prominent in the area. The fort is located on the edge of a high cliff and was inhabited through the 10th century AD.



Dunbeg Fort with the "Ring of Kerry" in the back-



Clochan's or "beehive huts" along Slea Head Drive.

Along the drive, near Dunbeg Fort, be on the lookout for Clochan's, or "beehive huts." These primitive houses were constructed of stone and assembled in a manner resembling a beehive. Some Clochan's are rectangular, but we will only see the beehive shaped ones in this area. They were constructed with stones without the aid of mortar to hold them together. Most believe the huts date back to the early Middle Ages and were built and inhabited by monks who followed Saint Patrick. Others believe the huts may date back to the "Irish" Bronze Age (2000-1600 B.C.). Time permitting, we will make a stop, climb to the top of the hill to experience several of the huts in a small community. Some think this climb is physically difficult. While the path is steep indeed, the distance is only about 200 yards.

At the Blasket Island Heritage Center you will see many exhibits and a short film depicting the harsh life on these rugged islands. These islands have a unique literary significance due to several of the inhabitants documenting their lives and customs in their native Irish language. You'll be able to imagine how hard it was for these islanders to eek out a mere existence which led to the islands' abandonment in 1953 as many of the youth left for the mainland. It's hard to believe that the islands were ever inhabited considering the seclusion and weather elements that have made the islands almost barren. It is possible to take a boat ride out to the largest of the islands but not on this trip!



The Great Blasket Island

The Gallarus Oratory, a corbel-vaulted, dry stone building, is thought to have been an early Christian church built sometime between 600 and 900 BC. There is, however, some evidence pointing to its construction during the 12th century. Regardless of the date, it is still an amazing example of meticulous planning and construction. The Oratory is constructed in the shape of an up-turned boat. The builders carefully cut the stones on every side so that they would fit perfectly together with their edges projected inward. The stones were also laid at an angle, ensuring that rain would run off the structure and keep the inside dry. The literal translation of its Irish name means "the church of the place of the foreigners" leading one to think that the building provided shelter for those on their Holy Pilgrimages. The structure only has one tiny round window and local legend says that if a person climbs out through that window, his soul will be cleansed.



The Gallarus Oratory

Kilmalkedar is possibly the most important church site on the Dingle Peninsula. Tradition links the church to Saint Brendan, but it is possible that it was founded by *Maolcethair*, a local saint whose death was documented to be in 636. There isn't much left of the original monastery other than the Ogham stone which is quite fascinating. The Romanesque church that remains was most likely built in the first half of the 12th century. A sundial, large stone cross, and an alphabet stone also remain on the site.

Enter the church through the arched doorway which is constructed of three orders, or arches of stone. In the top arch, you will see a head carved into the green keystone. The chancel arch is also beautifully decorated in the Romanesque style. Next to the chancel arch, notice the alphabet stone. This stone was originally taller than its current 1.22 meters. The west side of the stone is inscribed with Latin script dating back to the 6th century and an earlier inscription with the letters DNI meaning Domini. The south facing side is etched with a Latin cross as is the north side, however, part of the cross is missing. Imagine what the stone would have looked like when it was first created!



Ogham Stone at Kilmalkedar

Outside of the church, situated on the northern side of the pathway that leads to it, find an Ogham stone with a hole in the top. The inscriptions on the stone may have been added during the early Christian period. Ogham stones are thought to depict the Old Irish alphabet, as well as, to mark ownership. There are two basic schools of thought for why/how the alphabet was created. Some think that the Irish did not want anyone who could read Latin to understand what was written, therefore the alphabet was created so that the Romans could not read it. The other faction believes that the early church was trying to fit the alphabet to the early Irish language.

You will find a sundial on the south side of the pathway as you approach the church, very close to Saints Road. This particular sundial has a cross of arcs on its northwest face. It is believed that this cross is a symbol of pilgrimage. This same symbol can be found on many stones associated with pilgrimages or pilgrimage routes. Also found on the south side of the path is a stone cross. While the date of the cross is not known, it appears to be a very early cross.

The population of the Dingle area is about 2,000.