



David McGuffin's
EXPLORING EUROPE

DINGLE SLEA HEAD

DESTINATION GUIDE



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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 and some of its most ancient and historical sites.

The first significant site along the way is the **Dunbeg Promontory Fort**, one of many ring forts in Ireland. This ring fort probably dates back to the 6th century BC. Evidence suggests it could have been a defensive post, but it could have just been a home for a prominent ruler or petty king. The fort is located on the edge of a cliff and appears to have been in use through the 10th century AD.



Along the drive, near Dunbeg Fort, look for ***Clochans***, or “beehive huts.” These primitive houses were constructed of stone and assembled like a beehive. Some ***Clochans*** are rectangular, but we only see the beehive-shaped ones here. The rocks are dry-stacked without mortar to hold them together.

Most believe the huts date back to the early Middle Ages when they were built and inhabited by early Christian monks. Others believe the huts may date back to the “Irish” Bronze Age (2000-1600 BC). If you have time, stop to climb to the top of the hill and experience several huts in a small community.

Corbelled Stone Construction

Many of the Dingle Peninsula’s stone buildings and walls were constructed of dry-stacked stones. When it came time to build the roof, workers laid the stones in a slanting fashion known as corbel-vaulting. The beehive huts, farm buildings, and churches are all fine examples of this corbel method.

The Gallarus Oratory and St. Brendan’s Oratory are fine examples of corbel- vaulting and dry-stone construction methods from 600-1200 in the early Christian era. The builders carefully cut the stones on every



side to fit perfectly together with their edges projected inward. The stones were then laid at an angle, ensuring rain would run off the structure and keep the inside dry.

At the **Blasket Island Heritage Center**, you will see exhibits and a short film depicting the harsh life of those living on the rugged Great Blasket Island. Several islanders chronicled their lives, writing in their native Irish language. These first-hand accounts have a unique literary significance and serve as a lasting memory documenting life and customs in the Great Blasket Island community.

The Great Blasket Island community was disbanded and evacuated in 1953 by order of the Irish Government. At the time, the residents were elderly, feeble, and unable to provide for themselves. They were given plots of land here on the peninsula, with perfect views across the sea of their former homes on the Great Blasket Island.



Kilmalkedar is perhaps the most important church site on the Dingle Peninsula. Tradition links the church to Saint Brendan, but the name implies it was founded by Maolcethair, a local saint who died in 636.

There's not much remaining of the original monastery. The nearby Romanesque church probably dates from the early 12th century. Nearby, a sundial, a large stone cross, and an alphabet "Ogham" stone also remain on the site.

The Romanesque Church

The arched doorway contains three arches of stone. Find the head carved into the green keystone in the top arch. The chancel arch is also beautifully decorated with chevrons, characteristic of the Romanesque style. Next to the chancel arch, notice the alphabet "Ogham" stone. The stone's west side has Latin script dating back to the 6th century and an earlier inscription with the letters DNI, shorthand for Domini, meaning Lord. The stone was much taller, but now, part of the cross is missing.

You'll find an Ogham stone, with a hole in the top, on the north side of the church. Early Christians may have later added additional script to the standing stone. This Ogham stone, and others, were often inscribed with the old Celtic Irish alphabet and probably used to mark ownership or memorialize a person or event.

This stone's Ogham inscription translates, ANM MAILE INBIR MACI BROCANN (The name of Mael Imbir, son of Brocán).

Nearby, a sundial sits on the pathway. It is inscribed with a cross and arches, thought to be a pilgrimage symbol. This symbol adorns many stones associated with pilgrimages and pilgrimage routes throughout the ancient Christian world.



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