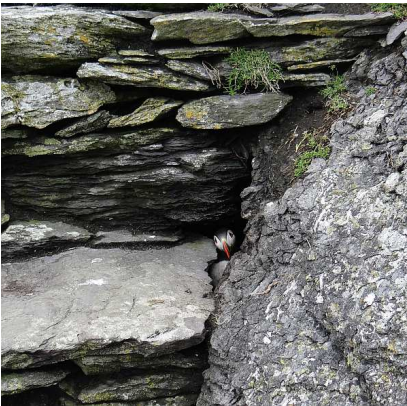


Pilgrimage



It was something of an inauspicious start. We were in a windswept field in Kerry, that is my long suffering partner and I, erecting a tent in horizontal rain. This was my second attempt to visit my 'bucket list' site of Skellig Michael off the Irish coast, and it was not going entirely to plan. Only 12Km out, ten years earlier the Skelligs had never become visible. Looking at the state of the sea we seem unlikely to have much more luck this time.

Effectively the westernmost point of the Kerry Mountains sitting alongside Little Skellig one of the world's most important gannetries (home to 25000 pairs). Skellig Michael - itself important for nesting puffins - is a World Heritage site. Some of these sites are honeypots, perhaps chosen as much to promote tourism as preserve heritage, but Skellig does not fit this bill.

I'm no ornithologist, rather stone-mad, stone-touched some might say. Skellig Michael is home to a seventh century monastic complex, described by the World Heritage Organisation as *"in many respects [a] unique example of an early religious settlement deliberately sited on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved because of a remarkable environment"*. What's more it's dry-stone built - stones carefully placed without the use of mortar; beehive huts (resembling upturned pudding basins), hull shaped oratories, all with unsupported corbelled roofs; walls, terraces, Celtic crosses. A site of penitential pilgrimage since the 16th century, a modern pilgrimage for me. Much more than puffins.

Drying out in the campsite's mess room, all déjà vu and gloom. Then a message. Surely someone was having a laugh - it's all go for the morning.

Gloomy, but only overhead, we bounce out to

the island, the last group to arrive. Somehow we manage to leap from boat to quay and begin the ascent. There are 1000+ steps (dry-stone of course), and we seemingly trip over the puffins nesting within them. Three-quarters of the way up at Christ's Saddle, a man sits. "I'm NOT going any further!". His wife looks on stoically. Daughter: "you're worse than Mark". No time to find out if Mark's a sibling or child. Onwards, ever upwards.

Thank goodness for bad weather, every cloud has a silver lining, poor weather discourages visitors but even so a few hundred people squeeze into the passageways between the monastery's huts. I skulk around the back, marvelling at the stonework. The crowds slowly disperse, being the last to arrive we would be the last to leave. Suddenly just three or four people are left, a fleeting sense of the monastery's tranquillity. The sun appears, maybe it's the stone gods smiling?

One of those remaining is a grey-robed Franciscan on a far more traditional pilgrimage, albeit complete with digital camera. Someone actually asked "do you work for the tourist board?"

All too soon time's up and we descend. A last look back, a puffin head appears between stones, wishing us well or longing for peace and quiet?

The trip back circles the islands. Bobbing past the gannetry, I momentarily concede that wildlife might rival stone. The by now even more suffering partner, never the best sailor, might disagree.

A visit to Skellig is fleeting, not necessarily easy. Great things rarely come easily.

Sean Adcock

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A detailed article on Skellig Michael can be found in Stonechat 17 Winter 2009 www.box.net/shared/12408hl80m

Or <http://www.wallingwonderland.info/Pages/Skellig.html>