

Loeragh Peninsula road trip

ROCKY ROAD

AOIFE O'RIORDAIN DRIVES SOUTH-WEST IRELAND'S IVERAGH PENINSULA
A STRETCH OF THE WILD ATLANTIC WAY THAT REVEALS ANCIENT FOREST,
DRAMATIC CRAGS AND ATMOSPHERIC SETTLEMENTS STEEPED IN HISTORY



OPPOSITE TOP ROW FROM LEFT The jagged, rocky coastline of the Iveragh Peninsula has a raw, elemental quality. Rugged Valentia Island is one of Ireland's most westerly points. The beautiful resort beach at Caherdaniel. **MIDDLE ROW** Sheep graze on the dunes above Rossbeigh Beach. Fifteenth-century Ross Castle is situated on the edge of Lough Leane. The peninsula's central spine is formed by the ancient MacGillycuddy's Reeks mountain range. **BOTTOM ROW** Rossbeigh Beach sweeps into Dingle Bay. A view of the lakes in Killarney National Park. Roads are shared with sheep and mountain goats

There is an old Irish expression that goes, 'There's a lot of weather in a March day,' but it could apply to any day of the year on the Iveragh Peninsula. Standing on the glorious three-mile sweep of Rossbeigh Beach, a long tendril of sand that curls into the centre of Dingle Bay, you can see it coming – and there is nowhere better from which to watch the clouds roll in from the Atlantic Ocean. Suddenly, the panorama of the neighbouring Dingle Peninsula is completely obscured; moments later, there it is, bathed in bright sunshine again. The weather looms large here, the skies are vast, and the ever-changing light adds to the elemental drama of the landscape.

One of the five fingers of land poking into the Atlantic Ocean in the south-west of the country, the Iveragh Peninsula is one of Ireland's most scenic swathes of countryside, and a magnificent collision of mountain and ocean. Tracing a path between Kilbrinlin and Kenmare, much of the celebrated Ring of Kerry follows the rugged 60-mile ribbon of road around the peninsula's edge. Tour buses starting from nearby tourist hotspot Killarney might do it as a round trip in a day, but it deserves to be taken slowly.

From Kilbrinlin, the NYO (a prosaic name, given its glorious route) threads its way through bog and coast in the heather-flecked shadow of the rumpied 400-million-year-old MacGillycuddy's Reeks. These are the mountains that form the peninsula's central spine. Beyond Rossbeigh, as you drive south along the Wild Atlantic Way, the Dingle Peninsula unfolds beside you in wide-angle splendour. Detour to Kells Bay House & Gardens, a gem hidden in a kink of coastline, kissed by the warm currents of the Gulf Stream that create an unusual microclimate. The 19th-century estate, where the subtropical gardens are open to visitors, reveals an extraordinary primeval forest of hundreds of tree ferns – the largest collection in northern Europe. Shady and silent, the canopy of fronds forms a lacy green ceiling above your head, creating the feeling you have accidentally wandered into a Tolkienesque scene.

Beyond Caherdaniel, one place the tour buses often miss is Valentia Island. One of Ireland's most westerly points, it played a historic role in the evolution of global communications. The world's longest transatlantic telegraph cable was laid to the island from Heart's Content, Newfoundland, in 1866 – the first permanent communications link between Europe and North America. The island's main village, Knightstown, reached by a five-minute ferry ride from Roanard Point on the mainland, has a prim, old-world charm at odds with the rugged nature around it. On

the north-east of the island is some of the oldest evidence of amphibians' first steps on land – 385-million-year-old crocodile-like tetrapod tracks preserved in the rocks.

A wind-buffed walk up Bray Head reveals panoramic views and the apparition-like, mist-cloaked crags of Skellig Michael and Skellig Beag in the distance, Iveragh's scenic showstoppers. Writer George Bernard Shaw described the Skellig Islands as an 'incredible, impossible, mad place'. Two lonely rocky sentinels surrounded by the churning waters of the Atlantic, the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Skellig Michael was first settled by Christian monks in the 6th century. Sailings from Portmagee are often cancelled due to the sea conditions, and you certainly need a head for heights when you get there. It is a leg-wobbler of an ascent from Blind Man's Cove up a flight of treacherous steps carved into the cliff face, the air filled with a cacophony of squawking from the resident kittiwakes. Skellig Beag also supports one of the world's largest colonies of gannets and storm petrels. But when you reach Skellig Michael's cluster of monastic buildings, austere beehive-shaped huts surrounded by vibrant, grassy slopes, an otherworldly sense of tranquility prevails.

Back on the mainland, there are afternoons at the often-deserted silvery crescent of St Finian's Bay, and Derrynane House and Gardens near Caherdaniel, the ancestral home of Irish statesman Daniel O'Connell, with its sandy beach edged by water that has a Caribbean-like tinge on sunny days. Then there are the walks along stretches of the 125-mile Kerry Way that threads around the peninsula, the lonely, isolated splendour of Ballaghbeama Gap, or dinner at O'Neil's, the Point Seafood Bar beside Reenard pier for locally landed lobster and prawns *à la* style.

Swinging back east beyond Caherdaniel, the road passes alongside the Kenmare River estuary. Here the landscape takes on a gentler gradient and the towering cliffs and crashing waves give way to a coastline that seems to melt into the water, shattering into fragments, coves, inlets and small islands, where the hedgerows are garlanded with rhododendron, woodbine, fuchsia and hydrangeas depending on the season.

After the pretty village of Sneem, the next town, Kenmare, is the unofficial last stop before the Beara Peninsula. Overlooking the Kenmare River, jauntily painted shop fronts line its three main streets, which were laid out in a triangle in the 17th century by its founder, Sir William Petty. But the English translation of the town's Gaelic name – 'the little nest' – feels more apt: a spot to linger surrounded by nature and contemplate the seasons, maybe even all four in one day.

Ways and Means

Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from London Stansted and Luton to Kerry Airport. Stay at Ard na Sálte, Caragh Lake (ardnasalte.com), Parknasilla Resort & Spa, Sneem (parknasillaresort.com), Park Hotel Kenmare (parkkenmare.com), Sheen Falls Lodge, Kenmare (sheenfallslodges.ie) and Lost Cottage, Glenbeigh (uniparhomesdays.com) □

OPPOSITE The craggy outcrops of the Skellig Islands rise from the waters of the Atlantic, eight miles off the west coast of the Inishowen Peninsula. These two uninhabited islets are known for their colonies of seabirds, including puffins and petrels.

THIS PAGE Ballaghbeanna Gap is a steep, winding single-track road that cuts across the peninsula, running through breathtaking scenery.

