

THE PERFECT 10 DINGLE PENINSULA, IRELAND

Take the coast roads



On a ramble near Dingle, left; Slea Head Drive, above; Blasket Islands, right; Gallarus Oratory, below



Wander in a wild and wonderful region

MARIAN MCGUINNESS

01 With the Wild Atlantic Way's five scenic southwest peninsulas waiting to be explored, make time to stay in the town of Dingle on the northernmost craggy finger. With its emerald hills, ancient ruins and wandering black-faced sheep, it's a photogenic fragment of County Kerry. Take the Slea Head Drive, a 48km return loop from Dingle. A white stone crucifixion scene marks Slea Head with its dramatic views to the now-abandoned Blasket Islands. The Interpretative Centre is around the headland at Dunquin. Heading on through villages with neat rows of houses, circle back across Brandon Creek, the legendary starting point of St Brendan's voyage to America, centuries before Columbus. Continue around the base of Mount Brandon, the second-highest mountain in Ireland, before ending back in Dingle; dingle-peninsula.ie.

02 Visitors love driving the Wild Atlantic Way, but navigating the Wild Atlantic Ocean gives a different perspective. The Blasket Islands, 2km off the coast are the last outposts of Europe. Rug up and hunker down for a boat trip from Dingle, sailing past red sandstone cliffs and the crumbling-into-the-sea ruins of Dunbeg Castle where stone fences form a latticework up the hillside to white-washed cottages. The islands have been inhabited from 2000BC until just recently. Interestingly, many Irish literary classics have been written in the isolation of these outposts, including Tomas O'Crohan's *Islandman*, Maurice O'Sullivan's *Twenty Years a-Growing*, and Peig Sayers' autobiography *Peig*. Hop on a fast ferry from Dingle and wander the abandoned main island or take a three-hour eco tour, observing seals, dolphins and comical puffins; dingleboat.tours.com.

03 With more than 2000 archaeological sites, the Dingle peninsula is an open-air ancient history museum. Ogham Stones, scribed along their length with the parallel strokes of ancient Irish language, are found in their dozens. The 7th-century Gallarus Oratory is a tiny dry stone chapel shaped like an upturned boat. It remains as it was built and has never been repaired, such were the skills of the craftsmen. A visit to the

Slea Head Famine Cottages takes you into the lives of farmers during the tragedy of the Great Famine in the 1840s. Behind these meagre cottages is a beehive hut, one of many built in the 12th century when the Normans settled in Ireland and drove families off their lands; dingle-peninsula.ie.

04 A 15-minute drive east from Dingle will take you to Annascaul and its blue and white South Pole Inn. It was the house-turned-pub of Antarctic explorer Tom Crean. Stop for lunch in the rooms of stone and timber, surrounded by memorabilia and ceilings swirled with a timeline of Crean's life. He was a hero of the Shackleton and Scott expeditions and dragged an ill companion 80km on a sled in dire conditions. He was one of the six men who made the 1300km voyage in the open boat James Caird from Elephant Island to the South Georgia whaling station, seeking help for their stranded crew; annascaul-village.com.

05 The wild beauty of Dingle inspires the work of many of its artisans, from the iconic beehive huts fashioned in John Weldon's jewellery, to the symbols of ancient Ogham Stones crafted in goldsmith Brian De Staic's stunning offerings. Stoneware and exquisite porcelain from Ireland's pre-eminent potter Louis Mulcahy can be found alongside Lisbeth Mulcahy's stylishly woven designs at The Weaver's Shop in Green Street. Crystal artisan Sean Daly, who became a master craftsman with Waterford Crystal, creates and handcuts his Celtic-design giftware using the inspiration of his surrounds, the Gaelic culture and its archaeological history. Dingle Crystal is also on Green Street or see Sean in action in his workshop on the edge of town; lisbethmulcahy.com; dinglecrystal.ie.

06 With such a musical name, Dingle is deemed the Capital of Craic. With a bar situated about every 10m, it has one of the highest pub-per-person ratios in Ireland and an abundance of traditional music venues.

Check out John Bennys on Strand Street, O'Flaherty's on Bridge Street and An Droichead Beag on Main Street. Many bars are uniquely different to the norm, such as J. Curran's 1870s old-style hardware shop and bar, where you can buy a pair of wellington boots and a pint of stout, or Dick Mack's pub, where patrons drink on one side of the room and have their shoes repaired on the other. Music starts about 9.30pm. No matter which pub you choose, get there early, pull up a stool and settle in for the craic with a dewy Guinness; dingle-peninsula.ie/food-drink/.

07 Dining in Dingle is a challenging choice. Should you go for the fresh fish, shellfish, lobster and crab straight off the trawlers; the finest quality beef and lamb raised and grazed on the Blasket Islands or vegetables and fruit from the lush agricultural land surrounding the town? Don't get me started on the accompanying soda bread made with Guinness. With more than 50 eateries offering heavenly locations, divine cuisines and sinful desserts, Dingle's restaurants have won many international foodie awards. Try The Boat Yard Restaurant overlooking the harbour; the nautical-themed Doyle's Seafood Restaurant or the Chart House. And note that crab claws are called crab toes and take a bit of working out; theboatyardrestaurant.ie; doylesofdingle.ie; thecharthousedingle.com.

08 There always seems to be a queue outside the cobalt blue and white shop of Murphy's Ice Cream. Legendary for its premium products, every step is hand crafted using highest-quality local ingredients. The superior milk comes from indigenous Kerry cows. Everything is farm-fresh, from the organic free-range eggs to local cream. Murphy's even makes its own sea salt from Dingle sea water and distils Dingle rain for the dairy-free sorbets. As well as the staples of Kerry cream vanilla and handmade chocolate chip, curious flavour combinations include choc whiskey, caramelised brown bread, Dingle gin (from the local distillery) and Irish Gar-

den, made with seasonal herbs. Grab a creamy cone and stroll along the waterfront; murphysicecream.ie.

09 Another maritime opportunity is to join the shenanigans of Dingle's resident bottlenose dolphin, Fungie. He is often seen fishing around the harbour entrance as well as escorting the town's fishing boats to and from port. The now famous dolphin made his sea change to Dingle Harbour in 1984. Soon after, the local Marine Ministry officially recorded Fungie as a permanent resident of the entrance channel and self-appointed Pilot of the Fleet. Dingle Dolphin Boat Tours has departures from the pier on the hour every day. Passengers can watch the wild, free Fungie cavorting for his human audience with jumps and loops. He is immortalised in bronze on Main Street, opposite the harbour; dingleddolphin.com/fungie.

BEST BEDS

10 Acknowledged as one of the best places to stay in Ireland, Heaton's Guesthouse, with its elongated cream, white and grey exterior, is at the edge of Dingle Bay and a five-minute flat walk from the town. As the tide ebbs and flows, you can watch its shimmering ripples from Heaton's elegant sitting room. All guestrooms are stylishly decorated and breakfast in the dining room, complete with magnificent water views, is nothing short of a feast, serving porridge with a shot of Cointreau, brown sugar and cream. To follow, there's a traditional Irish selection with black and white pudding; local smoked salmon and scrambled eggs; and Dingle Bay kippers. Preserves and bread are homemade. It's enough to warm your cockles and set you up for a day of exploration; heatonsdingle.com. ireland.com

