

Sceilg Mhichíl World Heritage Property

An island monastery towering over the sea



Site and Safety Guide



Heritage Ireland
OPW



Sceilg Mhichíl | Skellig Michael

Láthair Oidhreachta Dhomhanda
World Heritage Site



Wear suitable
footwear with
a good grip



No dogs
allowed



Children must be
strictly supervised
at all times



Toilet facilities
available



Drone use
prohibited



No climbing



WARNING
Slippery when wet



WARNING
Risk of falling



WARNING
Sheer drop with
no edge protection



WARNING
Uneven steps



WARNING
Steep gradient
on the steps



WARNING
Stay on the path
at all times



WARNING
Mind your head



WARNING
Strong winds



WARNING
Beware of
falling rocks

Sceilg Mhichíl is a World Heritage Site and is unique.

It has outstanding universal value as denoted in its archaeological, historical, spiritual and natural heritage on the island. Please help us to preserve this special place at all times.

The key things to remember are:

- This is a challenging site. **Accidents and fatalities** have occurred.
- Take responsibility for your own actions.
- Show courtesy to your fellow visitors.
- Care for the environment.

Further information can be obtained by checking our websites:

www.heritageireland.ie

www.worldheritageireland.ie

Planning Your Visit

Getting there

Sceilg Mhichíl is 11.6km from the mainland and is accessible by boat between the months of May and September, subject to weather conditions. Boats carrying passengers to Sceilg Mhichíl operate from Portmagee, Knightstown, Ballinskelligs and Caherdaniel.

During the tourist season there is a Guide Service (located at the monastery) on Sceilg Mhichíl. On the mainland you can visit the Skellig Experience Centre on Valentia Island, just opposite Portmagee, where a visitor centre gives an insight into the island and its history.

Visiting the site

Leave no trace

Visitors are asked not to leave a trace of their visit on the island and bring back any litter to the mainland where it should be disposed of responsibly.

Keep your hands free

Visitors should carry items in a backpack, ensuring your hands are left free. There are almost 600 steps to reach the monastery.

Children

Children under the age of 12 are **not permitted** on the island. If you intend to bring children over the age of 12 with you, please ensure you are completely confident in looking after them on a steep island where there are no barriers or rails on the ancient paths.

Food and drink

Visitors are **strongly advised** to bring food and appropriate fluids with them in a sealed container.

Taking photos

If taking photographs, please ensure that you are standing in a safe place. Do not stand near an edge and do not leave the steps, or disturb any rocks or wildlife. Do not use your mobile phone or take selfies whilst ascending or descending the steps – the uneven steps require your full attention.

Safety

Embarking and disembarking boats, the terrain and climb to the monastery are challenging and requires a reasonable level of fitness. The island may not be suitable if you have certain mobility issues or medical conditions such as vertigo. For your safety please consider your own suitability to travel before booking your trip and do not make the trip if you have any concerns.

Appropriate footwear and clothing

Wear suitable footwear with a good grip for the climb, as the steps can be slippery, particularly in wet weather. The weather can change on Sceilg Mhichíl – bring appropriate clothing and footwear. Sandals and flip flops are not permitted.

Toilets

Visitors should be aware that the trip in its entirety can be up to six hours. There are toilet facilities available on the island.

The Guide Service

- The Guides' function is primarily to protect the monument and to interpret the sites' significance.
- The Guides do not escort visitors up and down the access route.
- The Guides are the official monitors on the island and their instructions, particularly in relation to safety, must be complied with at all times.
- You will be met by a Guide on the lighthouse road at the start of the climb to the monastery.

Visitor Behaviour

- Leaving the access route is **prohibited** as it may cause the dislodging of loose rock and stones, thereby endangering your life and the lives of those below.
- Picking up and throwing loose stones damages the monument and endangers the lives of those below.
- Climbing on dry stone walls is forbidden. This damages the monument and may endanger lives.
- Offenders risk prosecution.
- Take your time. Do not hurry when either ascending or descending the steps.
- If the route is congested, please give way to the person who is descending.
- Use of drones and UAV's over this site is prohibited.



To view the Sceilg Mhichíl safety video guide please scan the QR code opposite.

Further information on Sceilg Mhichíl can be accessed on www.worldheritageireland.ie, www.archaeology.ie, and www.heritageireland.ie.

The Terrain and Health & Safety



- **Visitors should comply with all safety notices on the island.** The Guides are the official monitors on the island and their instructions, particularly in relation to safety, **must be complied with at all times.**



- The lighthouse road and access routes are exposed to loose overhead rock, as well as falling debris from nesting birds. Do not loiter on the pathway. Any photographs should be taken from underneath the safety of the timber canopy.



- Due to the unpredictable nature of the terrain, be prepared for fog, deterioration of visibility and sudden gusts of wind which can change in direction, particularly when on the steps.



- Transferring between a boat and the landing pier can be hazardous in certain sea conditions; there is a risk of serious injury or death.



- The access route includes steep uneven steps with unprotected edges. Know your own abilities and seek the advice of the Guides. Any person with health issues should consider carefully before visiting the site. Given the challenging terrain a reasonable level of fitness is also required. Use handrails/chain linkage where provided.



- Sceilg Mhichíl is a precipitous rock and there are about 600 steps on the ascent to the monastery. **Steps can be slippery when wet.**



- The terrain includes sheer cliffs, please stay on the designated access route. Straying from the access route involves a high risk of fall or tumble, and damage to the habitat of nesting birds – stay on the paths.



- For safety reasons, and to minimise disturbance and damage to seabird breeding habitats, visitors must remain on recognised visitor routes while on the island. In order to protect the wildlife, dogs are prohibited from the island.



Background

Sceilg Mhichíl, comprising a well preserved monastery and a remote hermitage perched on a rock in the Atlantic, is the most spectacularly situated of all the early medieval Irish monastic sites. The islands' isolation has helped to preserve and protect the monastic remains, allowing the visitor to marvel at the remarkable achievements of the monks. Sceilg Mhichíl is also an internationally renowned site for the breeding of seabirds with its steep slopes and cliffs providing nesting places for a variety of seabirds. It is this combination of cultural and natural heritage which imbues the island with a strong sense of beauty and spirituality.

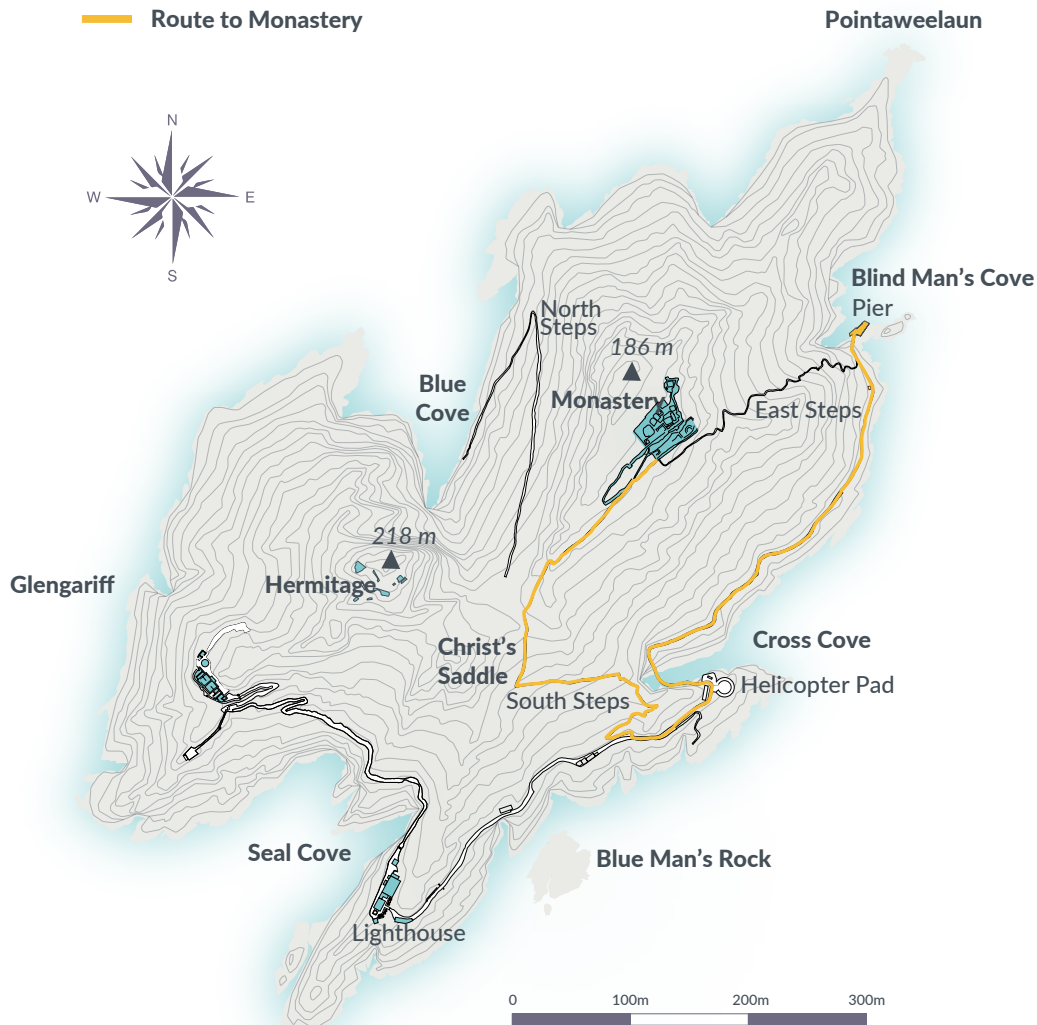
UNESCO

When inscribing the site on the World Heritage List in 1996 UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) described Sceilg Mhichíl as a unique example of early religious settlement, which illustrates, as no other site can, the extremes of Christian monasticism. Sceilg Mhichíl is one of only two UNESCO World Heritage Properties in the Republic of Ireland, the other being Brú na Boinne in County Meath. World Heritage Properties are considered to be of outstanding universal value regardless of geographical location or nationality.



Sceilg Mhichíl

A UNESCO World Heritage Site



Your Visit

Your visit begins at Blind Man's Cove. To reiterate, the landing can be difficult and extreme caution is advised when disembarking from the boat. There was an original monastic landing at this point but it, and the lower 40 metres of steps, were removed in the 1820's in order to construct the present landing and the lighthouse road.

Leaving the landing, you walk along the lighthouse road that skirts the south side of the island, gradually ascending as you go. After about 300 metres you reach Cross Cove where you can see guillemots, fulmars and razorbills nesting on the cliffs.

You pass under the wooden canopy and, just past the helicopter pad, you can see below you another of the original monastic pathways up to the monastery. From this point you continue for about 50 metres to the beginning of the steps to the monastery.

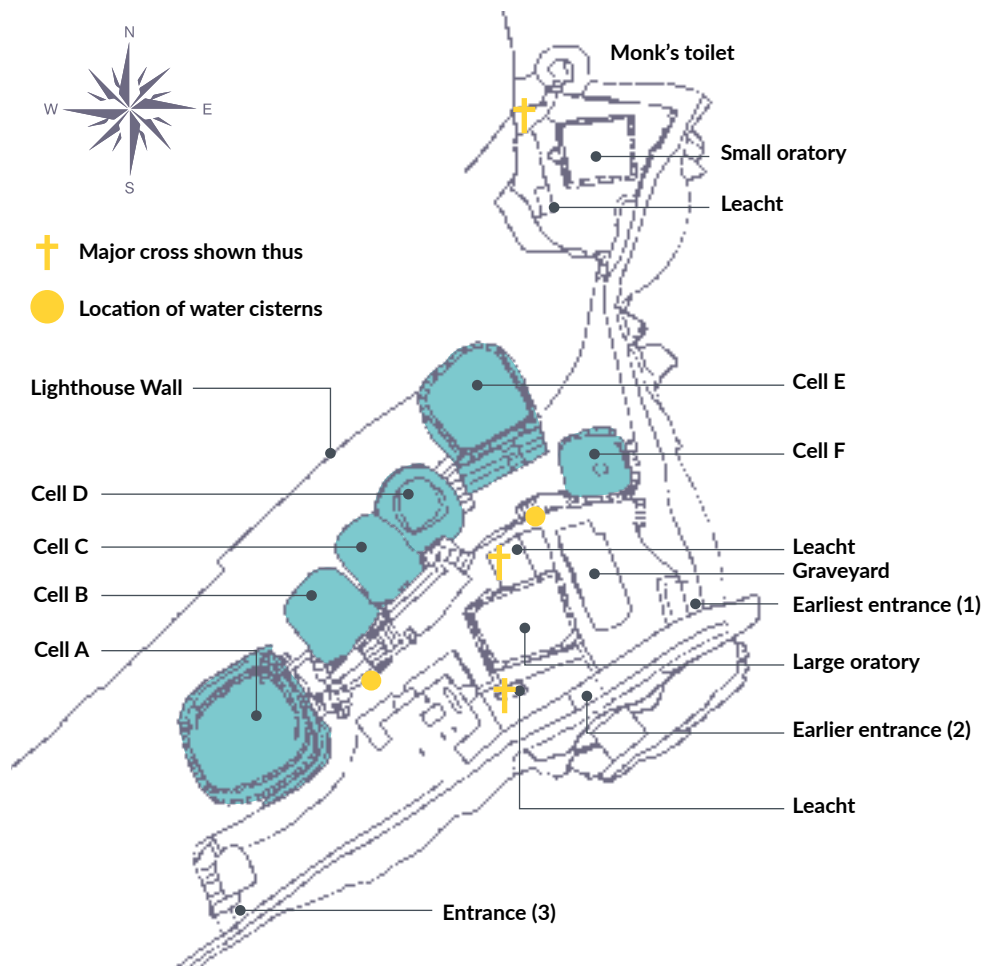
Here, if you look westward along the lighthouse road, you will see the lower of the two lighthouses, the only one still operational. The road is closed to the public from this point forward.

As you ascend the steps, after about 30 metres you will see a large vertical piece of bedrock known as the Wailing Woman. From the Wailing Woman you continue your ascent, following the steps as they rise steeply to the right, bringing you to Christ's Saddle – an area of open ground between the two peaks of the island. Visitors are encouraged to consume any food they have brought with them in this area.

The South Peak, which rises above you on the left as you arrive on Christ's Saddle, is the location of a hermitage built by the monks on the steep slopes and narrow ledges. This area is not accessible to the public. Images of the terraces, oratory and other structures on the South Peak may be viewed on www.worldheritageireland.ie

On your left, as you look at the South Peak, there is a small cave modified by the monks. Visitors will see a cross cut into the rock on the right hand side of the entrance. In front of you there is a fence which prevents access to the North Steps. These steps are closed to the public.

From Christ's Saddle another steep flight of steps continues up to the monastery. About half way up, you can see a cross-inscribed slab on your left side. In windy conditions extreme caution is needed on these steps. The current entrance to the monastery, opened in the 19th century, leads into the Upper Monks Garden – an open area surrounded by dry stone walls. Visitors gather here to commence their guided tour of the monastery.



In front of you is the Lower Monks' Garden with steps leading down to one of the original entrances to the monastery. The walls in this area collapsed on several occasions in antiquity and the large stones visible in the garden area are part of this collapse. At the eastern end of the garden the remains of a monastic cell or clochán (Cell G) can be seen with its entrance facing you.

Continuing through the entrance in the inner enclosure wall, you enter the core area of the monastery. The first of the beehive huts or cells (Cell A), as the largest cell, may have had a communal function for the monks, while the others (Cells B-F) were most likely the residential cells. The cells date from different periods and represent a unique record of the development of drystone construction throughout the early medieval period. Beneath the plinth upon which the cells stand are two cisterns that collected rainwater from the site and stored it for use. A third cistern exists west of Cell A, outside the area of the monastic buildings.

St Michael's Church, the only mortared structure in the monastery, was probably built in the 11th century and remodelled in the 12th century. Behind this is the Large Oratory which may have been built in the 9th century. This oratory is roughly contemporary with the majority of the Cells. Next to the oratory is a leachta with a large upstanding cross. Behind the oratory is a pair of conjoined leachta known as the Monks' Graveyard. Excavations on the east and south sides of the monastic enclosure have revealed the presence of two early entrances to the inner enclosure (see plan). These indicate periods of collapse and rebuilding during the occupation of the monastic site and give us an insight into the evolution of the monastery into the form we see today.

Behind Cell F, a set of steps leads you to the small Oratory Terrace which contains a second oratory, a small leacht, a cross and a latrine. Structures in this area are fragile and can be viewed by visitors, but direct access to the terrace is not allowed.

History

The word 'Sceillic' means 'a rock', particularly a steep rock. The first reference to Sceilg Mhichíl occurs in legend when it is given as the burial place of Ir, son of Milesius, who was drowned during the landing of the Milesians. An 8th/9th century text refers to the flight of Duagh, King of West Munster to Sceilg Mhichíl sometime in the 5th century, though the latter remains unestablished. We have no means of knowing whether a monastery existed on the site at that time.

A monastery may have been founded as early as the 6th century but the first reference to monks on Sceilg Mhichíl dates to the 8th

century when the death of 'Suibhni of Sceilg' is recorded. It is referred to in the annals in the 9th and 10th centuries and its dedication to St Michael, the Archangel, appears to have happened sometime before 1044 when the death of 'Aedh of Sceilic-Mhichil' is recorded. It is probable that this dedication to St Michael was celebrated by the building of St Michael's church in the monastery. The church of St Michael was mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis in the late 12th century.

His account of the miraculous supply of communal wine for daily Mass in St Michael's Church implies that the monastery was in constant occupation at that time.

In the 13th century a general climatic deterioration resulted in colder weather and increased storms in the seas around Sceilg Mhichíl. This, together with changes in the structure of the Irish Church, signaled the end of the eremitical community on Sceilg Mhichíl. The monks appear to have moved to the Augustinian Priory of Ballinskelligs on the mainland at about this time. The Prior of Ballinskelligs was referred to as the Prior of St Michael's (de Rupe) implying that the site still formed an important part of their monastery at the time.

In 1578, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the island passed to the Butler family although the site continued to be a place of pilgrimage into the 18th century.

In the early 19th century the island was purchased by the predecessors of the Commissioners of the Irish Lights in order to erect two lighthouses. They built the present east landing and built a road along the south and west side of the island to facilitate the construction of the two lighthouses situated on the west side of the island.

In 1880 the Office of Public Works took the monastic remains into State guardianship and commenced

the repair of collapsed structures. Since that time the OPW has continued to repair and conserve the monastic remains, in partnership with the National Monuments Service. In 1989 the State purchased the island from the Commissioners of Irish Lights, with the exception of the lower (working) lighthouse. In 1996 the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Geology

The pinnacles of the Skellig Islands (Great Skellig, also known as Sceilg Mhichíl and Little Skellig), which rise 218 metres above the ocean, are formed from the durable Old Red Sandstone that also forms the backbone of the mountainous regions of South West Kerry and West Cork.

These rocks began life as sediments deposited in the Devonian period some 400 million years ago. These rocks were subsequently altered in a period of folding and mountain building some 100 million years later.

Sea level subsequently rose, forming the deep marine inlets of south western Ireland and isolating the Sceilg islands from the mainland.



Flora and Fauna

The Skellig islands are two of Ireland's most important sites for breeding seabirds and are remarkable both for the size of their colonies and diversity of species. They support some of the biggest breeding populations of manx shearwater and storm petrel in the world. Other birds that breed on Sceilg Mhichíl include puffin, fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot, peregrine falcon, chough, raven, rock pipet and wheatear.

Puffins can be seen on the island until early August every year. Little Skellig hosts the second largest colony of breeding gannets in the world and these can be viewed from the boat on the way to the island.

Grey seal haul out onto the rocky edges of the island and can be seen in the summer months. Rabbits and house mice can also be found on the island.

Due to its ornithological importance Sceilg Mhichíl is designated as a Statutory Nature Reserve, a Special Protection Area, and is a proposed Natural Heritage Area. Visitors are asked to please remember not to interfere in any way with the wildlife.

Much of Sceilg Mhichíl is composed of poorly vegetated habitats such as rocky sea cliffs and exposed rock. The vegetation that does occur is typical of the highly exposed maritime conditions, limited by thin soil, steep ground, salt spray and high winds. Common plant species include Thrift, Sea Campion and Rock Sea-Spurrey, with patches of Red Fescue, Dock, Sea Spinach and Sea Mayweed occurring frequently.



Care for the Environment

- Sceilg Mhichíl is a National Monument and World Heritage Site and is protected by the National Monuments Act 1930-2014.
- The walls and buildings are very fragile and easily damaged. Please **do not climb** on them.
- Because of excessive wear and damage within the monastery, access within the enclosure may be restricted and only allowed under the supervision of a Guide.
- Graffiti or any other willful damage will result in the prosecution of the offender.
- In order to protect wildlife and maintain the fragile ecosystem, dogs or other animals are prohibited from the island.
- Enjoy wildlife from a safe distance – **do not touch** or feed the wildlife as there may be a risk of Avian Influenza. Bird colonies **should not be disturbed** during nesting.
- Picnicking is not permitted within the monastic enclosure or on the steps. Guides can advise on an appropriate location.
- Biosecurity – any food brought should be in sealable containers, ensure that any backpacks are vermin free and all litter should be taken back to the boat and disposed of later at an appropriate facility on the mainland.







To view the Sceilg Mhichíl
safety video guide please
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Images © OPW, Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland and National Monuments Service

