

## Skellig St Michael The Experience

The rocky island off the coast of Kerry called Skellig St Michael has a brilliant back story. It goes like this. Throughout Europe and the Middle East early monks looked for isolated retreats where they could endure privations and seek a spiritual way of life. The more isolated and the tougher the conditions the more authentic the experience and the greater the spiritual reward. Monks became hermits in the deserts of the Middle East but in Ireland they sought the ultimate in solitude on this very small rock which lies 8 miles off the coast of Kerry.

The cliffs rise steeply on all sides but there was a flat ledge some 200 m where monks could assemble igloo like structures built from rocks they found to live in. The area was sheltered from the winds of the Atlantic and five or six of these igloo like structures were built on the ledge. The Hermitage seems to have been occupied by various monks from 600 to about 1200 A.D. They lived brief brutish lives catching fish eating birds.

It doesn't get much more remote or romantic than this. So how much of this story is actually true? Surprisingly, it does seem that all of it is actually true Skellig was not unique - monks sought places of spiritual power and isolation. As an ascetic, dramatic existence it must've been exemplary.

Restoration began in the 1970s and is carried on ever since. It was essentially complete by 2008.

### Getting There

They seem to be about five or six boat operators who land on the island including the one we went with. It was 27 May 2015. We had booked two days before the trip would normally have left at 10 AM but the captain decided he wanted to leave at 8:30 AM to improve the chance of decent weather conditions. We drove down a vertiginous track to a small pier and promptly at 8:30 AM a small red boat appeared and we set off with nine other passengers. It rapidly became cold as the boat pushed through the swell. As we moved on I regretted the fact that I hadn't brought more insulation or waterproof trousers. By the time we arrived at the island at 10:45 AM I was shaking with a cold.

### On The Rock

The boat docked but still moved with the swell may be 2 feet up and down. Once off the boat I looked around and saw the helipad and some guys painting the exterior of a cluster of modern huts grey. The huts had solar cells mounted on their roofs.

I need to get moving to pump some heat into my frozen body. But a young lady appeared and explained that there were 600 steps, no hand rails, vertiginous drops, and, if it rained which seem probable the steps be slippery as hell. She explained you must not force people onto the outside of the edge of the steps and if you suffer any kind a medical condition, or suffer from vertigo you shouldn't proceed.

"Yeah yeah yeah" I thought and set off at a lick to get some warmth. The climb was almost vertical but seemed easy enough except for the wind which was howling to rip you off.

Up, up, ever up I went as I went up I was building heat by the time I emerged onto the monastery ledge I was at last warm again.

You enter the monastery or perhaps it is better to call it a collection of huts under an arch. The wind dropped instantly and all was calm. There was a tour group being lectured on the site. There were people wandering around all with their cameras clicking away. All was so perfect, the dry small stones that comprise the beehive hut structures could have been just built.

Around the site was very modern green wire mesh fencing. I saw a gate in the fencing which was not locked and so I ambled through it towards the modern huts hidden by a dry stone wall. Another lady appeared instantly and told me to go back

I asked "Does mean we are penned in by the fence?"

"Yes." she said.

Even the little grave area seem to have been scrubbed to perfection. Overall, I felt the area had been robbed of any emotional impact, that it had been over restored. Almost immediately it was time to leave and I ducked under the arch and headed back down the steps.

### Getting Down

The wind which was vicious was ascending was now howling was picking up grit with the main squalls and throwing it in my face. I had an Atlantic grit facial! I was cleaning grit out of my ears for hours afterwards.

I was holding onto my glasses one hand and trying to balance with the other. Puffins were taking off to be swept backwards in the maelstrom. The steeper areas which had seemed benign going up now required progress on my bum bumping down from step to step. Concentration was essential.

By the time I made it down the hour and three quarters we had been allowed had pretty much elapsed.

### Going Back

The red and white boat came alongside and the 11 of us reboarded. The swell that seem bad going was now redoubled and the rain joined in. A large wave dumped itself on my jeans and I became completely soaked. The cold and spray started to penetrate deeper and deeper. I was praying the reverse journey would be shorter than two hours it took going out. I kept checking on my watch is a cold bit deeper. Eventually after almost exactly 2 hours we docked shaking game I started to walk away.

I realised that I had paid no one. In fact no one had mentioned money at all. I asked the Captain and bright as a button he said "Okay, yes that will be €50 each please."

I was shaking so badly it was all I could do to hand over the two sodden €50 notes.

We got back to the car and somehow concentrating I managed to drive back up the vertiginous track. Clutch control on steep bends is not easy when you have the shakes. Eventually with the heaters set to maximum and the fans set to maximum the shakes subsided. Now the problem was I needed a pee. It was now 3:30 PM and not only will were then no loos on the island there was no privacy

either, so no relief anywhere. Eventually, oh joy, we made to the hotel and civilisation. A hot bath eventually sorted me out.

### Authentic Vs Tourist

So what was authentic and what was tourist?

The boat trip definitely required better gear than I had taken but even then the violent motion of the boat would cause muscles to ache. A better boat with a covered deck area would have been a lot nicer.

The steps the monastery are epic and dramatic. You can imagine the monks toiling up and down. The actual monastery area where the huts are feels devoid of soul – a series of over restored huts being endlessly photographed by eager tourists.

The monastery is stripped of meaning by the restorers and the tourists alike.

The birdlife the puffins and the gannett's are epic, authentic and great to see but you don't need to go to this extent to see them.

### Should You Go?

Would I advise you to go – yes - but downplay expectations if you can - expect a few dry stone walls perched on a ledge and nothing more then you will be impressed by the actuality.

Try and choose a nice summer's day to go. In any case make sure you are prepared with waterproofs warm clothing and statues for if you do have a medical condition then don't really think about it