



2.5 The Blasket Islands



View north-west towards Brandon Mountain from Great Blasket

The Blaskets lie on the westernmost edge of Europe. They were inhabited for many centuries, probably since the Iron Age. Great Blasket, by far the largest of the six, had a population of some 160 people during World War I, but this soon dwindled and the island was finally abandoned in 1953.

Although geologically continuous with Dunmore Head, the archipelago for thousands of years has been separated from the Dingle Peninsula by Blasket Sound – a narrow but treacherous strip of water. The rare isolation of these islands belies the short stretch of water that separates them from the mainland.

Even in the 20th century, island life had a distinctive, medieval flavour: arranged marriages, no machinery or electricity, and a cashless, co-operative economy. The abandoned village and outlying buildings add a fascinating human dimension to a walk (described below) that is already rich in mountain views, seascapes and wildlife. If you are lucky enough to enjoy a fine day on Great Blasket, this could be the highlight of your visit to Dingle.

Ruined house in the upper village





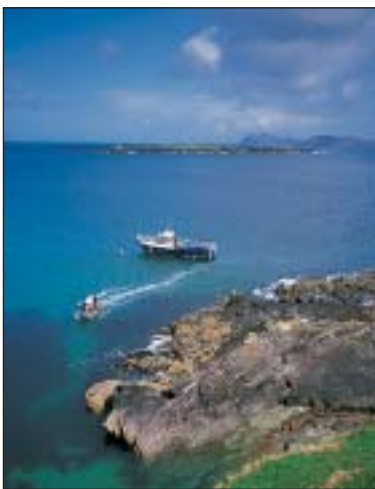
A day walk on Great Blasket

Of all the islands, Great Blasket is the least inaccessible: see panel. Be prepared for wet and windy conditions: the boat crossing can be rough, and the island offers no trees, bushes or natural shelter. Aim to make a day of it, taking food and drink. On a clear day, the views from the walk are glorious, and the modest climb to its summit (292 m) is rewarded by a unique panorama. In poor weather, the abandoned village is still of great interest, and its ruins offer some shelter. Of the few restored buildings, one houses a café, with simple overnight accommodation (booked in advance).

The walk itself resembles the Dingle Way in miniature: a leaf on a stem. From the harbour, you arrive near the end of the leaf, then walk towards the stem which runs south-west along the spine of the island. The round trip to reach 'the Cró', (Croaghmore) is 7 km (4 miles), or about 2½ hours. You could continue to the island's south-western tip (another 2 km). Allow time for the return boat trip, to explore the village and perhaps also for a trip to the beach (White Strand). Be sure to agree your return time with the boat operator: if you miss the boat, you could be stranded for days or even weeks.

Start by climbing steeply through the village and at the top, turn right (westerly) along a grassy road. After 250 m the road swings sharply left (southerly): here you can turn right instead down a path to White Strand, where seals bask on the sand and play offshore. One km after the sharp swing left, you reach Sorrowful Cliff. In the 1830s, the wives of fishermen watched from here as the boats below were smashed in a sudden storm that killed 14 men, a story told in *Island Home*.

Soon afterwards, you reach the junction with your return route: islanders ironically called this the 'traffic lights'. Bear right along the road, which starts to climb steeply and peters out. The remains of Doon Fort are a short detour to the right.



Arriving by tender from the Dunquin ferry



Boats to Great Blasket

Boats carry passengers during May to September, weather permitting.

Sometimes they run almost daily, but in May 2003, boats departed on only 6 of the 31 days.

To improve your chances of a visit, consider boat and weather options from either Dingle or Dunquin. The boat trip takes about 30-40 minutes each way, depending on local conditions, and you may need to transfer to the ferry boat from a small tender.

In 2003, the Dunquin ferry plied frequently and cost €20 return, whereas the faster Dingle boat ran every 2 hours and cost €30 return.

Dunquin quay: tel 00 353 66 915 6422
(www.blasketferries.com). From Dingle
(Peig Sayers): tel 00 353 86 852 2321
(www.blasketislands.com)





Continue to climb south-westerly to reach Slievedonagh (281 m). It commands fine views north to Inishtooskert, north-west to Mount Brandon and the Three Sisters, west to Mount Eagle and Dunmore Head, south to the Iveragh Peninsula and south-west to the outlying smaller Blaskets. Descend the path south-westerly, then ascend the Cró, en route passing small clocháns, built with ventilation holes for drying turf. The panorama from the Cró is even more impressive than that from Slievedonagh.

Depending on the weather and time available, either continue south-west to explore the island's south-westerly tip, or turn back to retrace your steps as far as the 'traffic lights'. Instead of going straight ahead, bear right to complete your circuit and follow the road back towards the village.



The Great Blasket Library

Three residents have made Great Blasket famous in the Irish literature: Tomás o Crohan, Peig Sayers and Muiris O'Sullivan. Although none had more than village school education, and two of them never travelled beyond Tralee, all three had a book published between 1929 and 1935. The islanders' accounts of life on Great Blasket embody the oral tradition of fireside storytelling, passed down through the generations. Their writings have all the freshness of speech and folk-tales, and make fascinating reading today. Although classics of Irish literature, they are more widely read in English translation.

Island Home details the literary tradition, with references to about 20 Blasket books, whilst the Stagles' book provides an illustrated account of the islanders' origins, agriculture, housing and pastimes.

*Stagles, Joan & Ray (1998) **The Blasket Islands: Next Parish America** O'Brien Press 0-86278-071-3*

*Thomson, George (1987) **Island Home: the Blasket Heritage** Mount Eagle Publications 0-86322-161-0*

Picnic at the Cró, summit of Great Blasket

