

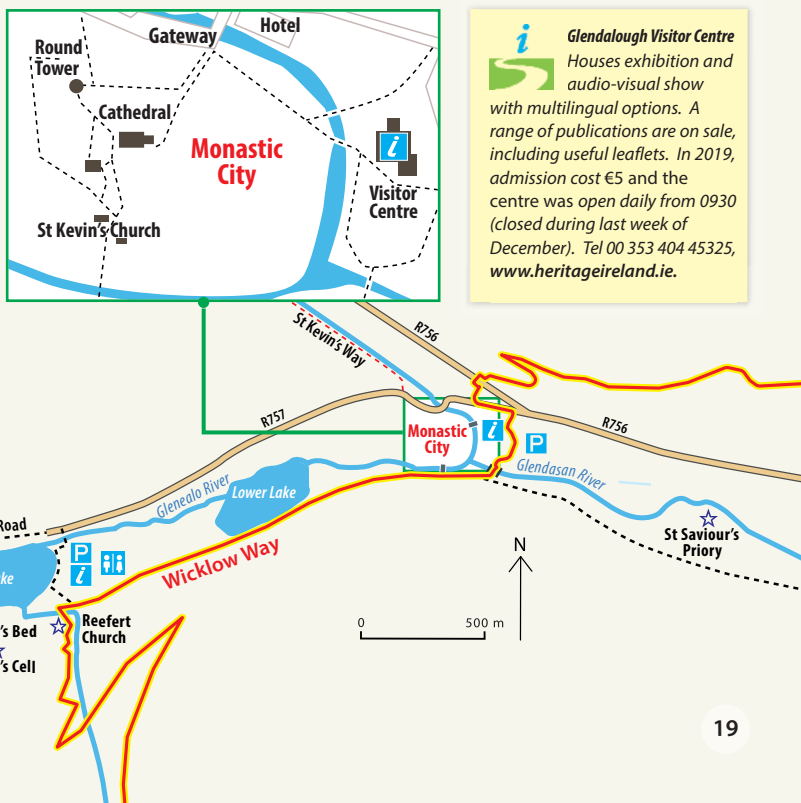
2.1 Glendalough

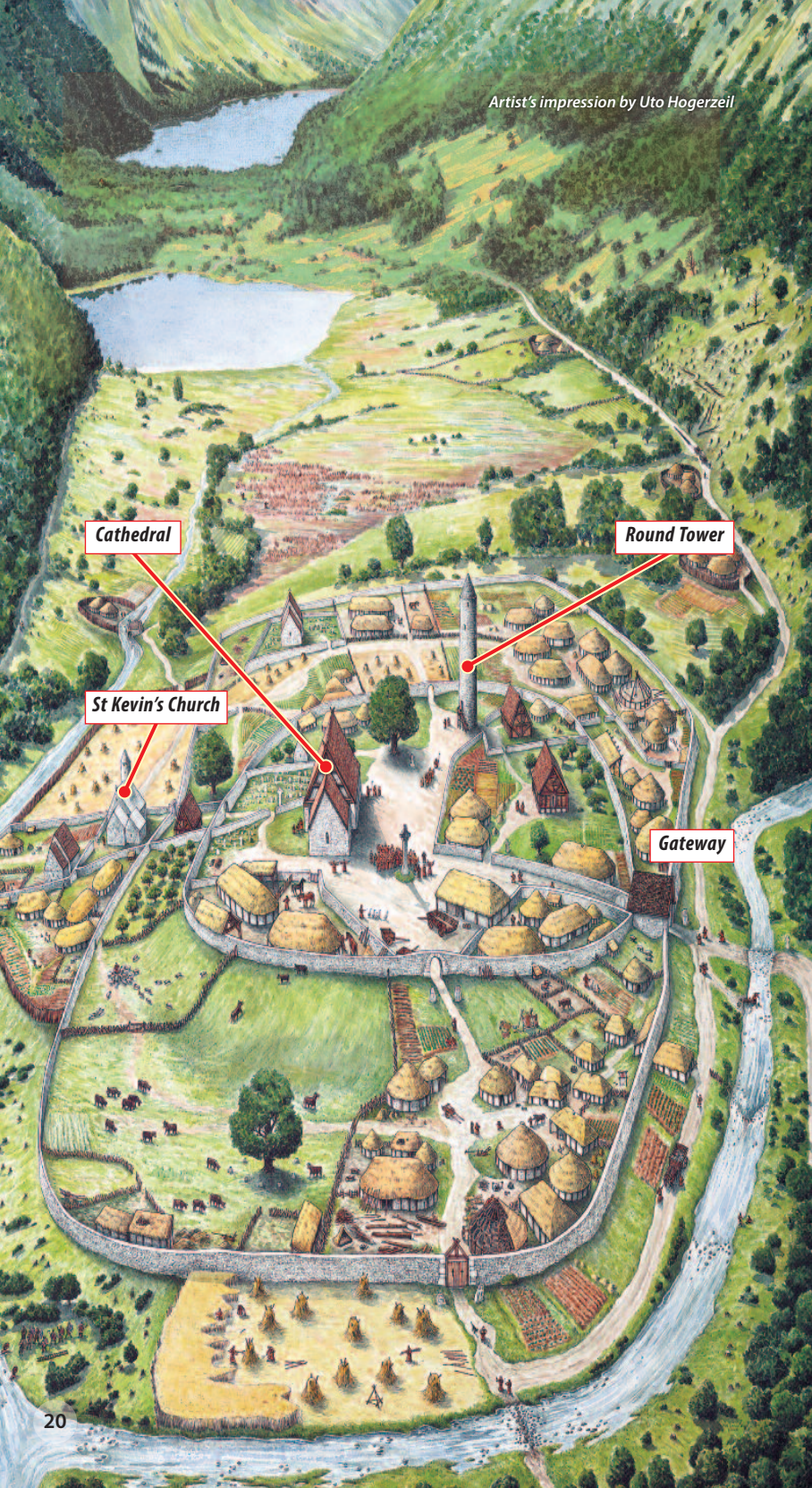
Glendalough's Monastic City was founded in the seventh century in honour of St Kevin. It became a magnet for pilgrims for over a thousand years. The artist's impression below shows how it might have looked in its heyday, around 1150.

Glendalough means 'valley of two lakes'. From the Way, there's a superb view over this tranquil and sheltered glen: see the photo on page 24. The confluence of the valleys of the Rivers Glendasan and Glenealo made this a natural site for settlement. Its dramatic scenery was formed in the Ice Age, and its steeply wooded slopes and valley floor provide a rich environment for flora and fauna.

The monastery was the centre of this settlement from the 7th century until the late 1530s, when the Irish monasteries were dissolved. For 900 years it provided a centre for learning, as well as for religion. Pilgrimages continued into the 19th century, notably on 3 June which is St Kevin's annual feast day. The site has been maintained by government agencies since 1869. Some of the buildings are superbly restored and maintained, others are ruins or barely discernible.

St Kevin was a descendant of the royal house of Leinster who turned his back on privilege. His solitary life as a barefoot hermit at Glendalough inspired many disciples: for seven years he slept in a tiny rock cave on the mountainside, wore only animal skins and ate very sparingly. The monastery was founded after his death in AD 618. It developed into a centre of learning, eventually housing up to 200 monks, who worked at copying and illuminating holy manuscripts, and caring for the sick.





Cathedral

Round Tower

St Kevin's Church

Gateway



St Kevin's Church (or 'Kitchen')

St Kevin allegedly lived from 498-618 AD, but in those days living to an age of 120 years would certainly have required divine intervention! Other legends about his life persist: when he was motionless at prayer one day, a blackbird laid an egg in his hand. Such was his love of animals that he is said to have maintained a trance-like stillness until the egg had hatched. This legend was immortalised in Seamus Heaney's 1996 poem *St Kevin and the Blackbird*.

Much later, in the mid-twelfth century, another saint, Laurence O'Toole, was Abbot of Glendalough. His buildings probably include St Saviour's Priory, with its romanesque windows and fine stone carvings of animals. Later, O'Toole became Archbishop of Dublin, and in 1226 he was canonised by the Pope.



Monolith cross, Glendalough

The Round Tower is at least 1000 years old, and it dominates the scene. Surrounded by gravestones, it stands over 30 metres tall. The tower consists of mica schist, with an arched granite doorway about 3.5 m (12 ft) above ground level. The upper storeys have small windows with lintels, whilst the top storey has four windows aligned to the cardinal compass points.

Ireland has about 65 such towers still standing, most of them of similar dimensions and construction. However, Glendalough's is perhaps the finest in the entire country. The towers served many purposes – a landmark to guide pilgrims, a bell tower, a storehouse and a lookout tower. Sometimes, especially when under attack from the Vikings, they also provided a secure place of refuge for people and valuables. Once safely inside, the monks could pull up the access ladder from the safety of its high doorway.

Glendalough's round tower was divided internally into six storeys by timber floors. Its conical cap was struck by lightning in 1876, and was rebuilt using original stones found inside the tower.

Round Tower, with gravestones





Cathedral, seen from the east

The largest ruin is the roofless cathedral, which dominates the centre of the main graveyard. Its nave is the oldest part, the chancel dating from the late 12th century, with beautiful stone carvings. Its walls are lined with grave slabs for people who died over a period of a thousand years.

The entrance gateway is imposing, and this is Ireland's only surviving example of a gateway into a monastic enclosure. Originally it was two-storeyed, with fine granite arches and a timber roof. Embedded in the stone wall is a stone tablet engraved with a large cross which marked the boundary of the area of refuge.



Entrance gateway, with cross highlighted

The Monastic City lies just across a footbridge from the Wicklow Way: see pages 48-9. The first building you pass is St Kevin's Church, with twin steeply pitched roofs and charming tower-like belfry. Its nickname 'St Kevin's Kitchen' refers to this chimney-like structure. Originally a two-storey building, its upper floor was probably used as living quarters, or to store manuscripts. Its date is uncertain, allegedly any time from the 8th to 11th centuries. In the early 19th century, it was revived as a place of worship.

The artist's impression on page 20 shows only the Monastic City, which has the best-known buildings. There's a cluster of even earlier buildings about 1.5 km to the west, near the Upper Lake: see the sketch map on page 19. These include two churches, many crosses, and St Kevin's Cell and Bed, associated with the hermit stage of his life. The remains of two further churches lie to the east: Trinity Church stands on the roadside about 300 m east of the Visitor Centre, and St Saviour's Church, with its beautiful carvings, lies 1 km to the east, on the south bank of the Glendasan River.

The Miners' Road Walk and St Kevin's Way

For those with time to linger around Glendalough, there are several interesting walks: seek out a leaflet of colour-coded *Walking Trails of Glendalough* from the Visitor Centre. The Miners' Road runs west for 4 km along the northern edge of the Upper Lake, to the miners' village at the end of the valley. Allow two hours from the Upper Lake car park for this round trip, which gives views of St Kevin's Bed and the ruined Teampall-na-Skellig (the Church of the Rock).

The junction of granite and schist in the rocks of Glendalough created rich veins of minerals, especially lead, but also copper, zinc and silver. During the 19th century up to 2000 people worked in these mines, with activity centred on the now-deserted miners' village. In 1856-7, the Mining Company of Ireland planted the fine stand of Scots pines that you walk past, intending them for pit props; but mining ended by about 1890, before the trees were ready to use. There was a revival in the 20th century, but the mines proved uneconomic and finally closed in 1950.

The waymarked St Kevin's Way links the village of Hollywood to the Monastic City Gateway, following St Kevin's likely route to Glendalough. Over about 30 km, it follows a mixture of forest tracks, riverside path and roadside walking.

Glendalough's lakes seen from the Way

