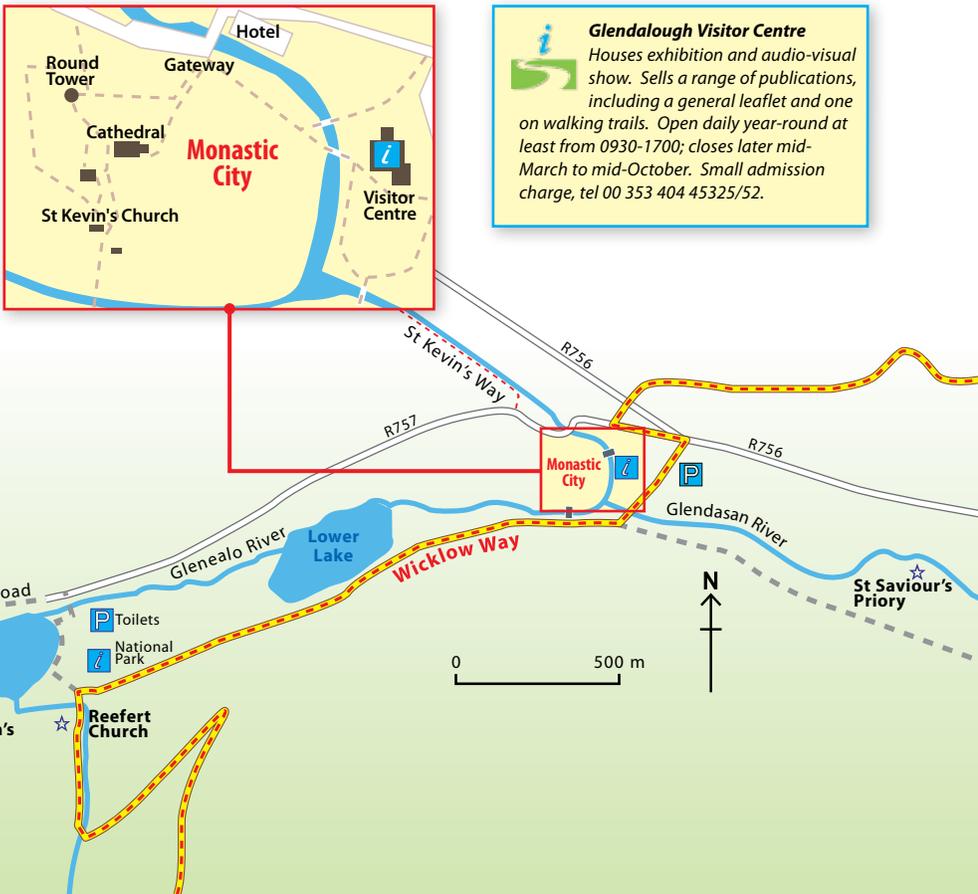


2·1 Glendalough

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 photograph on page 46. 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.



Artist's impression by Uto Hogerzell: see page 63



Cathedral

Round Tower

St Kevin's Church

Gateway



St Kevin's Church (or 'Kitchen')

St Kevin was a descendant of the royal house of Leinster who turned his back on privilege. His solitary life as a hermit in a cave at Glendalough inspired many disciples, and 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. St Kevin allegedly lived from 498-618 AD, but in those days to have lived to an age of 120 years would certainly have required divine intervention!

Many other legends about his life survive: for example, when he was at prayer one day, a blackbird laid an egg in his hand. Such was his love of animals that he is supposed to have kept completely still until the egg had hatched.

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 surrounded by gravestones and dominates the scene. It stands some 30 metres high and is one of Ireland's finest. These tall tapering towers served both as a landmark for visitors and as a bell tower. Sometimes, especially when under attack from the Vikings, they also provided a secure place of refuge for people and valuables. Glendalough's round tower was divided internally into six storeys by timber floors. Once safely inside, the monks could pull up the access ladder. Its cap was rebuilt in 1876, using stones found inside.

Round Tower, with gravestones





Cathedral, seen from the east

The largest ruin is the roofless cathedral, which dominates the centre of the main graveyard. Built in phases, 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 during 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. This marked the boundary of the area of refuge.



Entrance gateway, with cross highlighted

The Wicklow Way enters the Monastic City across a footbridge from the south: see page 48. The first building you pass is St Kevin's Church, with twin steeply pitched roofs and a charming tower-like belfry. Its resemblance to a chimney gave it the nickname 'St Kevin's Kitchen'. Originally a two-storey building, its upper floor was probably used as living quarters, or to store manuscripts. Its date is uncertain, with sources claiming anything from 8th to 11th centuries. In the early 19th century, it was revived as a place of worship.

The reconstruction on page 21 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 20. 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: obtain the leaflet of colour-coded Walking Trails of Glendalough from the Visitor Centre: see page 20. 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 (see page 28) 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. It opened in 2001 and is 26 km long, following a mixture of forest tracks, riverside path and roadside walking.