

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 mainland by Blasket Sound – a narrow but treacherous strip of water. This created the extreme isolation of these islands, making them a time capsule.

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 that is already rich in mountain views, seascapes and wildlife. If you are lucky enough to enjoy a fine day on Great Blasket, it could be the highlight of your visit to Dingle. If the ferry cannot land, be sure to visit the Great Blasket Centre: see page 49.

Ruined house in the upper village



A day walk on Great Blasket (An Blascaod Mór)

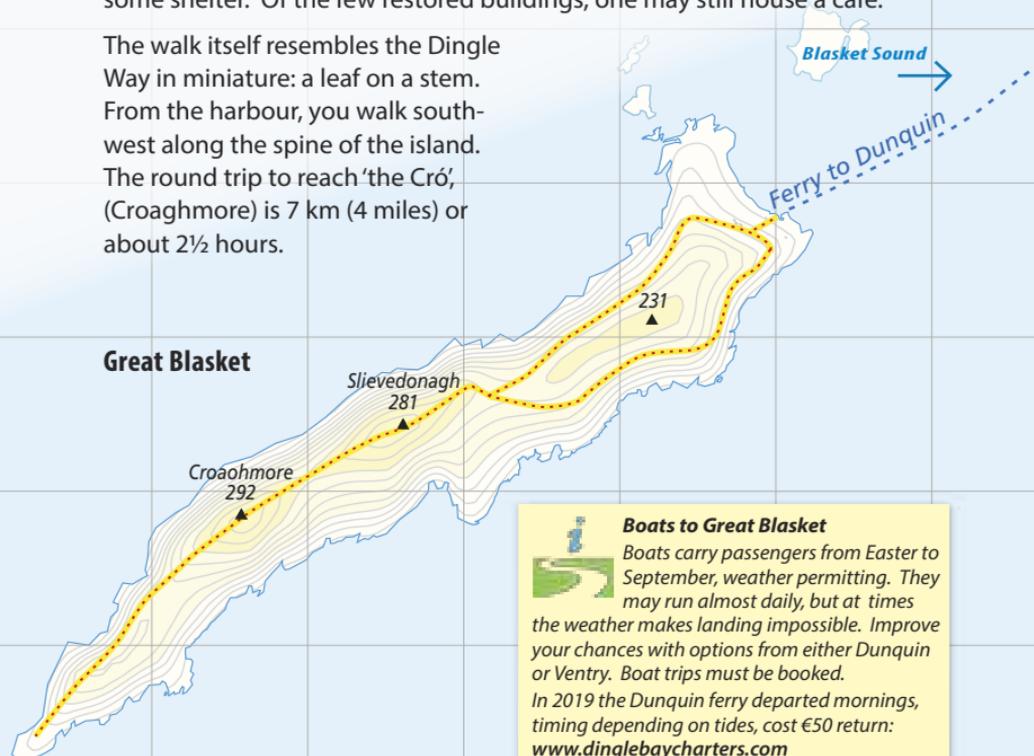


Arriving at Great Blasket by ferry, via tender

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. Take food and drink and make a day of it. On a clear day, the views are glorious, and the modest climb to the Cró (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 may still house a café.

The walk itself resembles the Dingle Way in miniature: a leaf on a stem. From the harbour, you walk 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.

Great Blasket



Boats to Great Blasket



Boats carry passengers from Easter to September, weather permitting. They may run almost daily, but at times the weather makes landing impossible. Improve your chances with options from either Dunquin or Ventry. Boat trips must be booked.

In 2019 the Dunquin ferry departed mornings, timing depending on tides, cost €50 return:

www.dinglebaycharters.com

tel 00 353 66 915 1344.

From Ventry, landing on the island is offered only as part of an all-day tour costing €70:

www.marinetours.ie tel 00 353 86 335 3805.

You could continue a further 2 km to the island's south-western tip, but don't take chances with your return boat trip: if you miss it, you could be stranded for days or weeks. Allow time also to explore the village and perhaps also for a trip to the beach (White strand/Trá bán).

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. To visit White Strand, where seals bask on the sand and play offshore, turn right instead down a path. After 1 km of path, 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.

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.

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, with ventilation holes for drying turf. The panorama from the Cró is even more impressive.

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 Writers

Three residents made Great Blasket famous in Irish literature: Tomás o Crohan, Peig Sayers and Muiris

O'Sullivan. None had more than village school education, and two of them had never travelled beyond Tralee. Between 1929 and 1935, each had a book published in their native Gaelic about life on Great Blasket.

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. For a book about the islanders, see page 70.

Picnic at the Cró, summit of Great Blasket

