The Ring of Kerry is often used as a substitute name for the Iveragh Peninsula, but more properly it refers to the 175-kilometre road that encircles this vast, scenic leg of land. Tourists have been coming to the peninsula in ever-increasing numbers over the past century, but most of them do the Ring by bus or car in a day from Killarney. If you stay in one of the Iveragh’s few small towns or venture off the main route, for example onto the Ring of Skellig at the very tip, you’ll have to yourself this giant’s landscape of mountains, lakes and long ocean views, which is at its most spectacular when illuminated by a sudden shaft of light through the clouds like a flash bulb. Continue reading to find out more about...Killorglin Portmagee The Skellig Islands The Ring of Skellig Caherdaniel The Kerry Way and Carrauntoohil **Killorglin** Nineteen kilometres from Killarney is KILLORGLIN, a distinctly missable town on the River Laune apart from for three mad days in the middle of August during the Puck Fair (wwww.puckfair.ie), which draws in crowds of up to thirty thousand. First a wild goat is stalked in the mountains, then caged and crowned as king of the town, the signal for a Dionysian festival of wine and song, plus a traditional horse fair. The event has pagan roots in the Celtic harvest festival of Lughnasa, though these particular ceremonies are meant to commemorate the herd of goats that ran down into Killorglin, to warn the townsfolk that Cromwell’s army was on its way. **Portmagee** By road, the jumping-off point for Valentia is PORTMAGEE, a harbour village situated beside the long bridge to the island. Its Skellig Heritage Centre and tourist office, actually just across the bridge, gives some fascinating background on seabirds and other marine life, lighthouses and early monastic life, with an impressive short film about Skellig Michael. The centre also has a café with fine views of Portmagee, and runs cruises around, but not onto, Skellig Michael, which are useful for those who could not manage the 650 steps to the island’s summit and which may be running on some days when the weather isn’t quite good enough for boats to land on the island; in worse weather, ninety-minute mini-cruises around the Valentia channel are occasionally laid on. **The Skellig Islands** *An incredible, impossible, mad place…I tell you the thing does not belong to any world that you and I have lived and worked in: it is part of our dream world…* - George Bernard Shaw A voyage to the Skellig Islands (Na Scealga, “the crags”), rising sharply from the sea 10km off the tip of the Iveragh Peninsula, is one of the most exciting and inspiring trips you can make in Ireland. On top of the larger of these two inhospitable, shark’s-tooth islands, Skellig Michael (or Great Skellig), a monastery was somehow constructed in the late seventh or early eighth century, in imitation of the desert communities of the early Church fathers, and dedicated to St Michael, the patron saint of high places. The exposed, often choppy boat-ride out, followed by Manx shearwaters, storm petrels and puffins from Puffin Island, a nature reserve at the edge of St Finan’s Bay, only adds to the sense of wild isolation. Little Skellig is a nature reserve too, crawling with over fifty thousand gannets and now officially full (the excess moved to the Saltees off County Wexford); landing is forbidden here, but the boatmen will come in close so you can watch the gannets diving for fish and hear their awesome din. If you come in spring or early summer, you’ll have thousands of cute breeding puffins to keep you company on the 200-metre ascent from Skellig Michael’s quay. The compact, remarkably well preserved monastery in the lee of the summit is a miracle of ingenuity and devotion. It was built entirely on artificial terraces, facing south–southeast for maximum sunlight, with sturdy outer walls to deflect the winds and to protect the vegetable patch made of bird droppings; channels crisscross the settlement to funnel rainwater into cisterns. You can walk into the dry-stone, beehive huts, chapels and refectory, which would have sheltered a total of twelve to fifteen monks at any one time and have withstood the worst the Atlantic can throw at them for 1300 years. The high cross beside the large oratory probably marks the burial of the founder, reputed to have been St Fionán, or an early saint. At least three Viking raids in the ninth century were not enough to dislodge the monks, but during the climatic change of the twelfth century, the seas became rougher and more inhospitable. Around the same time, pressure was brought to bear on the old independent monasteries to conform, and the monks adopted the Augustinian rule and moved to Ballinskelligs on the mainland. Pilgrimages to Skellig Michael, however, continued until the eighteenth century, even after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. **The Ring of Skellig** To the south of Portmagee runs the Ring of Skellig, a quiet, scenic though often very steep route around the most westerly promontory of the Iveragh Peninsula, via wild and exposed St Finan’s Bay – which is the unlikely home of the high-quality Skelligs Chocolate Factory (visitors welcome to taste and buy). From the highest point of the road between Portmagee and St Finan’s Bay, you can climb the hill on the seaward side of the saddle in twenty minutes or so for the most magnificent views out to the Skellig Islands, across to the Dingle Peninsula and the Blaskets, and inland to the Iveragh Mountains. **Caherdaniel** One of the nicest bases on the Ring of Kerry is CAHERDANIEL (Cathair Donál), attractively sited on the steep eastern flank of Derrynane Bay, at the southernmost point of the Iveragh Peninsula. The village has very good hostel accommodation at the Traveller’s Rest, as well as some more upmarket options, and there are two vibrant pubs by the central crossroads, Freddy’s and The Blind Piper, both with outdoor tables by a stream, and you can often catch live music (Thursdays are your best bet). **The Kerry Way and Carrauntoohil** The 213-kilometre-long Kerry Way is a spectacular, circular, waymarked footpath that starts in Killarney, takes in the Muckross Estate, Torc Waterfall, the Upper Lake and the Black Valley before crossing to Glencar, then goes right around the Iveragh Peninsula anticlockwise, with short offshoots to Glenbeigh, Cahersiveen, Waterville and Caherdaniel, finally passing through Sneem and Kenmare. Mostly following a network of green roads, many of which are old “butter roads”, the route provides magnificent views both of the Iveragh’s mountains and of the neighbouring peninsulas, Dingle and Beara. OS 1:50,000 map numbers 78 and 83 are essential, and Cork Kerry Tourism produce a useful Kerry Way Map Guide. The whole thing can be done in nine or ten days, or, with careful study of bus timetables, you could do day-walks along the Way beyond Glenbeigh in summer, or on the section between Glenbeigh and Waterville in winter. An excellent website, [www.kerryway.net](http://www.kerryway.net/), provides trail descriptions, maps and full details of hostels and other walker-friendly accommodation, offering services such as luggage transfer, evening meals and packed lunches, along the route. Experienced walkers may well be tempted off the Kerry Way to tackle Ireland’s highest peak, Carrauntoohil (1038m). Two of the finest approaches are described in Best Irish Walks by Josh Lynam: the Coomloughra Horseshoe, a seven-hour, occasionally vertiginous circuit, starting from the bridge at Breanlee on the Beaufort–Glencar road, which also takes in the second and third highest peaks, Beenkeragh and Caher; and a tough, nine-hour Macgillicuddy’s Reeks ridge walk, beginning at Kate Kearney’s Cottage, bagging six peaks and ending at the Breanlee bridge. Guided ascents are offered by Hidden Ireland Adventures (t064/664 4733, wwww.hiddenirelandadventures.com), Nathan Kingerlee and Irish Adventures, based in Dingle.