

An Island between Heaven and Earth

by Sheena Jolley

Ceaseless Vigil

FOR RICHARD FORAN, the lighthouse Attendant, and Michael Conneely, the helicopter pilot, it was just another day in the routine of their work. For me it was the long awaited moment of the start of the ultimate magical mystery tour. After three frustrating trips to the Skelligs by boat the previous year I knew it was impossible to get the shots I wanted unless I could be there at dawn and dusk. There are ascending steps up each side of Great Skellig. A couple of hours spent clambering up the steps was a rewarding experience but the light was too harsh and the time too short.

I wrote to the National Monuments Service at the end of the summer in 2005. After receiving permission and helpful advice from both the National Monuments Service and the Commissioners of Irish Lights, I was poised for my expedition to the Skelligs.

My spirits were high as I drove west on a beautiful sunny evening in my native Ireland. The weather was perfect, the sky blue, and the sea smooth as glass. I was filled with that wonderful feeling of excitement and optimism that one has in the sure knowledge that winter has been left far behind and all around new life and growth are emerging. I have a

fascination for islands and it was my first time on Valentia. I spent the next couple of days clambering over the hills and rocks in my usual bid to get closer to wildlife for action shots. There is always something new to observe and this proved to be no exception. I was either creeping up on unsuspecting brown hares grazing at dawn or crawling on my hands and knees observing young larks in a nest on the ground in a long deserted cottage.

During this time Richard, the lighthouse Attendant, kept in close touch as the helicopter had been delayed in Dublin. Finally two days later the call came to say we would be leaving in half an hour. We had agreed to meet at the church in Knightstown and I arrived in a flash. We chatted easily as we waited and, right on cue, the helicopter seemed to appear from nowhere and landed quickly and faultlessly. I tried to give the impression I had done this countless

times before and slipped into my survival suit only to be told I must take my shoes off first and put them back on over the suit! With my lifejacket on I ducked the revolving blades as I had observed others do although they were nowhere near my head, and was soon strapped into the front seat next to the pilot. Within

minutes we were swept up into an infinite blue sky. I did not waste a second to sit back, relax and enjoy the view as there were too many good shots to capture.

The men caught up on their news of the previous months exchanging stories of their travels to foreign places. Whilst concentrating on camera settings and composition I wondered why anyone would leave these lands in pursuit of greener pastures. We all agreed we enjoyed visiting new places but our own country of birth was best!

A mile a minute, and in seven minutes we had covered the seven miles over the water to land perfectly on the little helipad below the lighthouse. Now for the first time I ventured past the big metal gates with the words NO ADMISSION written boldly. With the level of excitement and anticipation so high I did not even notice the weight of my camera gear. I brought with me three lenses and two camera bodies. I strode with a new confidence eager to make the most of this wonderful opportunity.

My room in the lighthouse was the ultimate 'room with a view'. It was high up on the cliffs overlooking the sea which pounded the treacherous rocks 100 feet below. The window had long been sealed to keep out the penetrating salt but it only slightly muffled the sound of breaking surf and endless calls of swirling gulls attending their nests on the cliff face.

IT WAS early afternoon and no time to waste. I set off with a camera and two lenses, making my way up the south steps. I stopped at the Wailing Widow to capture her in full glory against a deep blue sky with Little Skellig standing tall and solid in the background. There was not a cloud or another soul in sight—only me, my camera, the birds, and the amazing landscape beneath my feet. I felt like a mountain goat eager to know every inch below me.

As I wandered among the beehive huts I was filled with a profound sense of privilege and awe. I stood alone but alive in a place which seems untouched by time, sharing moments with the spirits of past monks, fishermen,



A room with a view

the north steps had never before been photographed.

The north steps seem to go vertically down. It was an awesome and breathtaking sight that made shivers run down my spine and ensured I always kept a grip on terra firma. You cannot focus on the sea below for more than a few seconds or you easily lose orientation. I am not surprised that through the ages people have literally

fallen off. It would have happened so easily with a slight lapse in concentration. So as not to suffer the same fate I wedged myself against the ancient sixth century wall and started shooting the steps both upwards and downwards. As I worked, I kept as much of my body in contact with the rock surface as I could. The monks must have clambered up and down those steps every day. But when they first arrived there were no steps. It was impossible to visualise how they built this near vertical stairway with enormous slabs of stone.

Again I found myself asking questions on what they wore. Smocks would have been practical as long robes would have been a liability. How long did it take to create this ancient site and just how many must have perished in the process? These men must have been adventurous, fit, skilled, dedicated to a cause, and very determined. To exist in a place



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which is completely exposed to the elements and will always retain a sense of untouched wilderness would seem impossible to 21st century man. But these men not only eked out a living on this inhospitable rock, they also built monuments on precipices that still stand 1,500 years later and found the time to devote their minds, bodies and souls to God.

As I clung to the steps I knew that a single mistake of a hand or foot hold and one would unquestionably fall to one's death. As dangerous as it was, my fascination grew. I found it all too incredible a place to leave unexplored so I walked to the bottom as far as I safely could to where the remaining steps have collapsed. Only steep slopes separated me from the sea.

It was time to climb back up. As the sun began to set the light became warmer and the air was filled with a new presence. It was the sound and sight of thousands of little puffins returning to their nests. They filled the sky like bats and, until they settled on the land and I could observe them more closely, it was difficult to imagine these dashing tiny bundles as the same enchanting, sad eyed, orange footed, bright-billed puffins.

I had come to the Skelligs to photograph the wildlife but had been so

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awestruck by the place that I concentrated firstly on the landscape. Now feeling secure with my back pressed against the warm stone, I carefully and slowly replaced the camera's wide angle lens with a telephoto lens. Now I could give my full attention to these swift little creatures. Sitting on an ancient stairway, on an ancient rock, photographing the ongoing evolution of nature, was a sublime experience. I was in my element, filling my lungs with pristine air, feeling a great sense of freedom, knowing Ireland is still the romantic place I always knew it to be. I was witnessing the natural world at close quarters, being outdoors and being a part of nature. At 9.30 p.m. when the light had faded too much to capture the puffins in flight, I dragged myself away and crawled back up the steps and over the fence.

Richard was eager to see my shots. I managed to chew on some food while we talked enthusiastically about my exploits and he viewed my digital shots on the camera screen. He kept me amused with stories of previous visitors to the island.

A writer had spent a week on Great Skellig one summer and was blessed with glorious weather for the whole week. He wanted to experience bad weather on the island and Richard suggested January would bring the



'Follow me'



worst. He duly returned but had yet another glorious week, and claimed that it never rains on the Skelligs. However, after he had left, the following week the weather was so bad that waves rose up over 100 feet and broke the windows in the lighthouse accommodation. I began to wonder what tomorrow might bring!

Five a.m. the following morning; the mist hung so low that I could not see the cliffs out of my window. Fearful that the mist might lift and I would miss something, I enthusiastically dragged on my clothes and was soon out the door. We had planned to leave the island at 9.00 a.m. which gave me only three hours more shooting time. I sat on Christ's Saddle watching a red sunrise over a misty Little Skellig and a moody Wailing Widow, form a red trail across the sea. I saw the beehive huts shrouded in an eerie light and partly concealed by a still mist. The air was warm and out of the mist I spotted a rabbit scrambling between the rocks. My thoughts wandered again. Perhaps the monks brought rabbits from the mainland and then the puffins came and utilised their burrows. I could imagine the smell of stewed rabbit and roast puffin hanging in the air. All the firewood and peat would have been transported by boat and carried all the way up those long stairways. How easy our own lives are.



Helicopter landing at Skelligs Lighthouse helipad

The mist did not lift. As it gently swirled filling the air and settling on the rocks, the feeling of remoteness and isolation grew. As I made my way back down to the lighthouse the paths became slippier and the visibility decreased. Yet I did not feel alone. The fulmars silently emerged from the mist and glided past. The rock pippets gave warning cries as I passed too close to their nesting spots. A few stragglers were leaving their burrows following the main dawn exodus of puffins going out to sea to fish.



Stairway to Heaven

Richard had work to do on the mainland and the mist showed no sign of lifting. The visibility had to be three miles before it was safe for the helicopter to fly. I made the most of the delay by venturing down to the cove where hundreds of kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots were nesting. I was easily amused for the next few hours until Richard declared the helicopter could not fly that day and we would leave by boat. So we arrived by air and left on the water. The boat took us alongside Little Skellig, a rock rising straight out of the sea where hardly an inch is wasted. A vast and noisy gannet colony occupies most of the rock and the seals enjoy the rocks and sea below.

The weather was in complete contrast to the fine weather of the previous day and a stark reminder of how quickly the weather can change at sea and on the Skelligs. How privileged I was to experience the changing moods it cast on the Skelligs from being bathed in sunshine to shrouded in mist.

Sheena Jolley is a free lance photographer based in Kinsale. She studied photography at North Oxfordshire College of Art from 1999 to 2001. She is dedicated to capturing images of the indigenous wildlife of Ireland, combining her creative talents with a love of nature.

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