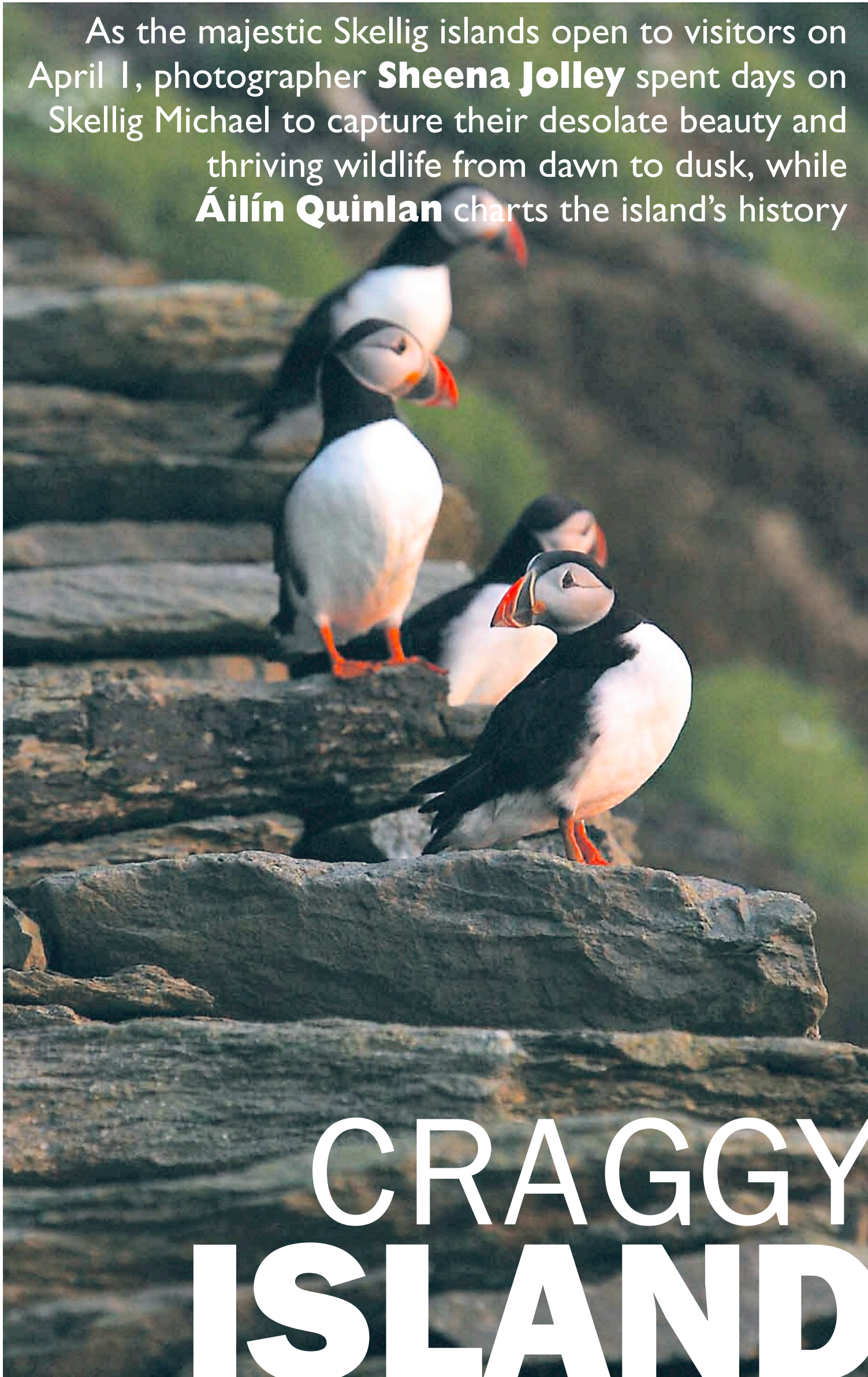


As the majestic Skellig islands open to visitors on April 1, photographer **Sheena Jolley** spent days on Skellig Michael to capture their desolate beauty and thriving wildlife from dawn to dusk, while **Áilín Quinlan** charts the island's history



# Craggy Island

**A**PRIL is the cruellest month, according to TS Eliot. But the author of *The Waste Land* clearly never got to enjoy Skellig Michael on a clear and sparkling day.

The Skelligs are one of the most enchanting of Ireland's coastal attractions: pyramids of sandstone which were home to some of the country's earliest monastic settlements and a modern-day sanctuary to a fantastic variety of birdlife.

Between April 1 and September, some 11,000 visitors are expected to visit Skellig Michael and climb the 600 hand-carved steps to the monastery atop the 230-metre rock.





**BIRDS OF A FEATHER:** Opposite, nesting pairs of birds on the Skelligs include puffins, guillemot, fulmar, kittiwake, storm petrel, manx shearwater, gannet, herring gull, lesser and greater black backed gulls; above, Sunrise at 5am, the Wailing Widow looks over small Skellig and the beehive huts that were home to the early monks. All pictures by Sheena Jolley

The island was an important centre of monastic life for Christian monks who lived there from the sixth to the 12th century. It's believed the monastery was built in 588 AD. One of Europe's better known, but least accessible monasteries, it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.

The spartan conditions inside the monastery illustrate the ascetic lifestyle practiced by early Irish Christians. The monks lived in stone 'beehive' huts or clochans perched above nearly vertical cliff walls.

The monastery on Skellig Michael survived approximately five Viking raids between AD795 and AD840. The community at Skellig Michael was apparently never

large — probably comprising about 12 lay-people, 20 monks and an abbot. Some time in the 12th century the monks abandoned the Skelligs and moved to the Augustinian monastery at Ballinskelligs on the mainland.

In the 1500s, Skellig Michael became a popular destination for annual pilgrimages, but had no permanent residents. A lighthouse was built in 1821, and a second one was completed in 1826, ensuring that Skellig Michael was again inhabited. The second lighthouse still operates, though it was largely rebuilt and modernised in 1967 and has been automated since the 1980s.

In May, a boat containing workmen,

guides and other personnel on behalf of the Office of Public Works will land on the steep rocky island off Kerry's coast. They will spend the summer carrying out crucial conservation works and informing tourists about this important remnant of early monastic life.

Conservation work on Skellig Michael has been going on since 1978 — and architect Grellan D Rourke has been there for nearly all of it.

"We spent the first year repairing a monastery wall that had collapsed and then moved on to the access steps to the south, used by visitors. Then we looked at the structure of the monastery itself. In 1986 the island was closed to the public

to enable dangerous work to be undertaken. We started work on repairing the retaining walls of the monastery, and that was one of the main focuses from 1986 until the late 1990s.

"We also repaired the east steps and the north steps leading to the monastery. The south steps, currently in use by visitors, are checked every week as they become loose. The north steps were finished by 2003."

This year, says Grellan, workers will continue with a conservation project at the Hermitage on the South Peak of Skellig Michael. The hermitage is an archaeologi-

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# An island between heaven and earth



**ROCK OF AGES:** The East window of Skellig Michael's medieval church. The view, like every other from the monastery, looks out over sister island Small Skellig just a mile away.

## A unique stay in Skelligs lighthouse gave photographer **Sheena Jolley** the photo ops of a lifetime

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 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.

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 windows have 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 I immediately set off with a camera body and two lenses for the south steps. I stopped at the Wailing Widow to capture her in full glory against a deep blue sky. There was not a cloud or another soul in sight. There was only me, my camera, the birds and the amazing landscape beneath my feet.

As I wandered among the beehive huts, I was filled with a profound sense of privilege and awe. I stood in a place which seems untouched by time, sharing moments with the spirits of past monks, fishermen and the families of the lighthouse keepers. One could not but admire the past souls who survived on those ancient rocks.

The north steps seem to go vertically down. It was a breathtaking sight that sent shivers 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 lose orientation. I am not surprised that through the ages people have literally fallen off.

The monks must have clambered up and down those steps on a daily basis, 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. 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 still found the time to devote their minds, bodies and souls to God.

As the sun set, the light became warmer and the air was filled with a new presence. It was the sight and sound of thousands of puffins returning to their nests.

I set the alarm for 5am. The morning mist hung so low I could not see the cliffs



**IMAGE CONSCIOUS:** It took four trips to the island for Sheena to get her ideal shots.

from my window. I sat on Christ's Saddle watching a red sunrise over a misty small Skellig and a moody Wailing Widow, forming a red trail across the sea. I saw the beehive huts shrouded in an eerie light and partly concealed by a still mist.

The mist did not lift. As it swirled, filling the air and settling on the rocks, the feeling of remoteness grew. As I made my way back down to the lighthouse, the paths became slipperier and the visibility decreased. Yet I did not feel alone. Fulmars silently emerged from the mist and glided past. The rock pippets gave warning cries as I passed too close to their nesting spots. Down at the cove, hundreds of kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots were nesting.

The helicopter could not fly that day so we left by boat. It took us alongside small 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 seals enjoy the sea below.

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

■ An exhibition of Sheena Jolley's wildlife photography will run for the month of June in the Cork Vision Centre, tel. 021-427 9925.

■ To find out more, visit: [www.sheenajolleyphotography.com](http://www.sheenajolleyphotography.com).

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cal site featuring a series of terraces built by the monks. There are the remains of a small church on the Oratory Terrace, and he believes there was probably a dwelling at one point.

Weather wise, access to Skellig Michael is usually more reliable between May and September, so there are only those months in which to work, he explains.

During the season the workmen stay on the island from Monday to Friday, while the guides, usually three of whom are on duty at a time, are rostered on for two weeks at a time.

"The OPW has guides to protect the site and interpret the site for the visitors. They are based in the monastery and they answer questions.

"In the region of 11,000 people visit the monastery each season, though you will get people coming out there who don't make it up to the top via the 600 steps. It's a very popular destination — it's a whole day trip."

The workers sleep in huts on the lighthouse road and use the cooking facilities provided by the OPW.

Water comes out of containers, they cook by gas and the fridges have solar power.

Although day-trippers can usually be

guaranteed a straight run over and back, things can be more complicated for those who actually stay on the island.

"It's very weather-dependent and also tide and wind dependent," says Grellan, who's been travelling to the island since 1979. It's never wise to depend on getting in or out on planned dates, he admits.

A native of Dublin, he has been working on Skellig Michael for much of his professional life. Spending much of his summer on a remote and rocky island certainly has had implications for his social life, he admits.

"When you're working like that it's easy to lose contact with people —

you're gone for so long it is awkward, you just have to make arrangements and be as flexible as possible. It is difficult to take holidays in the summer."

Grellan, along with other members of the team, is currently planning a book or even a series of books about Skellig Michael.

"We are putting a lot of information together. We are gathering information about the site from the excavations and investigations over most of the 30 years. We'll work on the material and see how it best fits together."

Although there's no publication date as yet — it will take two to three years to get the information together, he says.