

PLACES TO GO

JEWELS OF THE KINGDOM

Yvonne Gordon tells us why June is a great month to explore the gardens and attractions of County Kerry

Whether it's the rugged coastal scenery, beaches and scenic drives along the peninsulas, or the calm of the lakes and mountains of Killarney and how their appearances change in the different light of the day, County Kerry has lots to draw in those who love nature and the outdoors.

June is a good month to visit — with the last of the rhododendrons mixed with the vibrant green of new summer foliage, and before tourist attractions get busy with the crowds of late summer. Kerry is on the Wild Atlantic Way, and as well as its dramatic landscapes, there are some interesting gardens dotted along the way.

Two of southwest Ireland's most beautiful peninsulas are the Iveragh Peninsula, or the Ring of Kerry, and the Dingle Peninsula beside it. Both stretch out into the Atlantic, with rugged coastline, beaches, small villages and ancient sites to discover.

Allow a full day or more to explore the Ring of Kerry, which is the largest and busiest of the peninsulas, with plenty of daytrippers along the 175km route. Driving from Killorglin, there are views over Dingle Bay and Rossbeigh beach. Near Kells, drop into Kells Bay Garden, a 40-acre Victorian garden with a large collection of plants from Europe, New Zealand and South America. The peaceful gardens overlook the bay, and walking trails take in forest, bamboo glades and a walled garden.

Garden owner Billy Alexander says that June is a great month to visit, as the tree ferns are in full flush — Kells Bay has the biggest collections of these in the northern hemisphere. Billy also says the bamboo garden looks amazing. "It's one of the best months before the full summer comes, the plants look best in the cooler temperatures and all the trees are just about in full leaf now, after a very cold spring," he says. "The rhododendrons are still in flower and the gunnera leaves are almost at their biggest, with seven foot leaves."

Further along the Ring of Kerry, the two jagged outlines of the Skellig Islands come into view

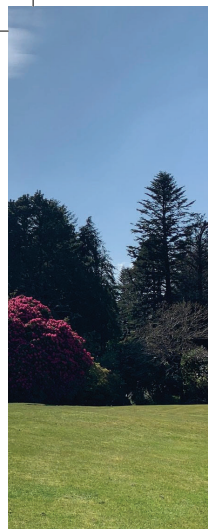


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— Skellig Michael and Little Skellig, which are 13km offshore. At The Skellig Experience Visitor Centre on Valentia Island, you can learn about the history and wildlife on Skellig Michael, which was once home to monks, and how the rocks provide refuge to thousands of breeding seabirds like gannets and puffins. As well as the exhibitions, you can book a sea cruise around the Skelligs from here — trips restart for the season this month.

For a scenic detour, turn off from the N70 between Waterville and Cahersiveen for the Skellig Ring, with Atlantic views from St Finian's Bay, tasty treats at The Skellig Chocolate Company and perhaps a quiet walk on the headland.

If you're exploring the Dingle peninsula, which is a Gaeltacht area, Dingle town itself is a popular spot with regular boat trips to see wildlife in the bay, made popular in the past by Fungie the dolphin. Further along the peninsula, the Sleat Head drive takes you on a scenic journey past dramatic rocky cliffs with views out over the



1 Derreen Garden overlooking Kilmackilloge Harbour and with views to Caha Mountains

2 The Gap of Dunloe renowned for the natural beauty of its rugged landscape

3 Japanese Garden at Dhu Varren near Killorglin

4 Muckross House and Gardens in Killarney National Park

5 Tree fern forest walk at Kells Bay Gardens

Blasket Islands (which you can also visit on a day trip), and down over sheltered coves.

Near Killorglin, Dhu Varren Garden is an interesting 2.5 acre garden with plant collections from temperate, sub-tropical and tropical climates around the world. There are glasshouses and a Japanese garden with a koi carp pond.

Further south, the Beara Peninsula borders with County Cork and Gleninchaquin Park is a lovely spot to visit, with a sensory garden, picnic areas and walking trails including a 2km waterfall looped walk, with views back over the valley.

The County Kerry side of the Beara Peninsula is also where you'll find Derreen Garden, tucked away in woodlands overlooking Kilmackilloge Harbour, with views of the Caha Mountains. The 60-acre garden was originally planted around 150 years ago and rare trees and shrubs are continually added. Rhododendrons are one of the highlights, as well as tree ferns, bamboo groves

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and old oak trees — Derreen means 'little oak wood' in Irish.

Garden manager, Alan Power, says that this time of year is when a lot of the greens are very vibrant and fresh. "This month you will see the final stages of the fronds unfurling on the tree ferns, which Derreen is famous for," he says. "They look fantastic, the fronds are just unfolding from the crown. They look quite vibrant when they come out."

"Some of the more scented rhododendrons still flower and the native trees, beech trees and oaks, are just coming into full leaf," he says. "We have the odd Japanese maple, dotted around the garden. With the red leaves, they look quite dramatic this time of year."

For exploring inland, Killarney National Park and the lakes are enchanting in the summer months. Lough Leane is the largest of the three lakes and you can visit Ross Castle on the lake shore, a tower house built in the fifteenth century. From here there are boat tours around the lake, or a short boat trip out to Innisfallen Island.

You can wander the extensive gardens and grounds at Muckross House, with views over Muckross Lake plus large rhododendrons, azaleas and a rock garden. There's also a working farm and a café and gift shop to stock up on local crafts and goodies.

Muckross House is part of Killarney National Park which covers 26,000 acres and takes in the McGillicuddy Reeks Mountain Range including Carrauntoohil, Ireland's highest Mountain at 1,039m tall. For something gentler, from Muckross House, you can follow the 10km trail around the Muckross Lake Loop, which goes through woodland and heather, taking in mountain views. You will pass the Meeting of the Waters, tearooms at Dinis Cottage and Torc Waterfall.

Finally, for some of County Kerry's most dramatic scenery, don't miss the Gap of Dunloe, an incredible mountain gorge with a river and small lakes, which runs on into the Black Valley with its steep sides. You can take a horse-drawn, jarey car tour from Kate Kearney's Cottage or, for the best way to appreciate this landscape, walk or cycle right through the timeless valley and soak up the surrounding nature.●

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Kells Bay Garden (kellsbay.ie), Derreen Garden (derreengarden.com), Gleninchaquin Park (gleninchaquinpark.com), Muckross House (muckross-house.ie), Killarney National Park (killarneynationalpark.ie) and Dhu Varren Garden (dhuvarrengarden.com). Check opening hours and Covid-19 guidelines before you visit.