

Annie Birney and Eoin Boyle are the very lucky young couple who were chosen to be the caretakers of the cottages on the Great Blasket Island this year. The island has not been inhabited full time since the islanders were evacuated in 1952.

Owners Billy and Alice who run The Great Blasket Experience, advertised earlier this year, seeking to find an adventurous couple who would be interested in taking a once in a lifetime experience. This was to involve living and running the day to day business on the remote Great Blasket Island, which is situated three mile off the Dingle Peninsula. The position required the applicants to give up their job and move to the island and live there from April until October. It was important that the couple chosen remained on the island for the duration of the time that visitors were there. There were an unprecedented 40,000 applications and Annie and Eoin were the chosen couple who secured the positions.



After the departure of Lesley and Gordon, the 2019 caretakers, the recruitment began in early 2020 to search out the ideal couple for the 2020 season. Billy and Alice, who own five of the island cottages, are lovingly restoring them, and they offer this unique accommodation to visitors. As they have a young family it was not possible for them to be on the island full time, so they looked for a couple to do this for them.

Annie and Eoin stayed with us for a few days and we got a chance to chat.

## **What prompted you to apply for the job on the Great Blasket Island with Billy and Alice?**

*We first realised that this was a job that existed thanks to Lesley Kehoe, (@island\_lesley) and her twitter record about her experience I (Annie) had been to the Blasket Island when I was younger with my family, and had read An tOileanach which had really captured my imagination, so it was a place that held importance in my mind. We had been thinking about moving away from Dublin for a while, we both love the outdoors and the country, but it was hard to set ourselves a deadline. When we saw the job on the island, we knew it would be the opportunity of a lifetime - it is such a special place and steeped in history, archaeology nature and folklore.*



## **What, if any fears did you have?**

*When we got the good news that we had gotten the job on the Blaskets, the world was a very different place, and so much has changed since we gave notice at both our jobs and the flat we were renting. It was nerve-wracking making such a big life change during a pandemic, but I suppose all we could do was continue with the plan we had made. It was scary to go to such a beautiful but also treacherous place, and not only us staying safe, but also the people staying over in the cottages. However, the people who came to visit and stay, were very knowledgeable about the place and very well prepared. Like us, they enjoyed the island but also had respect for the landscape and the sea. Cleaning and managing the cottages was a new skill for us, so there was a fear that we wouldn't be able to do the job well. However, we were really lucky that Eoin's mother was a nurse for many years, and my mother cleans a little school here in Waterford, so between them they had so many helpful tips and tricks for us and were a great help and support.*

**What was your normal daily routine on the island? How did you cope with no electricity or Wi-Fi?**

*Our day usually began with a cup of tea on the picnic tables and taking in the sunrise! Between 9 and 10 we got our cleaning caddies ready and made up the bed sets needed for the new arrivals. 10am was check out so at that stage we would go into the cottages, strip the beds, clean out the fires, dust and sweep and disinfect all surfaces in the houses. There are three houses where people can stay so this usually took us up to about 2pm Then we'd keep an eye on the horizon for Billy coming with the new guests. We'd greet the new guests, and take them through the facilities in the houses and also talk to them about health and safety - particularly fire safety - as the main light and heat source on the island is candles and the stoves.*

*Once the guests were settled, we headed down to the harbour to Billy, to drop off any rubbish and used bed linen and towels and pick up the new linens. Every two days or so, Billy and Alice dropped us some groceries, which was a great help. At about 4pm we finished up for the day and usually at that stage we would go for a paddle or make a coffee, before making some lunch. We tried to explore the island a little each day, no matter how busy the day had been. We were on the island for such a short time with lockdown, so we were determined to make the most of it. People sometimes asked did we get bored with no electricity or Wi-Fi, but to be honest the days were very fully. You would be meeting new people and chatting, or dealing with a query from a guest, or just sitting chatting to the donkeys, so we never had much of a chance to get lonely or bored thankfully.*



**What were the biggest challenges you faced living on the island - was it really like stepping back in time with no real modern conveniences?**

*The biggest challenge was keeping food fresh. Once or twice we were cut off from the mainland because of bad weather- Alice and Billy were so good to us and would drop us some food before the weather hit, but we found that without a fridge it was really hard to keep fruit, and particularly vegetables, fresh. I would often go to start dinner and find that the carrots, which had been fine the day before, had gone mouldy!*

*That said, our friends, relatives, and people who visited the island were very helpful and had lots of tips they had learned from the previous generation on how to keep things fresh. For instance Eoin's mother had some great tips on how to keep carrots and broccoli fresh. What worked for us is to keep them out of sunlight, out of the plastic wrapping and in a lunchbox that was not completely sealed. A few pieces of kitchen paper between the carrots would soak up and excess moisture and help them last longer. In times of bad weather, we would eat all our fruit and vegetables in the first few days, and then rice and beans, or potatoes would keep us going until fresh supplies arrived. Managing daylight in the houses also became more difficult, as the season went on, because of the way the houses and windows are orientated. It got dark very quickly, even if it was still bright outside. We had to plan our evenings carefully, as jobs like washing up and cooking were very hard to do in the dark! The climate on the island we found quite different to the mainland. Things got damp a lot*

*quicker and stayed damp. On rainy days when we were working, it was tricky to keep ourselves, and our clothes, dry. You realise how important the fires in the houses are. Sometimes it felt as if you had gone back in time, but in reality, we had a lot of modern-day luxuries thanks to Billy and Alice, like fresh food brought to us every few days. The sheets and towels from the accommodation were washed on the mainland, and we did have one plug powered by a wind turbine to charge a mobile phone! Our time on the island gave us such an insight into how resilient and resourceful the people who lived on the Blasket Islands must have been. I have so much respect for their skills and ingenuity.*

**What did you miss the most?**

*Apart from seeing friends and family, we would have to say that it was some of the simple things: like going and doing our own shopping. Not that we couldn't get what we wanted from Billy and Alice, they were very good - but the joy of being in the shop, and deciding on a whim, what you wanted for dinner based on what you found on a given day. It would really hit home the variety of food that's available these days! There was something about the act of food shopping that that we missed at times on the island as strange as that sounds. We were so reliant on others while on the island, that it felt odd sometimes not being able to do things like that for ourselves. The positives of living on the island far outweighed the negatives though!*

**If you were to do it again, and you could only bring three things from home, what would they be?**

*I would bring very practical things like a lot of spare socks; more waterproof trousers, for walking through the long grass; a mixing bowl as we started making soda bread and that would have been so handy. We had a flask with us, and I would absolutely bring that again - so important for walks to the back of the island! We were so lucky because the people who lived on the island last year (Gordon and Lesley), gave us lots of advice on what we would need , and what we also probably wouldn't need during the season.*

**I presume you did a lot of reading - what were your favourites?**

*Annie - I was given a lovely gift of the book *Ar Muir is ar Tír* by Mhuiris Ó Chathain, its' a wonderful book "as Gaeilge", written by a man who was born on the Great Blasket Island in*

*1870. One thing I really wanted to do while living on the island was to improve my Irish, so I really enjoyed reading this book. There's also a fantastic book called Letters from the Great Blasket Island by Eibhlís Ní Shúilleabháin. It's a wonderful read, the spirit and personality of the author and her love for the island really comes through the writing. We read a lot of the books written by the island authors, it was amazing and humbling to read passages and recognise the places mentioned from our own walks around the island.*

*Eoin - I also read a few of the island books while there. 20 Years A-Growing by Muiris Ó'Súilleabháin, From the Great Blasket to America by Michael Carney among others. I read some Flann O'Brien and also a fantasy series of novels by Stan Nicholls. It was a great summer of reading. We also got the chance to read loads of others while in lockdown prior to the island, we loved an tOileanach by Tomás Ó'Críomhthain.*

**You both spent so much time with each other - did you learn anything about yourselves that surprised you?**

*Yes, absolutely. We have known each other for 6 years, and we have been living together for about 4, so I would have thought that we knew everything about each other. However, the challenge of living on the island meant that we saw each other in quite intense and sometimes stressful situations. I was really surprised by how quickly Eoin can adapt to situations. I also discovered that he is very handy at DIY and figuring out things.*

*Having lived with Annie I thought I had seen and heard it all, but it was amazing to live and work so closely together. Annie's organisational skills were incredible and her perseverance in the face of any obstacle was great to witness. It was a joy to figure out challenges together.*



**Would you do it again? (I think I know the answer to this one)**

*In a heartbeat yes, it was a life changing experience and something we'll never ever forget.*

**How did it feel to be the chosen couple out of the 40,000 people that applied for the job?**

*We could not believe it. We couldn't help but doubt ourselves and feel the 'imposter syndrome' where you think a mistake has been made! We felt so lucky and we were determined to do as best a job we could.*

Follow their experiences [@anniebirney](#) on Twitter and Eoin [@son\\_of\\_uisne](#) on Instagram