

Cycling Ireland's Ring of Kerry provided the solitude – and change of scenery – needed for a pandemic reset

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 12, 2021

UPDATED OCTOBER 18, 2021

This article was published more than 1 year ago. Some information may no longer be current.



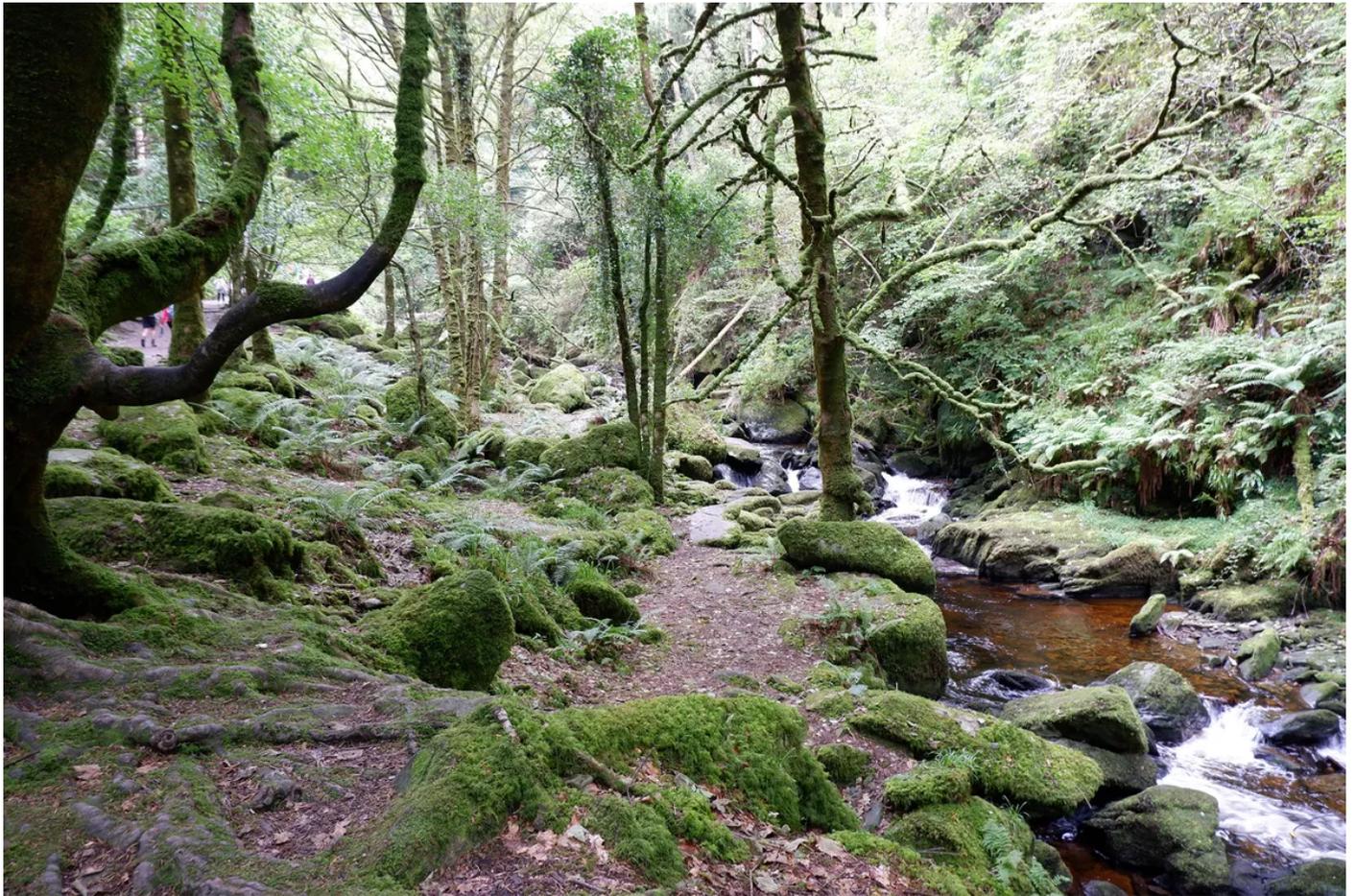
Extreme 'alone time' and a reprieve from pandemic inertia can be found while cycling Ireland's Ring of Kerry, a 179-kilometre circular route.

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After a year spent mostly indoors, unwilling to even go for an unmasked walk around my relatively uncrowded High Park neighbourhood in Toronto, the thing I wanted most this summer was to explore the world outside my apartment far from humanity in its entirety – especially the elevator sneezers, the mask-policy flouters, and those who insisted on occupying the space just centimetres away from me in the grocery-store line. At the same time, I needed a break from the incessant voice in my own head that never tired of going through endless permutations of possible COVID-related scenarios both significant and mundane. In short, I was seeking a kind of quiet solitude I'd never experienced before.

And I'm not the only one. Data from online travel-booking engine TourRadar shows an increase in bookings for both adventure travel (up 13 per cent from 2019) and hiking and trekking trips (up 6 per cent from 2019) since the loosening of pandemic-related travel restrictions. Stevie Christie, head of adventure at Britain-based travel company Wilderness Scotland, says, "We are seeing a definite growth and increasing popularity in self-guided, self-drive and outdoor adventures."

Lockdown gave me a better understanding of people like Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk (note: understanding, not appreciation). At several points during the ebbing and surging of wave after pandemic wave, space travel – probably the most extreme version of getting out of Dodge currently on offer – seemed appealing to me, too.



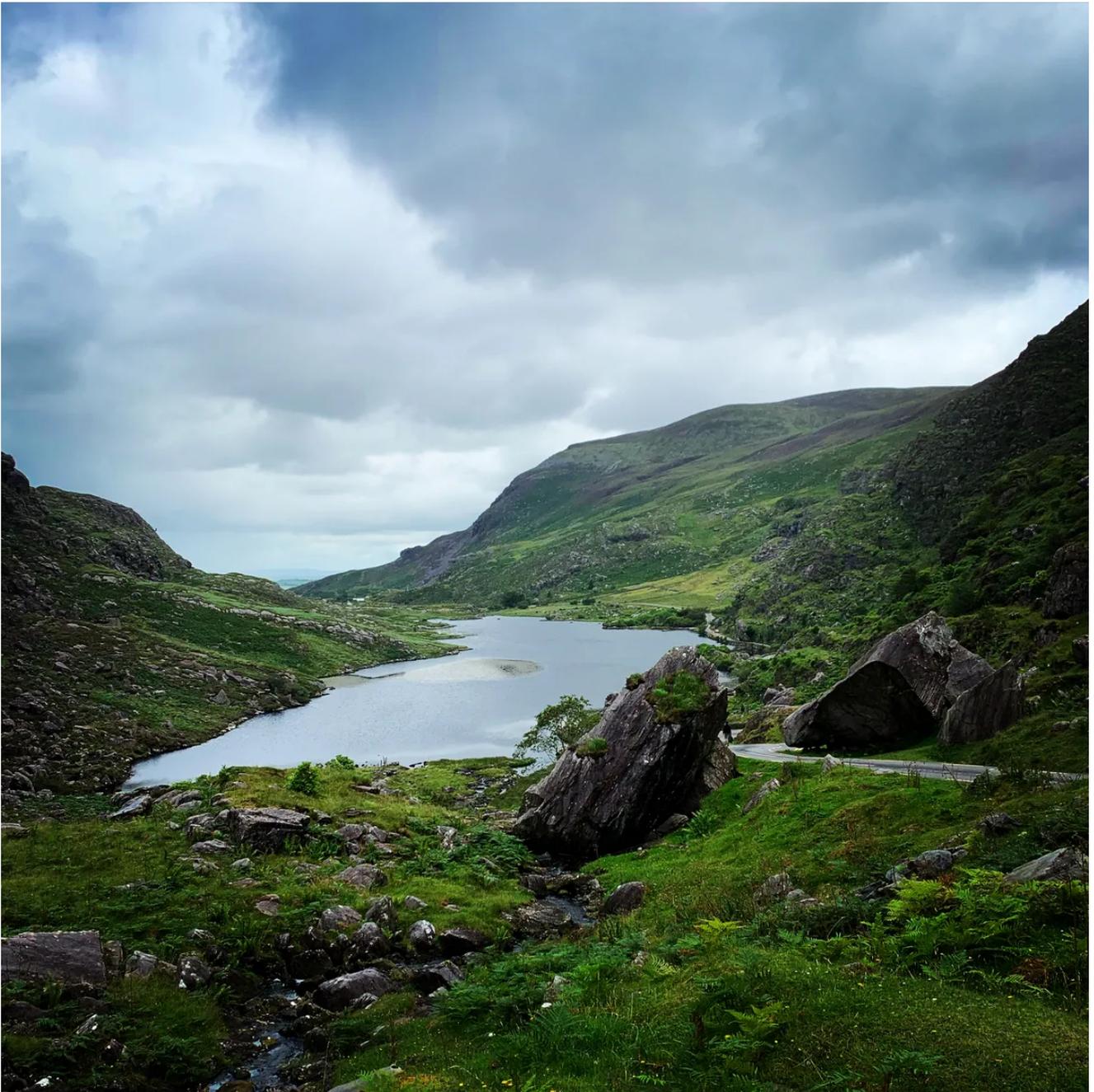
Ireland's Killarney National Park is the start and end point of the Ring of Kerry route.

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Not being a billionaire limited my options. Was there somewhere terrestrial, beautiful and (most importantly) solitary where I could put a degree of mental and physical distance between myself and Earth's nearly eight billion other inhabitants? The answer, as many tourist destinations continue to remain less crowded than before the pandemic, was yes. I decided on a bike trip around Ireland's Ring of Kerry where, on a typical day in the countryside, a cyclist encounters more sheep than people.

I'd travelled alone many times before COVID, surveying unfamiliar cities and mingling with locals and fellow tourists, but the idea of carving a path through the crowded aisles of Barcelona's La Boqueria or sitting elbow-to-elbow with fellow espresso-drinkers at La Rotonde in Paris's sixth *arrondissement* was, at this point, still anxiety-inducing. After my second vaccine, I wanted to travel – to cover ground, to feel the sensation of forward movement through both time and space after a long period of feeling (and actually being) stuck. Just ... not in the company of other people.

Ireland's Ring of Kerry is a 179-kilometre circular route that begins and ends in Killarney, along the southwest coast of the country. Each year, a charity event is held in which cyclists complete the circuit in a single day. I did it in six – averaging around 45 kilometres each day, taking into account both planned and unplanned detours. Exodus Travels, the tour company I used, organizes the route via a well-designed GPS app, transfers your luggage from hotel to hotel, and is there for support in case you get a flat or run into logistical or technical issues. Other than that, travellers are left to traverse the path at their own pace, stopping according to want or whim. For me, that meant frequent pauses, since the Kerry landscape – with its mist-draped mountains and Atlantic Ocean vistas – is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.



The Gap of Dunloe is one of the highlights of the route.

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On some level, pandemic lockdown trained me for the ride. Each steep incline was best climbed by looking at the patch of road immediately in front of me, rather than looking too far ahead in order to assess how much longer the climb would take. Speed was not an option – this was an endurance test (sound familiar?).

In her book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit writes that “travel can be a way to experience this continuity of self amid the flux of the world and thus to begin to understand each and their relationship to each other.” The pandemic cut us

off from that kind of exchange while also depriving us of the small degree of authority we may have felt over our lives. On a larger scale, I'm a believer in the driving forces of time and luck, and for the most part, can cede control to them. In terms of the minutiae of daily life, however, I feel healthiest when I'm making my own decisions over what to eat, when to sleep and how to structure my workday. A solo bike trip lined up perfectly with my ability to accept bad weather or construction detours and a long-suppressed need to be free of compromise, at least when it came to the details.

On the day when it rained so hard over the Ballaghbeama Gap that it felt like I was swimming rather than biking, I embraced that fate. Another day when I saw a farmer at the side of the road allowing the one or two tourists who'd stopped in Cahersiveen to hold his lamb, Mary, for the bargain price of €3, I embraced that, too (literally). Outside of Glenbeigh, I had a brief conversation with a taciturn artisan selling handwoven St. Brigid's crosses, accompanied by his well-dressed Jack Russell terrier, and a longer one at The Climbers Inn in Glencar with an anti-vaxxer/political candidate/science-fiction writer who showed me a wizard statue he'd ordered online to use as an attention-getting prop during his run for local office.



One attraction of the Ring of Kerry is that travellers are able to traverse the route at their own pace, stopping according to want or whim.

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The length and depth of these interactions was up to me. At any point, I could get back on the bike and pedal away, unconstrained by a group or guide or travel partner who might have felt discourteous making an abrupt exit or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, one who was unwilling to sit at a picnic table sipping a Guinness at noon with a rambling anti-vaxxer (he was an avid cyclist and happened to warn me about a particularly perilous downhill hairpin turn on the last day of my route – still grateful).

Geographically, I ended the ride in the same spot I'd started. When I finished, the pandemic hadn't miraculously vanished, future lockdowns remained a possibility and there was talk of yet another new variant. What I'd gained, however, was a deep enough solitude to clear some mental space for what was to come – all of which I knew was out of my control. I feel physically and psychologically stronger – enough, if required, to weather another round of lockdown, closed borders, or more unanticipated turns in the road we've all been navigating these past 18 months.

The writer was a guest of Exodus Travels. The organization did not review or approve the story before publication.

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