

interpretative information on the Geopark that covers natural heritage, Cultural heritage and Built Heritage, plus sustainable transport options.

Wonders of the Burren

Geology

The natural heritage of the Burren is unusual and in many ways I regard the Burren as an area that is distinct and unlike any other landscape in Ireland. Whilst there is a second "Burren" geopark in County Cavan, there are not the same sweeps of bare limestone hills you get in the Burren. However it is well to remember our cousin to the north, that is a limestone plateau between 700 and 900 feet high. The Burren meanwhile lies in counties south Galway and north Clare along the Atlantic Way. The limestone has been exposed through a long process of glaciation, and the rock is as old as 416 million years old. It is a typical karst landscape (similar to what exists in Slovenia in mainland Europe), and has been subject to volcanic activity, and then rising sea levels around 325 million years ago, which led to the deposits of sea creatures whose skeletons formed the limestone! There has been erosion of the rocks followed by periods of uplift creating the formations that are so evocative for artists and writers. e.g. the iconic Mullaghmore mountain in the National Park. Then there have been periods of further erosion caused by weathering and also glaciation. However here, unlike in the rest of Ireland, the glaciers left little evidence in terms of glacial terrain.

Flowers

What we do have to enjoy is vast plateaus of cracked pavements that host a rich flora that defies logic at times. For instance, we have Arctic and Alpine flowers growing alongside each other, and lime-loving and acid-loving flowers growing in close proximity.

Caves

At times rivers that abound underground have left dry river-beds that created an extensive network of caves, much to the delight of potholers and cavers. Some of these caves are open to the public, such as ones near Doolin and Ballyvaughan. In the Burren Lowlands where much of these rivers originate the rivers exit the land in Galway Bay.

Landscape

There are intrusions of Galway granite that dot the landscape particularly around the coastline where glaciers deposited them. They are spectacular on the coastal area north of Doolin. There are also very other-worldly inland cliffs close to Doolin, in an area rich in folklore and fairy myths. For those of you drawn to fossils and rock formations, the Burren is a paradise too.

Animals

If you love bees and butterflies you will be pleased to hear that the numbers and biodiversity of species are at relatively healthy levels here in the Burren. This is in no doubt due to the nature of the farming that allows small scale, more labour intensive

production. The soil can be rich but the rocky substrata does not allow for mechanisation. Thanks to the long-term dedication of Burren Life, a charity who works with many of the local farmers, the land is farmed more sensitively. Nature is more supported here than other parts of the countryside. Interestingly, cattle can stay out all year round due to the mild temperatures. The farmers practise the tradition of wintrage when they move the cattle onto higher grounds to enjoy the rich pasturage that has been growing all summer. The rocky pavement can be up to two degrees warmer than other local regions in Ireland so it created its own microclimate for the animals.

Fish

Fish in Galway Bay were varied and abundant until the factory ships plundered Irish waters. No doubt this region was intensely peopled in the past when population numbers did not require towns to live in.

Archaeology

There is a plethora of monuments, some of them fairly rare, that bear testament to death from the early Bronze Age onwards. (This is also known as the Neolithic period.) In the Burren the density of wedge tombs is far greater than any other county in Ireland. There is even some evidence of man being here in the Stone Age. Certainly the land was once covered with ash trees, which early Man over-forested. The hazel scrub is often the canopy tree now, interspersed with juniper, holly and blackthorn, with ancient stunted pine trees in hidden pockets. There is little evidence of group rituals taking place apart from one cave in the central Burren that shows burials of specific bones of young animals and infants along with a deliberately placed large piece of quartz. Fascinating the DNA of the human bones led to the discovery that many of the descendants still live in the vicinity today!

Culture

In more recent centuries music, dance and storytelling have formed the backbone of local culture, not only for the region but for the whole of Ireland. Many icons from these arts hail from County Clare in particular. My own father was born on the southern edge of the Burren and always loved singing and dancing. He shared many fun stories of his many attractive sisters going to the local dance, or fishing with his boy friends for fish in small boats, or working with the donkey fetching water for the West Clare railway (now a tourist attraction), or having great house parties after harvesting the hay.

A wish

For me, the Burren is the heart of Ireland, and I look forward to the day when as a haven of ecological beauty there will be laws in place to protect it, and good sustainable practices to support and honour it.