

BOUNTY OF THE BURREN

Inland from western Ireland's mighty Cliffs of Moher,
the Burren offers a sensory journey connected
to the rhythms and flavours of nature.

Words SERENA RENNER







YOU'LL KNOW YOU have reached the Burren when the County Clare coastline in western Ireland turns into stone. (The name comes from the Gaelic word 'boireann', which means 'stony place'.) Everywhere you look, grey limestone is stacked and spiralled like a surrealist sculpture. But the Burren is far from barren, as proven by its UNESCO Global Geopark status. Just look closer at the rocks — hewn by geological forces over 360 million years — and you might see marine fossils, Neolithic burial sites, and pairings of Arctic, Alpine and Mediterranean flowers blooming from the cracks in the pavement. It's a landscape where, as the late Irish poet John O'Donohue said, "an ancient conversation has continued between the chorus of the ocean and the silence of the stone".

This conversation has long been translated by artists, musicians and writers — from O'Donohue to The Kilfenora Céilí Band to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy author JRR Tolkien. Now a new generation of artisans is offering a fresh take on the area's story.

Today, travellers who venture deeper into the countryside from the Cliffs of Moher and the Wild Atlantic Way embark on a journey for the senses: filled with the traditional music and poetry of the region plus inspired foods, fragrances, and fairytales.

"Because it's predominantly grey rock, the Burren reflects light continuously; it's like watching a movie," says Peter Curtin, as he sits beneath the antiques and old photos adorning his Roadside Tavern in Lisdoonvarna, one of the oldest pubs in the area. "If you're a photographer, October is the time to come because the sun has gone back towards the Equator. So you don't have the golden summer light. You have the silver light of autumn."

"The Burren is also very special in terms of the grasses. If you take a piece of wood, about the size of a folded newspaper and drop it on the ground, you'll find 57 different varieties of grasses and herbs, which you can taste in the beef and lamb. And, being on the edge of the Atlantic, we have crab, shrimp and cod. You are what you eat, you know?"

Although the local food scene has only recently started turning heads towards West Clare — thanks in part to the Burren Food Trail, an association of gourmet producers that range from St Tola Irish Goat Cheese to Burren-made Anam Coffee and delicious Hazel Mountain Chocolate — the Curtins have been in the business since 1893.

Peter's grandfather ran a bakery in the tavern that was famous for its 'crusties' — the butt ends of loaves that were fluffy on one side, crunchy on the other. After attending Galway University and a stint in the Merchant Navy, Curtin returned to

FROM TOP LEFT Wild thyme grows out of the Burren limestone; the Poulabrone dolmen portal tomb; a traditional Irish pub lines a County Clare street; staff at The Burren Perfumery. **OPENER** The stunning Cliffs of Moher.



Lisdoonvarna and opened the Burren Smokehouse with his Swedish wife Birgitta. Carrying on the family's tradition of playing with fire, the smokehouse produces Scandinavian- and Irish-style smoked salmon, which is stocked in upmarket retailer Dean & DeLuca and has fed the Queen as well as three US presidents ("the Bush Junior kid, the Clinton man and the Obama guy," Curtin says). In 2015, the couple opened the Burren Storehouse to add woodfired pizza and house-brewed beer to the craic. They also cater events, from the Burren Slow Food Festival to a popular annual gathering of Tolkien fans.

"Have you tried the fairy beer?" Curtin asks, eyes twinkling with excitement. He quickly disappears behind the bar and returns with a golden ale flecked with floating yeast — or fairy dust. He collected the yeast from a cone-shaped hill nearby, which, in Irish mythology, was the stronghold of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the semi-divine beings that inhabited Ireland before the Milesians (the supposed ancestors of the modern Irish) cast them to the underworld. The mythical people may have inspired the elves in *The Lord of the Rings* — Tolkien was a regular visitor to the Burren — and are associated with the fairies of the Irish landscape. "[The hill] is a spectacular place with a fort that commanded the whole countryside," Curtin says. "I thought, 'Where could be a better place to get my yeast?'"

Crowning the scenic R480 road, the Poul nabrone dolmen portal tomb could have been a contender. The stone structure, topped with a 1.5-tonne capstone, is one of the oldest known megalithic monuments in Ireland — older than the Egyptian pyramids. Human remains that date back to 4200 BCE show

evidence of farming, labour and conflict as well as creativity. Their use of this sacred site over centuries conveys a heartfelt, longstanding reverence between people and place. To the east, the striped stone mountains and valleys of Burren National Park unfold, studded with ring forts, holy wells, and exotic flora that star in later chapters of the Burren mythology. Nature guide and author Tony Kirby from Heart of Burren Walks is well-versed in the region's geology and botany, and has a fascination for ancient archaeology. "Three new tombs were just discovered [in 2017]," he says, pointing out a rock grave sprouting with wild orchids. "They're temples of the dead, but also places for the living. Sometimes you look in there and don't see the dead at all. You see flowers; you see life."

HEAVEN SCENT

At the edge of Carran village, a single-lane road signposted for 'Boston/Gort' leads to The Burren Perfumery, which has provided visitors with an olfactory perspective on the region's plant life since 1972. Housed in a rose-covered stone cottage, it specialises in seasonally inspired fragrances and organic lotions, soaps, candles and balms designed by Sadie Chowen, who came to the Burren more than 25 years ago and never left.

"I arrived in Carran on a visit to see a friend and felt a very strong sense of being here before," says Chowen, who was born in England and raised in France. While not all the ingredients are sourced from the Burren, some products do include flowers and herbs that grow here, and everything is handcrafted on site. The range is broken down into six scent ➤



DETAILS

Burren Smokehouse

Kincora Rd, Rathbaun, Lisdoonvarna; www.burrensmokehouse.com.

Heart of Burren Walks

Regular walks depart opposite Cassidy's Pub & Restaurant, Carran; www.heartofburrenwalks.com.

Linnalla Irish Ice Cream

Finavarra; www.linnallaicecream.ie.

Roadside Tavern and the Burren Storehouse

Kincora Rd, Rathbaun, Lisdoonvarna; www.roadsideatavern.ie.

The Burren Perfumery

Follow signs from Carran; www.burrenperfumery.com.

GOURMET STAYS

Burren Glamping

A wood-panelled horse trailer parked at the Burren Free Range Pork Farm provides country-chic accommodation, including a full Irish breakfast. R476, Kilfenora; www.burrenglamping.com.

Gregans Castle Hotel

This 18th-century manor house was once the hideaway of JRR Tolkien. Enjoy dinner in view of the superb limestone hills. Road N67, Ballyvaughan; www.gregans.ie.

Wild Honey Inn

You can dine in style on a set menu of some French-style Burren classics including local salmon at this Michelin-starred gastropub. Kincora Rd, Lisdoonvarna; www.wildhoneyinn.com.

categories, from the seaweed and moss-infused Atlantic Coast to the Grassland that smells beautifully of meadowsweet, lady's bedstraw and hawthorn flowers.

"I really wanted to represent the Burren as I experienced it," Chowen says. "For me, what you are trying to do in a perfume is convey an experience, such as going into the herb garden in the morning. It has probably just been raining and there is water on the herbs. The Spring Harvest [fragrance] is trying to crystallise that greenness, that quality of being just so immediately fresh."

Many plants found growing around the Burren — wild thyme, marjoram, elderflower — can be spotted in the perfumery's gardens, to be sampled in soups and salads at The Tea Rooms cafe. "This is the culinary garden," Chowen says, sniffing the backs of leaves. "It's amazing just how divorced people are from what they eat," she says. "The plants we grow here are the same ones you eat, the same ones you put in your teas, the same ones you put on your skin."

THE NATIVE LAND

The last place to challenge your senses is along the Flaggy Shore, made famous by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney in *Postscript*. The pebbly coastline that juts up from Bellharbour on the County Galway border is scattered with fossils holding clues to the tropical seabed that once covered the area, and the glaciers that brought disparate rocks, as well as odd plant pairings, together. The shore ends at Finavarra to the west. On one side of nearby Lough Murree, Linnalla Irish Ice Cream transforms its foraged ingredients such as gorse, blackberries and hazelnuts into seasonal flavours with milk from its 19th-century dairy farm across the road.

Walking to the farm, ice-cream cone in hand, a wall monument reminds you of that "ancient conversation" between man, sea and land. In capital letters, next to a painted rainbow, the wall reads: "The Finavarra man loves his native land like barnachs love the stone." 🍷

FROM TOP A horse grazes on the Cliffs of Moher; restaurant of the Gregans Castle Hotel.

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