

# Exploring the Burren, Ireland’s Vast Rocky Region

 [nytimes.com/2025/10/06/travel/the-burren-ireland.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/06/travel/the-burren-ireland.html)

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Mullaghmore, derived from the Irish for “Great Summit,” is a distinctive feature of the Burren, which is known for its limestone. Credit...

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The first time I walked alone in [the Burren](#), a vast region on the west coast of Ireland, I got lost. Coming up a mountain path, I somehow wandered onto a desolate ledge, where I found myself in a standoff with a pack of wild Irish goats. The shaggy beasts didn’t seem inclined to make room for me, so I reversed course — which led me down into a valley where I came upon a 2,000-year-old stone fort (ancient forts and tombs abound in the Burren). I then climbed back up a different path, ascending to a breathtaking view of the Atlantic Ocean.

## Video

While people can be scarce in the Burren, goats wander freely throughout the area. CreditCredit...

For hours on end, I was the only human around. And there was no sound, other than my footsteps on flat limestone rock that glowed in the sunshine. Free of distraction, my mind raced with thoughts about a book idea just starting to form in my head. I lost track of time and walked for six hours, leaving me simultaneously exhausted and exhilarated.

To me, this is the essence of the Burren: It's a place to wander, both physically and mentally, to get lost in your thoughts and then be periodically snapped to attention by real-life wonders.

If you're not familiar with the Burren (the name derives from the Gaelic for "stony place"), you're not alone. Even among the Irish, many have only a passing familiarity with it — meaning, they tend to pass by it on their way somewhere else. Extending from just north of the Cliffs of Moher to Galway Bay in northwest County Clare, the Burren features scenic mountains, lovely beaches, grassland valleys and, around its perimeter, several small but lively towns. At its center is a six-square-mile national park.

## Image



Long ago, the area was covered by a tropical sea. As the water receded, a rugged limestone landscape composed largely of compressed seashells was slowly revealed.

Image



The Burren can seem like an unforgiving landscape.

Image



But tender flowers grow in the crevices of its rocks.

But what it's most known for is limestone. Long ago, this area was an enclosed tropical sea. As the water receded, a rugged limestone landscape composed largely of compressed seashells was slowly revealed. The stone, which is highly reflective, changes hue constantly, and can take the form of huge "erratic" boulders or flat, smooth slabs divided by crisscrossing crevices; walking on those slabs is like striding atop a limestone jigsaw puzzle.

Sprouting from the crevices between the rocks are some of the world's rarest flowers — vivid blue [spring gentians](#), [bee orchids](#), and more. The abundant plant life is nourished by hidden rivers flowing beneath the rocky surface, with the cracks serving as greenhouses. The Irish novelist [Niall Williams](#) said that at first glance, the Burren "seems an unforgiving landscape, but then you become aware of the extraordinarily tender plants surviving in the crevices — there's a kind of magic to it."

Through the years, Irish poets such as William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney have waxed lyrical about the Burren. The priest-turned-bestselling-author [John O'Donohue](#) — born and buried in the area — wrote and spoke extensively about its inspirational qualities. O'Donohue told one interviewer that this rocky canvas “was always waiting for me like a huge invitation to extend your imagination.”

Image



The painter Richard Hearn takes inspiration from the landscape around him.

In recent times, that invitation has been accepted by artists from around the world. The abstract painter [Richard Hearn](#), the documentary filmmaker [Katrina Costello](#) and the singer-songwriter [Luka Bloom](#) told me that soon after visiting and spending time in the Burren, they decided to live and work there. Creativity is in the air — though people insist it's also in the rock.

My own interest in the Burren as a creative haven was stirred by a local pub owner. A few years ago, as my wife and I were driving north from the Cliffs of Moher, we stopped at [Curtin's Roadside Tavern](#) in the Burren town of Lisdoonvarna. The proprietor, Peter Curtin, told us the Burren had inspired well-known authors, including J.R.R. Tolkien (some dispute this, but Tolkien did spend time in the area — and there are striking similarities between his Middle Earth and the Burren's misty mountains and underground caves).

I decided to do my own deep dive into the Burren's creative mystique, spending a week there last year. I came away from that brief stay with a fully formed idea and a half-written proposal for a book about how exposure to certain natural settings, including but not limited to, the Burren can fuel creativity.

Image



The stony landscape of the Burren gives way to the Atlantic coast.

Image



An ancient “wedge” tomb, featuring upright stones and a flat roof, is one of about 80 scattered about the Burren.

In May I returned to the Burren to continue my research, talking to creative professionals based there. Not unlike the local plant life, the artists of the Burren — some homegrown, others transplanted — are trying to thrive in an environment that can be austere. Mr. Hearn, the painter, acknowledged that at times he feels cut off from the larger art world and its networking possibilities.

But that remoteness is also part of the appeal. Mr. Bloom, the musician, an Irish native who has performed worldwide, eventually settled in the Burren as a refuge. “There are places in the Burren where you can’t see any sign of human life,” he said, approvingly. “I wanted to have access to that stillness.”

Image



Dune trails at Fanore beach lead to the beach.

There may be a scientific basis for why places like the Burren seem to inspire creativity. The psychologist Marc Berman, who runs the [University of Chicago’s Environmental Neuroscience Lab](#), has studied the effects of natural environments on cognitive performance. He has found that when people spend time in natural settings — particularly places with wide-open vistas, a sense of remoteness and an absorbing-yet-calming beauty — the creative part of the brain relaxes and is restored, which can trigger the surfacing of insights and ideas.

With my own half-dozen substantial walks in the Burren during my recent stay, I found that the longer I walked, the more deeply I thought and the more I was jotting down ideas in my pocket notepad. I then took my notes back to [Hanne’s Cottage](#), a traditional Irish home where the photographer Hanne T. Fisker rents out two rooms to visitors, to write them up for [my online journal](#).

Image



Monks pub in Ballyvaughan in the northwest corner of the Burren.

Image



The pub serves a Guinness beef stew.

With my walking and writing done, I replenished myself at Burren eateries such as [Monks](#) in Ballyvaughan, which serves a hearty Guinness beef stew; the 300-year-old [Linnane's Lobster Bar](#) in New Quay, where I devoured (with help) a head-to-tail John Dory fish swimming in butter; and the aforementioned Roadside Tavern, famous for its smoked salmon from the nearby [Burren Smokehouse](#). I usually finished my evenings in the Burren's traditional music hub town of Doolin, where the veteran flute and whistle player [Christy Barry](#) hosts visitors in the living room of his home, the [Doolin Music House](#); various other "trad" legends can be heard at [Gus O'Connor's Pub](#).

Image



The town of Doolin is known as a hub for traditional music.



The whistle player Christy Barry performing in Doolin.

If you're considering taking your own creative sojourn in the Burren, a few pointers: First, bring boots with ankle support for traversing rocky surfaces. But in areas where the ground is smooth, consider removing them and walking barefoot on warm, naked limestone. And occasionally stop, crouch down and take a closer look at what's flourishing in those small greenhouses between the stones.

Hike the dune trails of Fanore Beach and the paths leading up Mullaghmore, the Burren's "sacred mountain." Stroll the walkway that runs along the windblown Flaggy Shore. You can do these and many other walks solo, but if you desire an artful guide, the poet [David Whyte](#) conducts annual

[weeklong tours](#), as does the [John O'Donohue Legacy Partnership](#) (these tours can be pricey, at roughly \$5,000 and up). More affordable, multi-hour tours are offered by the author [Tony Kirby](#); or you can take a morning walk, as I did, with the author and artist [Gordon D'Arcy](#), an expert on the Burren's flowers, its native birds and its marvelously built stone walls.

One last tip: Leave behind the headphones. Just listen for the silence, the occasional faint cuckoo bird call, and most important, your own creative voice.

Video

Wind blows the grass in the Burren. CreditCredit...

Warren Berger is the author of "A More Beautiful Question."

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