



ILLUSTRATION BY TARA O'BRIEN

# 5 COOL CAVES TO VISIT

**Yvonne Gordon** goes underground to explore some of Ireland's subterranean secrets.

## **MARBLE ARCH CAVES, CO FERMANAGH**

What nicer way to arrive in an underground cave system than by boat? It is water itself that carved a route through the Marble Arch Caves by dissolving the limestone rock over time, and a tour here includes a boat journey deep into this fascinating subterranean world full of rivers and waterfalls. On foot, you'll navigate various passages that open out into natural chambers full of stalactites, cascades and the giant Porridge Pot, which took just 500,000 years of drips to form. [marblearchcavesgeopark.com](http://marblearchcavesgeopark.com)

## **MITCHELSTOWN CAVE, CO TIPPERARY**

These caves were discovered by accident in 1833, when a local labourer dropped his crowbar into a crevice and discovered a huge network of chambers and caverns, connected by narrow passages that follow the route of an old stream. This is one of Ireland's largest cave complexes, with lots of stalactites, stalagmites, calcite pillars, curtains and crystals and a nine-metre-high column, the Tower of Babel. The caves have hosted everything from concerts to a pop-up restaurant. [mitchelstowncave.com](http://mitchelstowncave.com)

## **DOOLIN CAVE, CO CLARE**

Exploring the rocky karst landscape is what The Burren is all about, so experiencing the world under the limestone flags, as well as above, is a highlight of any visit. At Doolin Cave, also known as Pol

an Ionáin, the Great Stalactite is the star attraction – and great it is, measuring 7.3 metres, making it Europe's longest, free-hanging stalactite. What's also nice about the setting here is the farmland nature trail, which has some rare animal breeds such as pygmy goats. [doolincave.ie](http://doolincave.ie)

## **AILLWEE CAVE, CO CLARE**

A stroll through this underground world, which is also in The Burren, will bring you along a kilometre of subterranean passages, over bridges and past an underground river and waterfall, to view stalactites and stalagmites that are thousands of years old. Curiously, the cave is also home to the bones of some extinct brown bears and may have been a bear den in times past. Here you can also find the Birds of Prey Centre, with flying displays and hawk walks. [aillweecave.ie](http://aillweecave.ie)

## **DUNMORE CAVE, CO KILKENNY**

As you descend the steps into Dunmore Cave, you can look forward to learning about the fascinating blend of geology and history that lies in more than 400 metres of underground passages. Dunmore Cave was first mentioned in the ninth-century *Irish Triads* as one of the three darkest places in Ireland and recent archaeological finds of silver treasures point to Viking activity from around the year 928. The underground chambers have some striking calcite formations, such as the Market Cross. [visitkilkenny.ie](http://visitkilkenny.ie)