

FOREST GUMPTION

The concept of forest bathing may be of Japanese origin but it can be equally enjoyed in Co Wicklow, the “Garden of Ireland”.

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“It’s very calming,” says a fellow walker, as she contemplates the tree in front of her. Green needles are hanging down, almost in mini cascades. It’s a Kashmir cypress and our guide, Megan, tells us it grows in the Himalayas. Apparently, it has a spiritual connection so is planted at temples. I’m feeling calm too – though I suspect this is because we’ve just spent an hour strolling through the National Botanic Gardens at **Kilmacurragh** in Co Wicklow (botanicgardens.ie), away from phones and screens, totally immersed in nature.

We’ve seen monkey puzzle trees from Chile, admired a flower meadow,

looked up a giant Californian redwood and marvelled at an old Japanese red cedar. We’ve inhaled a plant’s curry scent, heard melodic birdsong, stepped softly over tree roots and felt the ice-cold trunk of a Chilean myrtle. On a simple tour of the gardens, we’ve used nearly all of our senses to soak up nature.

Research has long shown the positive health effects of being in nature and green spaces. In Japan, the practice of “forest bathing” – *Shinrin-yoku* – first started as a way to reduce stress and counteract the effects of technology and city living. Many studies have proven its numerous benefits, both on physical and mental health.

I decide to find out how forest bathing works and what better place than in Wicklow, the “Garden of Ireland” and the home of Ireland’s forestry? It’s a quiet morning at **Avondale Forest Park** (coillte.ie) when I meet forest bathing expert

Previous pages, left, looking across from the valley toward Ballymoyle Wood and, right, forest bathing guru, Shirley Gleeson. Clockwise from top right, an apple tree in blossom; Ballyknocken’s Catherine Fulvio; sylvan scenes towards Lugnaquilla and Slievemaan.



Shirley Gleeson (ecowellnessconsulting.com; see “Smart Tips”, page 60). The 200-hectare estate dates back to the 1770s, and when the state bought the land in 1904, it experimented with the trees that went on to make up the bulk of Ireland’s forest industry. With so many different trees, it’s the perfect place for forest immersion.

Gleeson, whose background is in social work and who trained in forest therapy in the USA, tells me that the aim is to slow down and connect to nature. “It’s about getting people to reconnect with the senses and get out of their heads and into their bodies,” she says. “We have to unplug from technology and replug back into nature.” She explains how trees release phytoncides – chemicals that research has shown can help everything from our immune systems to easing depression and anxiety.

We start with a gentle stroll and Gleeson asks me to notice what is moving, for example tree branches swaying, to help get into nature’s rhythm. We then stop under a beech tree for some natural meditation. With eyes closed, she tells me to scan my body for any tension to release. Then the focus is on deep breathing. With her words as a guide, I tune into my senses of sound,

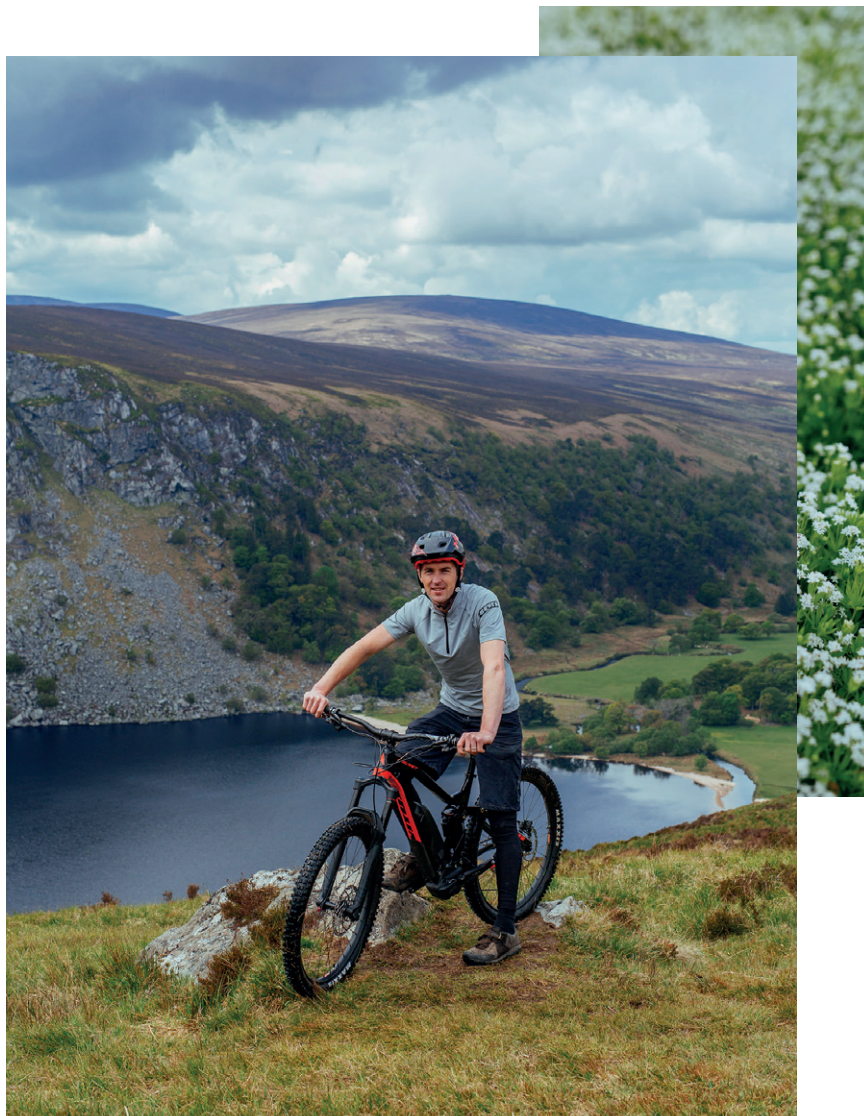
touch, smell and even “taste” the fresh air. When I finally open my eyes, I look around as if noticing everything for the first time.

As we walk silently through the trees, I take in all the different shapes and colours. I am aware of changing light, of bird songs near and far, of pungent scents and tiny insects in the air. I notice how green the moss is and appreciate the beauty of tiny lichen. Along the way, Gleeson picks wood sorrel leaves, dandelions and nettles, adding them to a flask. Later, we drink the “tea” under a copper beech tree – a ritual to taste the forest and also to close the walk and get back into everyday life.

Gleeson adapts the forest bathing to the Irish landscape around Co Wicklow and Ireland’s Ancient East. At **Glendalough**, ✈

Clockwise from above left, wild lemon balm; plucking pine pollen; Glencullen River, in the heart of Knocksink Wood Nature Reserve; a copper still at Glendalough Distillery; chefs James Kavanagh and Evan Doyle foraging wild garlic in Macreddin Village; raspberry tippie at Wicklow Way Wines; a paddling of ducks at BrookLodge.





at Avondale and as we start walking, Kavanagh rips a beech leaf off a tree for me to eat. It tastes like the skin of an apple. "I eat a lot of greens as I'm walking along," she says. "You get a lot of extra nutrition."

She built up her knowledge from spending time in the forest as a child. "I was eating beech leaves and always looking at plants. When I was a teenager, I learnt the names," she says. "I realised there's so much to eat in the hedgerows and nobody knows about it."

Kavanagh picks foods both for taste and for health benefits – she soaks cleavers (also known as goosegrass) to make a lymph-system cleanser, makes cordial from blackberries and ice cream with gorse. This month, there's meadowsweet in the hedgerows, plus wild blueberries and elderflowers for cordials and champagne.

She also forages for the wild botanicals that go into Glendalough Gin, finding unusual flavours. What's in season constantly changes – flowers this month, fruits and berries in autumn, haws and Douglas fir in winter, and each day's pickings go straight to the distillery to capture their essence.

My last forest experience is whizzing along a trail on an electric bike at **Ballinastoe** (biking.ie). As well as mountain bike trails, there are guided bike tours (from €80pp) along the mostly flat logging



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✈ which is home to a sixth-century monastic settlement, we also acknowledge the ancient Celtic spirituality. At **Devil's Glen**, we read the Seamus Heaney poetry carved onto benches. At **Knocksink Wood**, we explore a wild woodland trail. When I return home, I feel calmer, I am more aware of nature and of the trees near where I live – and am grateful to them for being there.

Someone else who enjoys showing people how to appreciate nature's abundance is Geraldine Kavanagh (wicklowwildfoods.com; see "Smart Tips", page 60), whose wild food forages help walkers identify wild leaves, flowers, fruits, mushrooms and nuts. We meet

roads. We cover a 15km loop and come out at a viewpoint over Lough Tay. I notice the Wicklow Way runs through here, a 131km waymarked route along the county's forest and mountain trails, past lakes, valleys and ancient settlements. I look along the trail and think about eight or ten days of pure nature immersion. Next time ... 🍀

Cara would like to thank **AVIS** for their assistance. For the very best car rental deals, visit CARS.AERLINGUSCARS.COM.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

STAY

NATURE An eco country retreat, **BrookLodge** is surrounded by nature – you might spot hens, ducks or deer on the lawn and food is all certified organic. A full-time forager and an all-natural food pantry keep its **Strawberry Tree Restaurant** well stocked. Sample dishes on the wild-focused menu include sika venison from the Wicklow mountains, with turnip and pear, or gnocchi with garlic from the local woods. After dinner, try “birch bark booze” from the local trees. There are also bikes for guests and the hotel will prepare picnics for forest walks. For a luxe detox, try the mud chamber experience in The Wells Spa (€60) and hit the outdoor hot tub. B&B from €146. (Macreddin Village, 0402 36 444; brooklodge.com)

RUSTIC The Victorian farmhouse of **Ballyknocken House & Cookery School** oozes country charm and character – from the row of boots-for-borrow to the drawing room’s log fire. Run by chef Catherine Fulvio, the food is unsurprisingly top notch, with chefs using local produce, much of which is picked from the working farm’s kitchen gardens. Learn the tricks of the trade at the cookery school, after which you get to sit down and enjoy what you’ve prepared (half-day classes €140). Guests can also explore Carrick Forest: check out the mountaintop picnic package at €171. B&B from €129. (Glenealy, Ashford, 0404 44 627; ballyknocken.com)

REMOTE Looking to unplug? Take up residence in **Wicklow Head Lighthouse**, which is surrounded by green fields and magnificent sea views, of course. There are two round double bedrooms, a sitting room and kitchen, all on different floors. Perfect for walks, reading and fresh air. From €624 for two nights (sleeps four). (Dunbur Head, 01 670 4733; irishlandmark.com)

GRAZE & GAZE

GARDENS Huge windows at **Avoca Garden Café** at Mount Usher Gardens and its sister restaurant **The Fernhouse** at Kilmacanogue look out on nature, the latter overlooking giant ferns. Fresh picks from on-site vegetable gardens feature on

the seasonal menu, with wholesome salads, Irish seafood and meats. Afterwards, stroll in Mount Usher gardens or admire Avoca’s trees, part of the former Jameson estate. (Mount Usher, Ashford, 0404 40116; mountushergardens.ie; Kilmacanogue, 01 274 6900; avoca.com)

DRINK

FRUITY MÓINÉIR Wines create small batch, artisan wines, such as its award-winning blackberry, strawberry and raspberry blend made at its Newtownmountkennedy base. Here you can learn how they’re all made, with tours and tastings at €25. (Unit 8, Newtown Business and Enterprise Centre, Newtownmountkennedy, 086 947 7396; wicklowwaywines.ie)

BOTANICAL Another local drink not to miss is Wild Botanical Gin, one of four craft gins from **Glendalough Distillery**. Botanicals from Wicklow are added daily – and summer ingredients include elderflower and wild rose. Get the lowdown on a Meet the Makers tour. (Unit 9 Newtown Business and Enterprise Centre, Newtownmountkennedy; glendaloughdistillery.com)

CRAFT Another tipple harnessing the terroir is craft brewery **Wicklow Wolf Brewing Company**. The brewery has a sustainable ethos and grows eight varieties of hops on its own four-hectare farm in Roundwood. Book a guided tour of the brewhouse and fermentation room, followed by a tasting, for €15. (Galtrim Park, Bray, 01 567 6993; wicklowwolf.com)

SMART TIPS

GUIDED WALKS Half-day forest bathing programmes with Shirley Gleeson of Ecowellness Consulting Ltd start at €80pp or from €130pp for a full day, including transport (ecowellnessconsulting.com). Three-hour Wild Food foraging walks cost €40 and run every spring until autumn (wicklowwildfoods.com).

PARK LIFE Avondale Forest Park, the National Botanic Gardens Kilmacurragh, Devil’s Glen, Glendalough and Knocksink Wood are all free to visit. An adult ticket for Powerscourt Gardens (powerscourt.com) is €10.50 and Mount Usher Gardens (mountushergardens.ie) is €8. For more information see visitwicklow.ie and irelandsancienteast.com.



Previous page, clockwise from main pic, Niall Davis from biking.ie, takes a breather above Lough Tay; stitchwort in the herb garden at BrookLodge; young pine cones, ripe for pickling. This page, above, nature’s bounty at the certified organic Strawberry Tree Restaurant.