

# Travel

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## Dive into the *wood life*

Millions of us have twigged that spending time immersed in nature is beneficial for our wellbeing. *Yvonne Gordon* takes a walk in the woods

**I**f life is getting you down and you just can't see the wood for the trees, perhaps you need to spend some time in a forest. Not surprisingly, there has been a big increase in our woodland visits since the pandemic started, even though the 5km restrictions mean many of us don't have access to woodlands right now.

Visitor numbers to some forests, such as those in the Dublin Mountains, Rossmore in Co Monaghan and Donadea in Co Kildare, have doubled or tripled, with 2.2 million people visiting the top 50 most popular forests from March to December 2020, according to Coillte.

The state-owned forestry service manages about 6,000 forests, all of which are open to the public, with 260 of those classed as recreational. Last summer, the UN released a report on how important forests are for protecting against future pandemics and how central they are to our wellbeing.

Before the most recent lockdown I walked through some of Co Wicklow's woodlands with Shirley Gleeson, a forest therapist, to learn more about the benefits of so-called forest bathing. We started at the 505-acre forest park at Avondale House, which is known as the

**The 505-acre Avondale forest park is known as the birthplace of forestry in Ireland**

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# Sunday Travel



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birthplace of forestry in Ireland, making it the perfect place to try woodland immersion.

Gleeson tells me we will walk through the forest, but rather than taking a normal pace, we will slow down and immerse our senses in nature. This first activity is a natural meditation – to get us out of our heads and into our bodies and connecting with the landscape. “We are always so frantic and moving so quickly. This helps us to reconnect,” she says.

We walk slowly and Gleeson asks me to notice what is moving in nature. I notice leaves and branches gently swaying in the breeze, and a bird flitting between branches high above.

The next activity is to connect with trees by introducing myself to one. I find a nice oak. I feel a bit silly talking to it but luckily there is nobody else around – and then I notice the tree has a sort of face shape on one side of its trunk. It’s a nice exercise, which emphasises the relationship between people and trees and how important trees are in our lives.

I lie on the ground under a sycamore for ten minutes, soaking up the sounds of

**The National Botanic Gardens in Kilmacurragh, above; Mount Usher gardens, in Ashford, right**

**“Rather than taking a normal pace, we will slow down and immerse our senses in nature**

birds, the swish of the leaves and the odd creak of a branch. I notice the different shapes of the branches overhead and how they come together to form cover as the light passes through them. It’s peaceful and relaxing to concentrate on nature and ignore my racing thoughts.

As we continue to walk in silence, I am aware of everything much more and my senses start to come alive. I notice the birdsong coming from all directions, the changing light as the sun shines through the trees, and insects flitting about in the air. There are pungent, sometimes fragrant, smells from the grass. I notice how moss covers a tree trunk, giving it a magical look, and looking closely, I see intricate patterns on some light blue lichen.

I start to notice all the different trees too, their heights and shapes and the varying shades of green of the leaves. As we walk, we admire beech, oak and sycamore trees and come to a group of giant redwoods from California, planted during a period of tree experimentation.

Ireland once had 80 per cent forest cover but much of this was lost because



scientific studies began to show that spending time in a forest could reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol and lower blood pressure. Researchers found that phytoncides, chemicals released by trees, can boost the immune system and that the natural killer cells that fight tumours increase in the body after forest exposure.

Gleeson, who is a trained forest therapist and operates as a nature and wellbeing consultant with Ecowellness Consulting, tells me about the “green prescriptions” issued by doctors in New Zealand and Japan, which recommend patients spend time in nature rather than take medication for problems including mental health disorders.

For the next forest experience, we visit Glendalough. We cross the bridge over the water and walk mindfully beside the lake, stopping at various trees along the way to soak up nature, admiring the oak woodlands and discussing the Celtic and monastic spirituality of the area.

At Powerscourt Estate, the gardens are more formal, set around a lake and fountain. To one side, the Japanese garden is bursting with red and pink flowers and there’s a bench to sit and look down over the gardens.

I also drop into Knocksink nature reserve, just a few minutes from Powerscourt. The forest trails are much wilder, with plenty of ancient oak trees, and it strikes me as amazing that there is such a variety of forests and gardens even in just one county.

Forests can have a dark side too. There’s an eerie, slightly sinister feeling at Devil’s Glen, near Ashford, which is not helped by its name. I can’t place the feeling but it is dark, thanks in part to how tall and straight the beech and ash trees are, which stop the light getting through. There are no birds or sounds of birdsong either. The paths feel a little creepy and quiet – it’s one of those dull grey days when there’s rain in the air, and nobody else is around. It’s a nice surprise, though, to come across lines of poetry by Seamus Heaney carved into the benches.



Forest bathing, far left, is thought to bring health benefits; try it at Knocksink, left

## FOR FUTURE VISITS

Check Covid-19 guidelines and opening hours before visiting. Avondale Forest Park, free (coillte.ie); Glendalough, free (glendalough.ie); National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, free (botanicgardens.ie); Devil’s Glen, free (coillte.ie); Knocksink Wood Nature Reserve, free (npws.ie); Powerscourt Gardens, €8.50 (powerscourt.com); Mount Usher Gardens, €8 (mountushergardens.ie). Half-day forest bathing programmes, from €60 per person, ecowellnessconsulting.com. For more information on Co Wicklow, see visitwicklow.ie.

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