Dive into the

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

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.

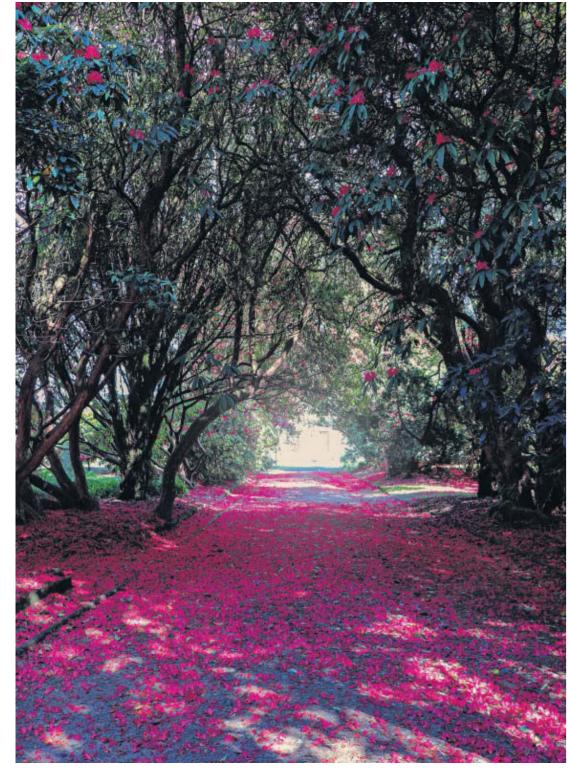
Visitor numbers to some forests, such as those in the Dublin Mountains, Rossmore in Co Monaghan and Donadea in Co Kildare, have doubled or tripled, with 2.2 million people visiting the top 50 most popular forests from March to December 2020, according to Coillte.

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 **Continued on page 12→**

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

Sunday Travel



→ Continued from page 11 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

Botanic Gardens in Kilmacurragh above: Mount Usher gardens, Ashford, right



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





of human activity such as farming and construction; at one stage, it was down to 1 per cent. In the 1770s, the original owner of Avondale House, Samuel Haves, a barrister, planted a variety of trees on the land. In 1904, the state purchased the estate and planted different tree species, which were then used to create areas of woodland in Ireland. The country now has 11 per cent forest cover; the European average is over 30 per cent. A new visitor centre at Avondale, which will open in

2022, will tell the forest story. Forests have long been sources of natural remedies in different cultures. In ancient times in Ireland, before the advent of modern medicine, forest plants were used to treat various illnesses and ailments. Many trees are considered sacred in Celtic culture and even today trees such as hawthorn are revered as "fairy trees".

There have been many studies on the benefits of exposure to nature for healing and reducing stress. Forest bathing, or shinrin-voku, started in Japan in the 1980s to encourage those who lived in cities or were immersed in technology to reconnect with nature. In the 1990s.

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 Heanev carved into the benches



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.

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

At Mount Usher Gardens in Ashford, the feeling is the opposite – the air is filled with the sound of voices and waterfalls, and gentle paths meander through colourful flower beds. It's another sensory experience as I notice all the colours and textures. I admire carpets of bluebells and wild garlic, maple and eucalyptus trees, and ferns that take on a magical air. One side of the gardens is like a jungle, other parts are more manicured. It's an easy garden to get around, with lots of benches at which to stop and pause and soak it all up. I end my forest bathing tour at

Kilmacurragh, Co Wicklow, part of the National Botanic Gardens. The 52-acre estate was developed by the landowner Thomas Acton, who introduced different plant species from around the world. A free guided tour points out monkey puzzle trees from Chile, Kashmir cypress trees from the Himalayas and 150-year-old Japanese red cedars, plus camellias, redwoods, an avenue of ancient vew trees and a meadow of flowers. It's another feast for the senses as I listen to the birds, sniff a plant that smells like curry and feel the cold trunk of a Chilean myrtle tree.

When I return home, I am more conscious of, and grateful for, the beautiful trees in my area, but best of all, I have a feeling of deep relaxation and calm that lasts two or three days. Gleeson says that over the past year, people have really

started to understand and appreciate the benefits of being able to walk in a forest and spend quality time among the beautiful trees.

"Walking in forests can help boost our resilience and is an added protective factor to help keep us well during this very challenging and unpredictable time," she says. "For many, the local forests and woodlands have become sanctuaries, places of quiet reflection. to try to understand all the chaos that this pandemic brings."

For optimal mental and physical health benefits, she recommends spending at least 30 minutes in nature four or five times a week, "Slow down and really take in all the sights, smells and sounds around you. Give yourself permission to simply be, without having to do anything, or achieve any goals. If you find your mind racing with worries, just tune into the movement of the swaying trees, the flowing water, the dancing ferns. Spending time in the forest in this mindful way also helps give us greater perspective and clarity," she says.

And as for hugging a tree? According to Gleeson, there's no scientific evidence of any benefits but until we are free to hug people again, it feels like a good substitute.

> All visits happened before Covid-19 restrictions were in place



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