

Natural wonders

Discover giants and geology in an aspiring Unesco Global Geopark, says **Cathy Toogood**

Take a wee minute to look around. Listen to the water." I do as I'm told and pause on the sun-dappled path I'm walking on.

There's a stream next to me strewn with velvety moss-covered rocks, with ferns overhanging its edge and a mini waterfall. A tree trunk bridges the water, covered in a tangle of holly, with a new birch tree growing on top of it.

"This is known as the Atlantic rainforest," our Walk the Mournes guide Peter Rafferty says, explaining that this lush woodland next to Glen Stream has ideal temperate rainforest conditions because it's close to both the coast and mountains.

I'm on a hike to Cloughmore, known as 'The Big Stone', in County Down, southeast Northern Ireland. According to folklore, this enormous boulder, which is said to weigh about 40 tons, was thrown here by the giant Finn McCool from the nearby Cooley Mountains during a battle with fellow giant Ruscaire. While we all admire the view from the stone, across pine forests to Carlingford Lough, Peter tells me that it's also reputedly the spot that inspired the stone table on which Aslan was sacrificed in CS Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK HOPES

The dramatic landscape of Newry, Mourne and Down, with its backdrop of the granite peaks of the Mourne Mountains, handsome coastal towns such as Newcastle, impressive natural features including Carlingford Lough – the UK's largest sea loch – and rolling fields separated by bright yellow *whin* (gorse) hedges alongside drystone walls, has inspired many legends

and stories. But the area, which is about an hour from Belfast, is hoping for a different type of worldwide attention through a new accolade at the end of May. This is when the Mourne Gullion Strangford aspiring geopark is expected to receive full Unesco Global Geopark status following an executive board meeting.

The Unesco Global Geoparks award is an international standard recognising outstanding geology and landscapes. A key focus of the title is on sustainable tourism and using heritage to support the area's sustainable economic development. During my visit I meet many locals who, like Peter, are running tourism initiatives linked to this landscape. All are passionate about teaching visitors more about the area's geology, history and what makes it special.

SUP AND SODA BREAD

One excursion likely to be popular with clients who want to combine outdoor adventures with traditional crafts is a visit to Tracey's Farmhouse Kitchen. Here, on the shores of Strangford Lough, I learn how to make Irish soda bread in a 17th-century thatched cottage. Friendly owner Tracey Jeffery gives a demonstration first, explaining that the ingredients she uses don't need to be weighed or measured, rather the dough should be judged by "the look, the feel and the texture". I'm let loose in the kitchen with soda bread flour, buttermilk and a griddle, and am surprised by how quick and easy the process is.

The location of Tracey's farmhouse allows me to combine this experience with a paddleboarding lesson on the lough with Tracey's husband Joe. As a complete beginner, I'm encouraged to commit to standing up, ➤



Cloughmore Stone, Rostrevor, County Down

PICTURE: Chris Hill

ASK THE expert



"It's important to highlight just how unique the area is from a geological perspective. The high granite peaks of the Mourne Mountains, the striking volcanic formation of the Ring of Gullion and the rolling drumlins (hills) of Strangford Lough... it's such a distinctive landscape, and all just a short flight away.

What's so special, and something to emphasise to clients, is that this landscape and geology have shaped and inspired the tourism product; for example, in creating fantastic flour used in soda bread-making experiences and oats transformed into world-class whiskeys. Traditional music, myths and legends inspired by the surroundings are still sung and told today. The people here are celebrating and nurturing the landscape, and it's a truly magical place for clients who love the great outdoors and a community spirit. The Unesco ratification this month is so exciting, as the area has been a hidden gem for years and is now getting the recognition it deserves."

David Wood, trade, industry and business tourism manager, Tourism Ireland

and Joe patiently teaches me how to steer. As we glide serenely along the water, he talks about the high quality of life his family enjoys in this waterside location.

NATURE, FOOD AND DRINK

This marrying of nature with food, drink and craft is a key theme of my trip, and if clients want a slightly faster adventure, recommend a tour with Bike Mourne. On a Mourne Trails and Ales tour, I am guided around Castlewelan Forest Park on an e-bike, with stops to taste local ales and learn about the park and the area's history.

The range of outdoor adventures is matched by good food in Newry, Mourne and Down, and a standout meal is a secret dining experience

with celebrity chef Paul Cunningham. During it, Paul created an 11-course tasting menu paired with local cider, beer, whiskey and gin. He tells me these nights, which are held regularly, are "a celebration of local place and produce", as he whisks people to interesting locations, which are revealed on the night, and cooks with ingredients sourced and foraged within the Mourne area. As with the other business owners I meet, Paul's pride for the area and community is infectious.

My guide Peter emphasises this devotion to the area as we eat lunch in a local pub after our hike. "Why would you ever want to move from here?" he asks. As I look out at the gently lapping waves and undulating mountains from my hotel that evening, I can't help but agree. **TW**

BOOK IT

Osprey Holidays offers a three-night trip to Newcastle in Northern Ireland, with B&B at the four-star Slieve Donard hotel in a Superior Room from £869 per person. Price includes flights from Gatwick and 15kg hold luggage, based on travel on September 16. ospreyholidays.com

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