

ACTIVE

THE DARK ARTS

It's pitch black and claustrophobic, but **Leanne Moore** finds going underground has its lighter moments

You should do one scary thing every day, it is said. Well if you could do it in bulk, my trip to the Burren Outdoor Education Centre to explore the sport of caving has earned me a month's worth of trepidation. The challenge seemed tame enough — to explore Cullaun Two, a popular beginner's cave at the Burren in Co Clare — until I reached the entrance.

I had imagined how it would look — something like the wide, grand arches you see in films or travel brochures. The reality was a wet, muddy hole in the ground, masked by a small but fast-flowing waterfall that was the result of the previous night's rain.

Now I was scared. I had a million questions running through my mind, but I was too afraid to ask them. I didn't want to put myself off entering the cave altogether. Alan Fairweather, a senior instructor at the centre, was my guide. An experienced caver, his first taste of underground air was at the age of 13, when he visited Pech Merle, a prehistoric show cave in the Lot region of southwest France. "It had spectacular formations, large spaces, rivers and ancestral wall paintings — almost everything a cave could have," he says.

Fairweather, now 37, is from Scotland but lives in Gort, Co Galway, and has lost track of the number of caving experiences he has had. Yet, he assured me, he still felt the same roller-coaster emotions when he entered a pothole.

"It's only natural to be cautious," he says. "For many people, the only caves they have experienced are tourist show caves such as the Aillwee Caves [in the Burren], as opposed to a wild or natural cave."

Fairweather described some of the more common phobias the first experience of the subterranean can bring to the surface, such as a fear of small spaces, the dark and the unknown — all of which I seemed to be experiencing. To distract myself as we descended into that ominous-looking hole in the ground, I asked my guide to define caving. Was it a sport? "It's a difficult one, isn't it?" he says. "We often refer to it as an adventure activity."

The beauty of it is that almost



Moore with Fairweather, her guide for the day; below, the pair approach the entrance to the cave

anybody can take part, as long as safety rules are strictly adhered to. Unlike many other adventure sports, it doesn't require supreme levels of physical fitness. It is imperative though, that novices go only with an experienced guide.

For experienced cavers such as Colin Bunce, who works at the centre, "adventure" is the operative word. His love of speleology — the study of caves and underground formations — began at the age of 17 and has grown into a passion for discovering the unknown. "I suppose for people who stick with it the real buzz is exploring what people haven't seen," he says. "For me, that's certainly the draw of it."

A former chairman of the Speleological Union of Ireland, Bunce stepped down last month after a four-year stint and is concentrating on activities with the centre, where he has worked for the past 20 years. Bunce, who moved to Co Clare from England 27 years ago, is also one of about 30 members of the Clare Caving Club.

"It developed from my interest in geology," he says. "For me, the science behind it is as important as the physical activity."

Meanwhile, inside the entrance of Cullaun Two, the last thing I was thinking about was science. I was concentrating on the ever-narrowing space and the water trickling beneath my wellingtons. The opening passage was narrow, but

Underground movement

John Duncan, the chairman of the Speleological Union of Ireland, the national governing body of caving, says that interest in the sport is on the increase.

"There has been significant growth in the activity in the past four or five years," he says. "There are a few clubs taking on new members. There is a lot of scope for increasing numbers."

A practising doctor, he was elected chairman last month and is trying to entice beginners to try the "unique sport".

"There are a lot of misconceptions about caving, but it's the only sport where there is true exploration. There are constantly new caves being found so it's about the experience."

"I would urge people to check out the website. There's a segment on there for people who want to try caving. It lists all the events and meetings where beginners are welcome."

caving.ie

bearable, calling for us to adopt a doubled-over stance in places where head space was limited.

Though I was dealing with a little fear, given the calibre of my guide, I knew I was in safe hands. That said, I couldn't help but dwell on the things that could go wrong. Thankfully, serious caving accidents are rare, thanks to rigorous safety procedures.

Before we left the centre, my guide had been required to provide a "call out". This was to inform co-workers of the cave we intended to visit and how long we would be gone. Details of our adventure were printed in large bold letters across a white board in the main office as a reminder until we returned and checked back in.

John Sweeney of the Irish Cave Rescue Organisation explained to me how the system works: "Three of our calls last year were from groups that were overdue. This could mean that they have merely been delayed at the cave, but each callout has to be looked into."

"Last year we had five calls in total," he says. "When something serious does happen, it's tough, because it's



invariably somebody in the team down there. That's the hardest part, knowing the person. Being involved in a minority activity we're a close-knit community, with about 300-350 active cavers in Ireland."

The rescue organisation has 100 members, ranging from people who hold a general membership and are available to help in any situation, to those who have specific skills to assist a rescue, including first-aid skills and the ability to rig a cave.

As a voluntary organisation, it relies on the Coast Guard in the south and Sport Northern Ireland in the north. Sweeney, who is from Co Donegal, has worked in Clare since 1992, and became involved in the rescue organisation two years later.

"My background is in PE teaching," he says, "but I also set up Backwest Adventures in Clare, where we do caving and kayaking. Sport is my life."

Fairweather echoes Sweeney's passion. "There are two sides to caving I enjoy," he says. "As a professional cave guide I love bringing groups, especially as an outdoor educational experience. Then on the other side I enjoy personal caving as a hobby, the adventure and exploring the elements of the activity."

Back in the darkness of the cave I can see the appeal to adventure-seekers. After we reach the point where no daylight enters, Fairweather suggests we turn off our head lamps to get a sense of the cave in its natural state. Suddenly we are in total darkness and I am made all the more aware of the chill around me and the water below. The cave's temperature is a consistent 8C-10C, cold enough to make me wish I had brought a pair of gloves.

Switching on our head lamps, we are on our way again. Later, when he reaches a narrow section that provides an alternative route through the cave, Fairweather demonstrates how tight caving can get.

As he squeezes himself through a limestone ledge, I decide to stick with the less claustrophobic route — the terror of getting stuck in the rocky hole is too much.

Fears apart, there was the grandeur of the rocky formations around us to gaze at in awe — stalactites, stalagmites and a lovely waterfall. Forgetting my nervousness, I realised what the sport has to offer — a whole world of beauty and amazement hidden beneath the ground.



Caving is a sport in which 'there is true exploration' and it has grown in popularity over the past four or five years



A subterranean journey

Ireland's cave systems offer some of the most rewarding subterranean "scenery" to be found anywhere, with spectacular underground streams and waterfalls seen by only a few, as well as out-of-this-world rock formations and breathtaking galleries and chambers.

It is good exercise, too, as some routes can be physically challenging. Here are some of the best:

Faunarookska in the Burren, is a cave complex that suits relative beginners, offering a surreal and stunning array of stalactites and galleries. **Pollnagollum**, also in the Burren, is the longest in Ireland. It has more than 17km of passages, although experienced cavers are still exploring new ones. The cave is full of large chambers and "alien" rock formations.

At 130m vertical depth, **Shannon Cave** in Co Fermanagh is the sixth-deepest, and sixth-longest cave in the country. It was discovered as recently as the 1980s and is recorded as being 5.4km long, though exploration is continuing and further passages are expected to be found.

Doolin River Cave, near Doolin in Co Clare, runs 3km in the hills near Lisdoonvarna and while it is regarded as one for more experienced cavers, it has more accessible parts, too. It boasts the longest free-hanging stalactite in western Europe.

Noon's Hole, about 11km southwest of Enniskillen in Co Fermanagh, is a foreboding vertical cave and at 76m in depth is probably one best left to experienced cavers.

Carrowmore Caverns, near the

village of Geevagh in Co Sligo, are less well known but some of the deepest caves in Ireland.

The cost of a guided caving experience for beginners is usually quoted on a trip-by-trip basis, at venues such as the Burren Outdoor Education Centre. There are guidelines, though, and costs for adults are typically €80 for a full day or €50 for a half day. Other centres that count

potholing among their specialised activities include: Petersburg Outdoor Education Centre, Clonbur, Co Galway; Corralea Activity Centre, Belcoo, Co Fermanagh; Gortatole Activity Centre, Florencecourt, Co Fermanagh; and Backwest Adventures in Co Clare.

The Discover Ireland website has plenty more information on the activity. discoverireland.com

Where to go caving in Ireland



- **Clare:** The Burren
- **Fermanagh/Cavan:** Belmore/Tullybrack and Cuilcagh Mountain area
- **Cork:** East Cork, Mallow, Ballyhoura, Galtee Mountains
- **Sligo/Leitrim:** Carrowmore, Glencar, Glendade
- **Kerry:** Castleisland, Ballymacelligott, Cloghormore
- **Tipperary:** Mitchelstown caves

Get the Gear

Be safe, be seen and keep out the cold when wandering through those caves



Berghaus Mera Peak II Gore-Tex jacket
This is a version of the company's best-known jacket with a modern twist. It has two layers of durable Gore-Tex, and the hood has an adjustable peak and foldaway collar. There are five useful pockets, including one in the internal chest. €319.99, greatoutdoors.ie



Petzl Tikkina 2 headlamp
Handy for explorers of caves with varying light, this headlamp has two modes: maximum and economic. It has improved-performance LEDs, and the batteries are easy to change. The lamp runs for 190 hours in economy mode and illuminates to 23m on full power. €24.99, greatoutdoors.ie



Lifesystems waterproof first-aid kit
This contains key first-aid equipment for injuries from water sports and the outdoors in general. It includes bandages and tape, shears, gloves, antiseptic wipes and paracetamol, as well as a thermometer and a Resusci-Aid for artificial respiration. €23.99, greatoutdoors.ie



Petzl Meteor III helmet
The makers of this helmet claim it's the most ventilated one that money can buy. Weighing 235g, it can be adjusted to your head shape. It's designed for climbing and mountaineering but meets European standards for cycling and whitewater sports. €89, greatoutdoors.ie



"Sealskins" all-season gloves
A good pair of gloves is as useful in the subterranean world as they are above ground. They will help protect hands from cuts and scrapes, keep them warm and give a better grip. The palms of these are made from supple and durable goat skin, and the gloves are both breathable and waterproof. €39.90, greatoutdoors.ie