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Lonely Planet names Burren among best places in world to visit in 2021

Pól Ó Conghaile
TRAVEL EDITOR

CANADA'S Rocky Mountaineer train. Italy's 400km Vie di Dante. Greece's organic food. San Diego's diversity – and the Burren Ecotourism Network.

Yes, a small community tourism network in Clare has been named one of the world's top 30 places, people and tourism projects for 2021. Described as "a global leader for sustainable tourism" in *Lonely Planet's* annual 'Best in Travel' list, the Burren Ecotourism Network has been hailed 'Best Tourism Project' for the year ahead.

"We're absolutely thrilled, because it's an acknowledgement of over a decade's work," says Jarlath O'Dwyer, the network's CEO. "And that's 10 years, through thick and thin, where people had to put in a lot of their own time and resources, hold on to their beliefs and stay motivated."

That went for this year more than ever – 2020 has decimated Irish tourism and Mr O'Dwyer recalls members' reactions back in March, when international travel shut down, as being "massive fear". But the network pulled together, ran weekly Zoom meetings, collaborated on marketing and social media and managed to salvage a "very good" 12 weeks of staycation business.

"They were a bit leaner, they worked harder, they had to spend on reopening, but they had huge support from the Irish market," he says. Celeb visitors even included Tánaiste Leo Varadkar, Roz Purcell and Paul O'Connell. "Shane Filan was down at the Cliffs as well.

Once they put out their photos, it's very influential."

Members range from iconic attractions such as the Cliffs of Moher and Aillwee Caves to the Falls Hotel in Ennistymon and small operators such as Linalla Ice Cream and forager Oonagh O'Dwyer's Wild Kitchen. Sustainability is "the bedrock" for all, Mr O'Dwyer

explains, from a code of sustainable practice governing waste and energy to an ethos of slow tourism and local engagement.

Lonely Planet's team of experts said the network showed "that popular tourism and sustainability don't have to be mutually exclusive".

The annual 'Best in Travel' is

usually a bucket list of destinations for the year ahead, but the pandemic forced a rethink this year, says Noírin Hegarty of *Lonely Planet*.

"We focused on how people travel now: outdoor; in family groups; purposefully; with careful attention to the communities they will explore," said Ms Hegarty.

The aim is to highlight destinations and individuals that enable visitors "to make genuine contributions through regenerative travel".

Categorised under sustainability, community and diversity, other winners include the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbuda (for banning single-use plastics and styrofoam), Rwanda's Gorilla Conservation Programme and Invisible Cities, a UK walking tour company giving home-

less people the opportunity to become tour guides.

Niall Gibbons, CEO of *Tourism Ireland*, said the accolade was "really good news" in a devastating year, "and will surely inspire travellers everywhere to put the Burren, Co Clare and the island of Ireland on their holiday wishlist, when the time is right".

Nobody knows when that will be. With Covid-19 still surging, aviation has taken a hammering, 2021 is full of uncertainty, and the Burren EcoTourism Network is planning for more staycation business. "This award will help for sure," Mr O'Dwyer says.

In the meantime, those weekly Zoom calls continue.

"People feel it's the rock in their week... this is what community is all about."



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Stunning:
Autumn
sunrise
(top) over
the Burren
in Clare,
and (above)
mountain
goats patrol
their land.
Left: The
landscape at
the Burren,
which has
been singled
out by *Lonely
Planet*.
PHOTOS:
CARSTEN
KRIEGER



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