



Cliffs of Inishmore, Ireland

Ice-scraped, wind-swept and salt-sprayed, the Aran Islands provide magnificent landscapes of bare limestone strung out across Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland. They are the last remnants of an escarpment of the Carboniferous Limestone, west of the larger outcrops on the mainland; those form the Burren, well known for its limestone pavements that are the signature landform of glaciokarst. Though more extensive, the Burren pavements are nowhere quite as bleak and barren as those on the Arans. The limestone dip is around three degrees, and it is to the southwest. So the scarp face on the islands is along their northeast side, where it was rounded and subdued by Pleistocene ice that came south from Connemara and ground its way up the scarp to create a staircase of low rock terraces. These dramatic cliffs along the southwest side of the largest island, Inishmore, are purely the result of relentless wave erosion that has cut far into the dip slope. Exposed to the full force of Atlantic storms, coastal retreat has been massive, and the cliffs are now 50–80 metres high. This spectacular viewpoint stands just east of the well-known stone fort at Dun Aonghasa. Preparation for the photograph demanded a modest site investigation. The cantilevered slab of strong limestone weighs over 100 tonnes, and it will fail one day in the future when fractures develop across it so that the projecting part can drop clean into the sea 70 metres below. A careful check found no deep fissures, nor any freshly broken rock, so it seemed that the added weight of one person was not going to precipitate immediate failure. When failure does occur, it will probably go unseen during a violent storm, when driving rain, pulsing wind, or perhaps a touch of frost, creates natural forces far in excess of those imposed by Jan posing for this photograph. © *Photographs and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*