

Natalia – The Lost Voice of the Parish

<https://www.daslebenistgruen.com/dlig/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/05/Psalm-42-1.mp3>

Sound on: “Psalm 42” adapted and sung by Natalia

“Obituary”

On Sunday 28th April 2024, shortly before 11 am on a lovely spring morning, an era came to an end. After months of joyful weekly gathering in St. Antony’s Church in Kilcoole, we said goodbye to the voice of the Family Mass – Natalia. It was a kind, but assertive voice, confident and never too shy to encourage even the most reluctant singers to join in. Also behind the scenes Natalia spared no effort to create this special form of worship every Sunday. Only a few weeks after losing Fr. John Daly to another Parish, we now see a further initiator of the Family Mass depart. Natalia is leaving a void and we yet have to hear about a plan how to fill it.



Wors(e)ship in Greystones before the weekly Family Mass

Having lived in Greystones for almost 8 years, it was a bit of an odyssey for our family to find the right congregation to celebrate mass with. After the convent in Delgany closed down

we were looking for a new sacramental home. We soon learned that whilst mass was “celebrated” in many places all over the Greystones Kilquade Parish, there wasn’t much of a *celebration* going on. Especially for a family with a young child at the time, we didn’t feel welcome by fellow church goers. We were casted looks when the buggy was taking up too much room in the aisle. Reluctantly, or not at all, people offered us a space on a half empty pew – despite (or because of) me holding an infant. Whilst we felt proud when people told us how well our by now three children behaved during mass, it was sad to see the disapproving looks towards other children who were less disciplined. The ceremonies themselves were mostly following an agenda. Rushed homilies or none at all, with everybody going their separate ways afterwards. Definitely not an environment to attract families – the future of the faith community.

Natalia’s Story

This is exactly how Natalia felt when she first arrived to the Parish in the summer of 2019. She had just completed the Camino de Santiago from St. Jean Pierre de Port in France to Fisterra in Spain. Whilst her 33-day journey came with the discernment that a vocation as nun – as previously intended – was not for her, it gave Natalia a taste of leading a spiritual life.





Originally from Olsztyn in Poland, Natalia was raised a Catholic and yet couldn't have been further away from the spiritual person that she is now. Born into a time of political transformation during the 1980's, practicing her faith in communist Poland felt more like expressing an ideological identity rather than developing a relationship with God. *"Going through the sacramental process at school wounded my growth with an empty theology and lazy rituals, highlighting my sense of loneliness. At the end of my Christian initiation, I had no one with whom I could share my experience of the divine"*, Natalia remembers.

This sense of being unmet in the spiritual realm escalated through her attempt of studying theology. Eventually, disappointed by the dull celebrations and shaken by public and private church scandals, Natalia turned her back on the Catholic church for almost two decades.



Coming Home

During that time Natalia followed a rather interesting career path. She seized opportunities of working in many different sectors such as TV, banking, software and gaming, as well as translating books from Polish into German. But no matter how 'fulfilling' her professional roles were, her soul remained unsatisfied. Guided by the online homilies of a Polish Dominican priest and an English Buddhist spiritual director, Natalia eventually re-discovered her faith and re-connected with the Catholic Church.





Returning from her pilgrimage on the Camino however, emphasised her inner loneliness once more. The spiritual depth encountered en route clashed with the emptiness of Catholic gatherings back home in Ireland. Giving up on finding a satisfying celebration, Natalia started attending Greystones and Kilquade masses out of convenience. In Fr. John's homilies and spiritual guidance Natalia found such inspiration that she ultimately took a leap of faith. In 2021 she left her secure, full-time corporate job and accepted a much less paid contract with the Parish.

Godmother and God-Grandmother



When I asked Natalia one Sunday after mass in 2022 if she wanted to be my Godmother, I didn't know that she contributed so much more to mass than just a nice tune. I was merely fascinated by the energy she brought to church and how she portrayed her faith to the crowd. That for me was enough to

make her my spiritual advisor and a year later again the Godmother of our third child. Rather than only facilitating the sacraments as per her job description, Natalia went above and beyond to revive the long lost (or maybe never existing) spirit within the local faith community. *"Whilst it was one of my most spiritually rewarding adventures, the sacramental process was challenging, demanding and exhausting"*, Natalia tells me. I remember her often being at the point of exhaustion after endless overtime and working late. And yet Natalia would face the congregation every Sunday with her guitar and a warm smile on her face.

We are good friends now and I am glad we will continue being part of each other's lives. I am sad for the community though, over losing these vibrant celebrations Natalia brought to the Parish with Family and Ruah Mass*. I will miss the songs she handpicked and adapted to convey the spirit of faith and for everybody to learn under her guidance. I feel upset that the Family Mass the way it was intended, and established during many hours of thinking, planning and re-jigging by a finely-tuned team, has come to an end. I am heartbroken that two people of this team who put something in motion and made a positive change in the Parish – despite fighting against hierarchies and internal politics – were let go without further ado.

Bouncy Castle & Chocolate Fountain – Communion & Confirmation in Ireland

Are we going back to the old ways now? I hope not. But who am I to complain anyway, barely a Catholic for a year and not even Irish. Best to quietly show up for Sunday mass, head bowed. Taking a seat in one of the back pews or even better remain standing by the door so I can slip out after communion. Inaudibly humming the traditional hymnes played on the organ at most, if there is music at all.

Most Irish people have a love-hate relationship with the

institution “Catholic Church”. More hate than love from what I sense in my immediate surroundings outside the congregation. Quite understandable when you consider how religion was interpreted and taught less than half a century ago. Many people still don’t want to have anything to do with it. And it is their free choice to turn their backs on faith altogether. No harm done. Unless they insist on sending their children to a Catholic school and demand as little religious teachings as possible. Unless they want to use the churches once a year to have their child baptised so they won’t feel excluded. Unless they complain about the way the preparations for the sacraments are done, so they can make communion and confirmation solely about expensive white dresses and parties with bouncy castles and chocolate fountains.

Being True to Yourself

I am uncomfortable saying out loud that [I got baptised as an adult](#). I get asked how I could join an organisation full of abuse and mismanagement, rather than [what my thoughts on faith are](#). There are awkward smiles when I say that our children receive the sacraments for we actually believe in them. Or that we give them prayers instead of “worry monsters” to deal with their fears.



What a strange society do we live in where people go along with something they despise, because it has always been done that way? And others feel they can’t say out loud what they truly believe in, out of fear of being ridiculed?

Natalia is a wonderful example for people of faith, never shying away from uncomfortable truths. I admire her bluntness and enthusiasm with which she encourages others to pursue with what they believe in. I am sad she has left the Parish, but I

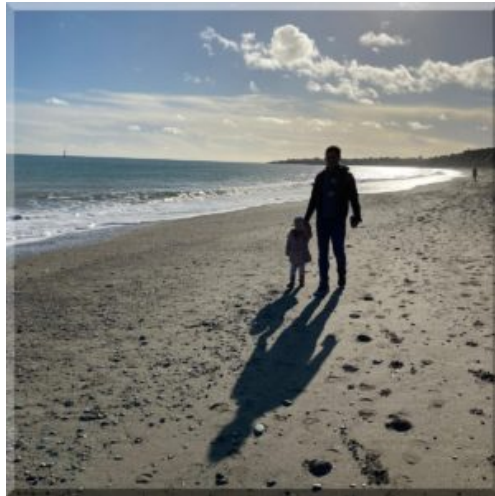
consider myself lucky to be part of her future projects. One of them will be [Full-of-Grace](#) – Natalia's next initiative to support individuals and communities in search for a faith-driven lifestyle. With all my heart I wish her best of luck, also for her journey towards becoming a Gestalt psychotherapist!

***Ruah Mass: A special way of celebrating mass introduced to the Parish by Natalia and Fr. John Daly. Focused on breathing God's presence through and with the community, translating each breath into praise and worship.**



Pictures: Courtesy of Natalia. Artistic Photography: © [Karolina Hrynek](#)

Foreigners of Greystones – “Eat the Cake”



“Life is short. Take the trip. Buy the shoes. Eat the cake.”

Usually I *conclude* my [“Foreigners of Greystones”](#) articles with the philosophy of life of the person I am writing about. They round up the interviewee’s story nicely and so far we had great advice and uplifting mottos in [my previous articles](#). Today however I would like to start off with what, Esther told me, was her attitude to life: “Life is short. Take the trip. Buy the shoes. Eat the cake.” I think it is the perfect introduction for Esther and how I got to know her during our interview and beyond.

Leap of Faith

Esther took a huge leap of faith when herself and her at the time 2-year old daughter followed her husband David from Germany to Ireland at the beginning of last year. David had

already been in Ireland for a couple of months after seizing a career opportunity his company offered in October 2019.

When Esther arrived in Ireland at the end of January 2020 it was very hard for her to settle in. Whilst her husband had already established a social network for himself through work, Esther basically started from scratch after leaving friends and family behind in North Rhine-Westphalia ([Viersen](#)) where she is from. Little did she know that it was going to become even harder with the beginning of lockdown shortly afterwards.

Planning, Planning, Planning – German Virtues at their Best

Esther had been well aware that moving abroad was going to be a big challenge. There was a lot to consider even if you were only planning to stay for 2-3 years like in Esther's family's case – depending on her husband's job situation.

Esther had contacted me through [my blog](#) in December 2019. She asked me a lot of questions. Something, Esther and I both agree, people should do before embarking on the big adventure of emigrating. But no matter how many questions I answered, I knew I wouldn't be able to take away her feeling of uneasiness that comes with moving countries. I remember it well from when I made the same decision almost 8 years ago.

It doesn't matter how much you plan or prepare in advance, a level of uncertainty always remains when leaving the familiar for the unknown. Learning to embrace a foreign culture. Overcoming the language barrier. Putting yourself out there and integrating yourself into a new community. These are all things easier said than done. However Esther was not oblivious to the fact that this was all ahead of her and their young daughter.

The Basics are not Enough

It was definitely an upside that Esther's husband David gave

their family a head start by finding a suitable family home before his wife and daughter followed him to Ireland. Their choice had fallen on [Greystones](#) due to its family-friendly environment and location by the sea. Something they had always wanted over a life in a big city like Dublin where David's office is based.

So far so good. But the basics aren't enough. To settle into a new home takes so much more than just finding a nice place to live. Esther didn't leave anything to chance and had already made a few contacts with local mummies on social media prior to their arrival. Now it was time to follow up with the 'field work'. Esther had it all covered.

Thwarted Plans

I had been delighted to finally meet Esther in person in one of the playgroups. She was that nice, friendly, open-minded woman that I had got to know through our chats prior. But I also saw that she was upset about what she had left behind, namely their newly-built house in [Brüggen](#) (Germany), her family and friends in the region she grew up in.

Unlike me, Esther hadn't chosen to come to Ireland because she had fallen in love with the island. It was a family decision to support David's career move which was a great opportunity for him. However living in a foreign country for a couple of years could have been a life-enhancing experience for Esther and her daughter too – under the right circumstances.



From Hundred to Zero

“Shortly after we arrived in Greystones, we introduced ourselves to the neighbours with homemade cookies”, Esther tells me. “My daughter and I went to local activities such as gymnastics for kids, musical classes and playgroups. And I met up with the German mummies I had contacted through social media before. These indoor activities were a great opportunity to meet people as the weather in February and March was cold, wet and stormy.”

Esther was well on her way to establish a social network for herself featuring some German mummies and other people she met through them. With spring on the doorstep and more sunny days ahead, this could have been a fantastic and above all sociable time for Esther and her family to explore their new surroundings.

The socialising came to a sudden halt when the pandemic hit full force pretty much straight away after Esther and her daughter had gained foothold. The beginning of what Esther describes “one of the toughest times in her life”.

Isolated, Lonely and Scared

Despite Esther’s thorough preparations and planning for every eventuality, she found herself in a situation which left her isolated, lonely and scared. “We had found a preschool place for our daughter from the beginning of March 2020”, Esther tells me. “And we had just finished our 3 days of easing-in period when the big shock came – Ireland goes into full lockdown. We had no idea how long this was going to last and decided to not travel to Germany for now. We didn’t want to take the risk of catching the virus on our journey and bringing it home to our families. For 12 weeks we pretty much isolated ourselves”, Esther says.

“My husband was working a lot and my daughter and I were basically on our own in a foreign country. We weren’t allowed any visitors and couldn’t go back to Germany either. It was particularly hard when my uncle died and my dad suffered a stroke”, Esther remembers, “and we were stuck in Ireland. I tried to keep our daughter entertained and to distract her with going to the beach and doing different things. But it was very challenging. The feeling of not being able to get away, the loneliness, the responsibility for our daughter and not knowing how things are going to pan out in the future. That pushed me to my limits.”

No Reason To Crumble

I guess it takes a good bit for a person like Esther to feel that desperate. Just a quick reminder of her philosophy of life at that stage. “Life is short. Take the trip. Buy the shoes. Eat the cake.” Despite only knowing Esther for a short while, I thought this reflected her personality very well. In fact she took that trip (to Ireland) and she certainly eats

the cake.

Well, don't get me wrong. Esther doesn't *look* like as if she was eating a huge amount of cake, but she definitely *bakes* the most amazing ones. Besides her occupation as an online editor in Germany's leading women's online magazine [GoFeminin](#), Esther runs her own [food blog E.A.T.](#)

"I love baking, cooking and trying out new recipes as well as writing and food photography. My job and blogging is ideal to combine what I am passionate about", Esther tells me. It also gives her the much needed flexibility and some sort of stability when they moved to Ireland. Even more now during the Corona Crisis when almost everybody is working from home – including her husband David.

A German 'Frohnatur' (= cheerful person)

Another thing Esther is passionate about is carnival which her home region in Germany is famous for. One can almost say that Germany is divided when it comes to carnival. You either love it or you hate it. Both with a passion. The region in East Germany where I come from does have carnival too, but you can escape the jolly season if you prefer. There are places here and there where you can join the party or just ignore it.

When you come from Viersen like Esther, about half an hour West of Düsseldorf, you hardly have a chance to not partake in carnival or Fasching as it is called in German. It's everywhere. "It's a big celebration that kicks off on 11th November and ends on Ash Wednesday", Esther tells me. "People party, laugh a lot and just enjoy life. In the Niederrhein ([Lower Rhine](#)) region people are very outgoing, chatty and like to celebrate."



Esther fits right in

Hence getting accustomed to the Irish mentality wouldn't have been too difficult for Esther and her family under normal conditions. "Our start in Ireland was actually quite easy. Our neighbours were very welcoming, friendly and helpful. Often people started talking to us on the beach and we really like the openness of the Irish. Everybody we have met so far has been chatty and interested in our story", Esther says.

Nevertheless, Esther admits that she didn't feel integrated for a long time due to the Corona crisis.

"You have to actively do something to meet people in a new place," Esther knows. "It doesn't just happen like that without showing initiative. Not being able to meet people, doesn't help with feeling isolated and lonely."

Never give up

Looks like Esther did everything right. And still, emigrating to Ireland couldn't have been more difficult for her and her family. However, like [Violine](#) and [Kris](#) already stated in my previous "Foreigners of Greystones" articles, never give up!

When I spoke to Esther again a couple of months after our first interview, times don't seem as dark anymore despite the still ongoing lockdown. "There was a turning point when our daughter eventually started in a lovely, recently opened kindergarten in September 2020" Esther says. "The teachers really helped easing her into the new environment. They even learned a few words in German and made lanterns to celebrate the German St. Martin's Day in November which we really appreciated."

Positive Outlook

With spring around the corner just like last year when Esther was about to embrace her Ireland adventure, she can now pick up where she left off. "Through kindergarten I made more contacts who I can at least meet outdoors", Esther says. "Our neighbours are still looking out for us and the German mummies support me when I have questions. We also met parents from other countries like Sweden, Texas and Thailand who were very welcoming and invited us to their weekly gatherings. I took up a Yoga Class with [Minaste Yoga](#) which started out on the beach and is now online every Thursday. I can say that I have established what I would call a positive routine and a good social network for myself."

Let's hope the Corona restrictions will ease soon so that Esther and her family can enjoy their Ireland adventure to the full, how ever long it may last.

Foreigners of Greystones – Violine Sea Craft



©1-3 Violine Deane, 4: Anke Marquardt

Of course writing is art. At least when you write like Paul Coelho. Would I consider myself an artist writing an Ireland Blog and running a little journalistic project called the [“Foreigners of Greystones”](#)? Probably not.

I have always had a [passion for playing with words](#). In primary school when I could barely write, I made up stories and didn't feel ashamed to read them out aloud in front of my classmates. I would say that I still had the advantage of childlike imagination at the time. And the bonus of my young age. Whilst other kids were still struggling with spelling, I was already

filling pages. Something that I am proud of looking back.

The Writing Challenge

In the adult world I find it rather challenging to be heard or seen with what I write. Be it due to the amount of competition out there (seems everybody wants to be a writer). Or because my stories aren't scandalous, shocking or lurid enough. But I enjoy writing them. And this is what matters most to me and why I continue.

Writing about the "Foreigners of Greystones" brings me a lot of joy. As stated in my [interview with the Greystones Guide](#) and previous articles, people with a similar emigration story like mine interest me. Also, what brought them to Ireland and to [Greystones](#) in particular.

Greystones' Real Artists

In [my last article](#) I wrote about a *real* artist. Well, real in my eyes. Someone with a special gift who creates the most [amazing paintings](#) and mosaics – Kris. In this article I would like to stick with real artists and introduce Violine who might already be a familiar face to some people in the Greystones community.

Even though Violine is originally from France, her artwork couldn't get more local. With [Violine Sea Craft](#) she has created something original, beautiful and full of innovative ideas. Every picture is unique and 100% Irish. Besides on [her website](#), she is selling her frames in the [Boatyard Gallery Greystones](#), the [Design House in Belmont](#), [Amora Gifts & Jewellery Bray](#) and on the [Kilmacanogue Farmer's Market](#).

Art in her Blood



1: Florence Bertin, Taradeau

**©1&3 Courtesy of Violine
Deane, 2&4: Anke Marquardt**

Violine grew up with art. Her mum Florence is an artist herself who makes sculptures out of different materials. Something that has certainly inspired Violine when she started her own business with Violine Sea Craft last year. It also involves different natural materials that Violine collects on the local beaches. "I have fond memories of collecting treasures from nature as a child which I am now doing as a mum together with my three boys", says Violine.

Violine Sea Craft

There seem to be real treasures hidden in the rough sand of Greystones beach. At least they become real gems once Violine has used them for her Pebble Art at Violine Sea Craft. It features drift wood, shells, glass and obviously pebbles. These 'raw materials' then turn into seagulls or lovebirds, looking onto the sea while sitting on a wooden pole. Or couples standing admiringly around the cradle of their newborn little 'pebble'. Whole families leaning into each other, watching a flying kite in the sky. The very same seems to be the limit when it comes to Violine's creativity. Purely by looking at the different shapes and colours of her materials, Violine gets her ideas of how to use them for Violine Sea Craft.

I have already gifted three of Violine's pictures to family and friends myself. Whilst the repertoire of Violine Sea Craft is huge and contains motifs for each and every family relation or occasion, Violine tailor-made them for me. The extra personal touch was very much appreciated by the people who received them.



Violine Sea Craft ©Courtesy of Violine Deane

Greystones vs. Provence

Moving to Greystones when her eldest was 1 year old in order to be closer to her husband's family, suited Violine. It was well before she started her Pebble Art and Violine Sea Craft. "I fell in love with the place", she says, "It was ideal for my connection and love I have for nature. Besides I love sea swimming. Could there be a more perfect place than Greystones?"

It sounds pretty perfect to me when Violine describes the place of her childhood. "I grew up on a goats cheese farm in [Taradeau](#), which is a small village in the south of France, surrounded by vineyards and 'Herbes de Provence'. The hills around the farm are covered in wild thyme, rosemary and oregano. There are a lot of food producers and farm markets in the area selling wine, olive oil, honey and so on. St. Tropez and the Verdon region with its Lavender fields and stunning lakes are probably more famous. Taradeau is right in between."

A Good Reason to Leave

Whilst it is hard to understand why someone leaves a dreamlike surrounding like the Provence, I find it very uplifting, how fondly my "Foreigners of Greystones" speak of their home countries. It is not that they grew tired of the places where they grew up. For most of them Ireland was only meant to be an adventure with no intention to stay for good. But – as we

Foreigners of Greystones know – Ireland has its very own magic. Even when you were raised on a picture-book farm in the Provence.



©1: @lucortiz_photoesie: 2&3 Courtesy of Violine Deane

Foreigners of Greystones don't quit

Violine came to Ireland in the summer of 2003 to improve her English. "My English was very poor. I worked as a waitress in a café. The pronunciation was so different from the English I had learned in school. I really struggled to communicate and work was very challenging due to my limited English skills", Violine tells me.

But the "Foreigners of Greystones" ain't quitters as I can now confidently say after having interviewed six fellow Greystones 'blow-ins'. Despite the language barrier Violine stayed in Ireland longer than she had planned to, because she loved the

country. “A couple of years later I met my now Irish husband and have no plan to go back to France. I lived in Dublin first, then moved to a few places in the south of Dublin before settling in Greystones about 4 years ago.”

It has been nearly 18 years since Violine set foot on the Emerald Isle for the first time. You wouldn't believe she struggled with her English at first when you hear her now. She is beyond fluent with a very light, charming accent.

Easy-going and Welcoming

Apart from the language Violine didn't have any difficulties settling in or meeting locals. “I have been lucky to meet many lovely people in Greystones, in my neighbourhood, in playgroups and at sea swimming. Everyone here has made me feel integrated into the community. I have always loved that about Ireland, but even more in Greystones”, Violine says.

“The Irish are easy-going and welcoming”, Violine continues. And I think we can't deny that there is definitely something about the Irish men too. The same way the Irish weather is the common negative denominator for most of us “Foreigners of Greystones”, the Irish males seem to be tipping the scales in favour of Ireland over our home countries.





©1&3: TheConsciousCamera.com; 2&4 Courtesy of Violine Deane

Foreigners of Greystones – Kris’ “Secret Map”

Hands up who needs Therapy?

My [“Foreigners of Greystones” articles](#) usually start with how I met the person I am writing about. In this case I will have to reveal a lot more about myself than I feel comfortable with. But here we go.

Hands up who has never seen a therapist in his life for one reason or another! Nothing to be ashamed about right? On the contrary. You always hear in the media that people should be more open with topics like anxiety and depression in our society. But when it concerns you personally it is a hell of a lot more difficult to talk about it or even admit you are experiencing it yourself.

That is what I am herewith doing. Well, admitting it, not talking about it. The focus of this article lies on Kris as

another “Foreigner of Greystones” and not on me after all.

Hypnotising Kris

So what does Kris have to do with my mental health? I stumbled across [Kris' website](#) when I was searching for hypnotherapists in the area of Greystones. I had always wanted to try hypnosis in addition to a conventional behavioural therapy. And there she was, showing up in my online search, right at my doorstep. An opportunity that I couldn't miss.

Our meetings were just on a professional level. But still, I liked Kris very much as a person and her kind and reassuring way of talking. After my final session I felt comfortable enough to ask her about the art work I had spotted all around the therapy room. Amazingly colourful mosaics done to an absolute level of perfection. I almost didn't believe they were handmade as I couldn't spot a single irregularity in them.



Perfect relaxation

I learned from Kris that this is what she does to unwind. Hard for me to imagine. To create [her mandalas, contemporary abstracts and animal motives](#), Kris uses a special technique called [dotting](#) or pointillism. To me it seems anything but relaxing because it requires absolute precision. Something that I aim for, but that occasionally drives me to distraction. One possible reason for me needing therapy...

Holistic Approach

When I started my “Foreigners of Greystones” series I knew straight away that I wanted to include Kris. Besides her fascinating art, Kris’ educational background and career path intrigued me. Kris studied different health science fields such as pharmacy, toxicology, diet & nutrition as well as psychotherapy. All of which I benefitted from whilst being in therapy with Kris. I valued her holistic approach considering dietary and physical components in addition to mental health.

Change is Good

According to her philosophy of life, Kris’ website where she offers her therapeutic services, is called [changeisgood.ie](#). Similar to [Farzanas](#) life motto, who I wrote about in my previous “Foreigners of Greystones” article, Kris believes that things constantly change and to use that to your advantage.

I personally have problems with change. I don’t think change is bad. But I am very much a creature of habit and have troubles with getting used to new things. However I *did* take some serious leaps of faith in my life one of them being [emigrating to Ireland](#).

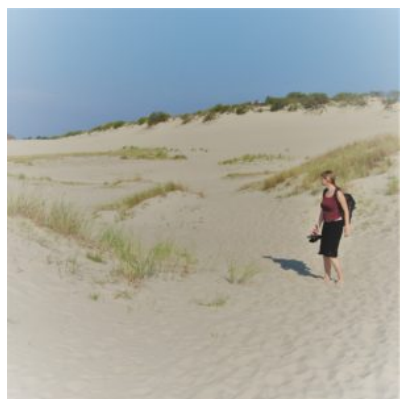
I agree with Kris that the way we see things changes over time as we get older and hopefully wiser. “Our philosophy of life is probably based on our beliefs, moral code, life experience

and expectations. I would say – being authentic and accepting everything else as a part of my own development and growth is the most fundamental part of my philosophy. Being the best example of my own beliefs and teachings is important,” Kris says.

Foreigner Status as Icebreaker

Learning how to be authentic and accepting myself are probably two reasons I started therapy with Kris in the first place. It might sound ridiculous, but with Kris being from a different country and a non-native speaker like myself, I felt more comfortable talking to her.

It also was a great ice breaker talking to Kris about her home country. A country that brings back fond memories of a summer camping holiday many years ago. I got to travel there before it became a trend destination for numerous holidaymakers. It was far from lacking a touristic infrastructure at the time, but I still felt I got to see the real thing. Something you will know is really important to me, when you have read my article [“Abandoned in Ireland”](#) .



Golden Beaches full of Amber

“Lithuania has unique golden sand beaches full of amber, amazing pine forests with silvery moss carpets, sand dunes surrounded by the sea from two sides. There are charming authentic straw roof villages protected by UNESCO, still not touched by a disturbing commercial invasion. Cities are small but charming with loads of stunning historical and architecturally interesting buildings. Not to forget the old narrow streets and inviting small restaurants and coffee shops.” This is how Kris summarises the highlights of her home country.

Once-in-a-Lifetime-Experience

Although I was only in Lithuania once for a short holiday in 2006, it is exactly how I remember it. Especially the ‘golden sand beaches’ and the Curonian Spit in particular are something that I will never forget. My grandmother’s friend had always been talking about the almost 100km long sand dune that separated the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea Coast. She grew up close by in [Nidda](#) and was expelled after WWII together with the rest of the German population. That didn’t stop her from talking of it in glowing terms.

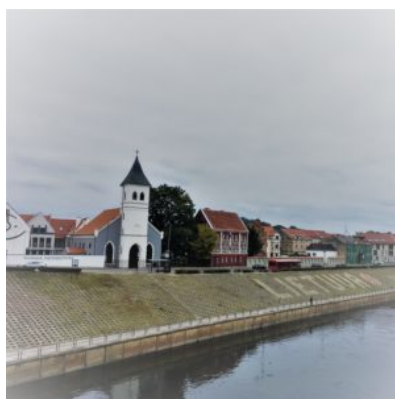
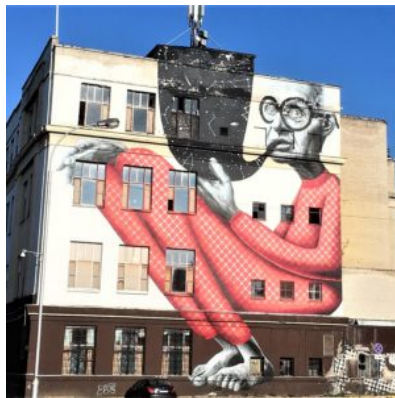
The endangered strip of golden sand is a UNESCO World Heritage site and rightly so. I consider myself lucky having seen it and having been able to walk on this unique natural site that stretches from 400m in width up to almost 4km. (We were told the dunes might be closed off to visitors in future in order to prevent them diminishing.) Whilst it was like a race to get to the only campsite nearby and secure one of the precious spaces for the night, the beach itself was almost empty when we visited it early the next morning. A truly unforgettable experience!

Kaunas – A Place to Study and Live

Besides the unspoilt, beautiful landscape, I was very

impressed with the cities in Lithuania too. When Kris told me she was from Kaunas, I roamed through my old photographs which mirror what Kris says: “My native Kaunas is the second largest city in Lithuania known for its fine architecture (city of design by UNESCO). It is very rich with unique museums, stunning cathedrals and theatres. It’s also an academic city with many great universities including the best medical university in Eastern Europe that I had the privilege to graduate from.”

“94% of its citizens are ethnic Lithuanians which is quite rare for a modern European city“, Kris continues. This indeed is a fact that surprises me. I am sure over the next couple of years and with Covid hopefully out of the way, more young people will discover Kaunas as a place to study and live.



“I looked at Google and chose Wicklow”

Having said that, I asked Kris why she had left Kaunas to come and live in Ireland and how she chose [Greystones](#).

When Kris decided to take a break from her work in a big

Lithuanian medical company, she chose Ireland more or less by chance. The same way I picked it due to the fact that it was a small, English-speaking country in Europe, Kris had chosen it many years before me for these very reasons. In fact 19 years ago. Whilst it took me a while [to find my place in Greystones](#), Kris' "secret map" – as she calls it herself – had laid out Greystones for her right from the start. "I looked at Google and chose the 'County of Gardens' – Wicklow," Kris tells me. With meeting her husband soon after, her final destination had been decided.

The Rootlessness of Immigrants

Being drawn to another country as Kris was to mystic Ireland, is in many ways better than wanting to get away from your country of origin. Nevertheless it doesn't prevent you from feeling rootless as Kris describes it: "It was a scary feeling that every (I believe) immigrant experiences – not having any 'roots' in this strange new soil. No family to call for a dinner on Sunday, no close friend to chat with over a cup of tea, no sentimental place to go when you feel lonely. Knowing that you'll never bump into some old school friend on the busy street or walk by a shop window that still reminds you about that special sentimental moment. Your past becomes nearly irrelevant. You're starting from a blank page."

Fast Food and No Mixer Taps

My favourite "Foreigners of Greystones"-question or answers respectively are the ones about the biggest cultural shock in Ireland. They are usually quite funny and most of the time I can relate to them. Kris remembers it as follows: "Regarding cultural differences, of course, many things were so strange and most of them made me laugh rather than upset! I had some fun learning how to use a sink with two taps – one with ice cold and the other -with boiling water, two story buses manoeuvring in narrow busy streets seemed unreal, amount of junk food places was overwhelming (we had only one McDonald's

at the time I left the second biggest city in Lithuania).“ The absent mixer tap in our kitchen sink still causes disapproval every time my parents come to visit. Interesting to hear it is not only a German obsession after all.

No Summers, No Winters

The Irish summers – or rather the lack of them – seem to be a challenge for most foreigners coming to live in Ireland. For us “Foreigners of Greystones” however not a reason to quit. Rather something we get used to – maybe by taking it with the Irish sense of humour: “When I call to my parents”, Kris says, “we always have fun discussing the weather. If I ask about the weather in Lithuania in winter time, they typically say – very mild, no winter this year. That means the temperature is ‘only’ minus 10 degrees. When I say to them in summer that we are having very hot weather in Ireland with 20 degrees, they look at me with sympathy meaning – no summer again this year in Ireland!”

Learn, Learn, Learn

Whilst this is a quite humorous way of dealing with the sometimes dreadful Irish weather – especially compared to continental Europe – it is all about acceptance. Accepting your country of choice for what it is and fully embrace its otherness. Otherwise you will never settle in at all. A very valuable advice from Kris to emigrants-to-be:

“[...]they should know that once they made a decision to make another country their home, everything in that country should concern them. There is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ anymore. Many immigrants that I know through my work, don’t feel comfortable socialising with locals or actively participating in many areas of life and they use cultural differences as an excuse. My best advice to them – learn learn learn! Language, history, culture and traditions of the country that is your home now! The result is always rewarding as you will find something new and amazing all the time.”

Foreigners of Greystones – Trading Mauritius for Ireland



From Island to Island – Farzana’s Story

I love my project [“Foreigners of Greystones”](#). Whilst I knew the people who were going to participate, I now realise that I didn’t *really* know them. With each article I learn so much about their home countries and above all their diverse life stories. It is a pleasure to share it on my [blog](#).

Farzana answered my interview questions in such great detail and so eloquently that I wondered if I need to retell her

story in my own words. I am going to try anyway. Hearing about [Mauritius](#), where Farzana is from, was super interesting. I hope it will be for you too. Feel free to leave a comment what you liked best about Farzana's (and my) story.

Our First Encounter

How I met Farzana seems to be a good start. Like [Ana from my previous article](#), I first saw Farzana in one of the Greystones Parent & Toddler Groups. I asked her a question that she had probably heard a million times before. I bit my tongue straight afterwards. Could I not have come up with something a little bit more original, I thought to myself. Anyway, "*How on earth could you leave Mauritius for Ireland?*", I asked her. And this was when she started telling me her story.

I couldn't guess where Farzana was from. In fact, I had never met anyone from Mauritius before. Nor did I know much about the island in the Indian Ocean. Except that it was a popular honeymoon destination with stunning beaches. I held back on saying this out loud though. No need to start on another cliché after my clichéd entry question.

Why Ireland?

I am personally very interested in what brought people from all over the globe to Ireland. And in particular how they ended up in [Greystones](#). It is the central question of "Foreigners of Greystones" and what started me on the project in the first place.

Farzana had been living in different European countries before she came to Ireland. During her studies in France she met her Mauritian husband who was studying in Ireland at the time. While she returned to Mauritius to work there for a couple of years, her soon-to-be-husband stayed in Ireland completing his training. After their wedding, Farzana joined him on the Emerald Isle and they lived happily ever after.

From Mauritius to Greystones

It would be a short story if this 'happily ever after' was actually the end of it. Instead Farzana, her husband and their meanwhile 2 children lived in Dublin for 8 years, before they decided to go back to Mauritius. Understandably, they wanted to be closer to their families, now that they had one on their own.

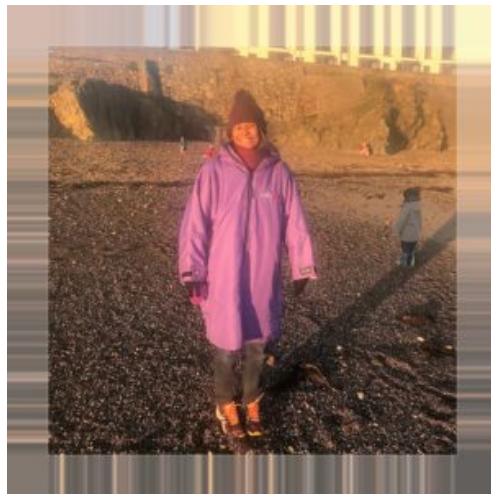
After only 9 months back in Mauritius, the young family realised that this was not what they had pictured for their life. They made the decision to move back to Ireland. This time to the family-friendly Greystones. A friend helped them to settle in and their son got to join his best mate in playschool. Two reasons why they had picked Greystones. Another 'happily ever after', but still not the end of Farzana's interesting story.

Outcast or Insider?

Farzana and her family have been living in Greystones for almost 2 years now. When I asked Farzana if she feels integrated into the local community, her answer surprised me: "That's a tough one. Sometimes I really feel integrated, like I am part of this community. Other times, one look can make me feel out of place. Most of the time, I have felt very welcome here but then there are some hard times when I felt really lonely and not where I should be. It is a choice not to live in my country and therefore something I have to accept and live with."

"There is a small minority of people who understandably feel people from other countries are taking too much space", Farzana says. Obviously that makes her "feel out of place or ill at ease sometimes", she continues. "But having lived in other European countries, I was nicely surprised by the warmth of the Irish! With the name and the skin colour that I have, it has sometimes been challenging to live in other countries but the Irish people were really welcoming in spite of the

differences,” Farzana concludes.



Racism in Greystones?

Mentioning the words ‘Racism’ and ‘Greystones’ in one sentence makes me cringe. Almost like a taboo. Not because I think it doesn’t need to be addressed. But more due to the fact that it makes me realise it even exists in a small community like Greystones.

I guess *especially* in a small neighbourhood where people know each other, it is an issue rather than in a big city. Not long ago you were considered “foreign” when you moved from the neighbour town Bray to Greystones. Whilst it is nice to be part of a community and to be recognised, it is also harder to blend in when you look different.

All in the same Boat?

The Irish are a nation of emigrants and so are the Mauritians as Farzana explains to me: "It is probably in our genes we move around the world so much because our ancestors actually emigrated to Mauritius. I remember someone saying that for a small island there are quite a number of us all around the world."

Being an immigrant myself I can personally relate to what Farzana is saying. However when I occasionally feel as an outsider, it is more in my own head assuming people are judging me because of my foreign accent. Basically Farzana and I have the same status as immigrants in Ireland. And still Farzana experiences it differently due to her skin colour. That is what racism is about, isn't it?

A little History

"Many different countries have colonised Mauritius. Sailors found the island on their way from Europe to Asia. At that time, it only consisted of mountains, forests and animals. Between 1600 and 1800 its discoverers slowly populated Mauritius. Firstly the Dutch, then mainly the French and British. They used the island as a stopping point on their journey to Asia. Mauritians are therefore descendants of all the people who settled in Mauritius a long time ago."

Sadly, among the settlers working the fields and rearing the animals, were slaves from Africa and at a later stage workers from India (Farzana's ancestors). "This history, however, was an important aspect of Mauritius because it defines who we are as an island and also where our roots stem from. That leaves us with a rich heritage may it be in terms of architecture, cuisine or language", Farzana states proudly.

A Matter of Taste

Farzana's answer to the question what her biggest cultural

shock was when she came to Ireland made me laugh: “What I struggle with is probably that they serve cream with every dessert and that food portions here are massive!” Likewise Irish people can’t seem to understand that not all people live up to their weight standards. I remember Farzana telling me that the health nurse tried to match up her daughter to the standard weight percentile during the developmental checks. We were both laughing – one look at Farzana’s stature reveals that there is no Irish measurement for ‘petit but healthy’.

With regard to food portions and creamy desserts the Germans are probably closer to the Irish than to the Mauritians. But when it comes to dress code Farzana and I are totally on the same page. Wearing pyjamas in public and even to social outings, we both haven’t acquired a taste for yet. Clearly another cultural difference Farzana noticed living in Ireland.

Irish Summers equal Mauritius Winters

When Farzana admitted that it was quite a big deal getting used to the [Irish weather](#) too, I don’t feel that bad anymore having asked her why she left Mauritius for Ireland. Considering the tropical climate with temperatures between 14 and 18 degrees during Mauritius winters, it is surprising the cold Irish summers were not a deal breaker for Farzana. Some years temperatures of 18 degrees might be the highest of feelings during the summer months in Ireland.

‘Honeymoon’ Childhood?

Although Farzana grew up less than 10 minutes from the beach, she now spends more time in the cold Irish Sea than she did as a child in Mauritius. “The Mauritian East coast is well known for its beaches. It is on the windy side of the island but has some of the island’s best-known tourist resorts”, Farzana tells me. Whilst I still imagine what it must have been like growing up in one of the most popular honeymoon destinations in the world, Farzana said that for locals these resorts and luxury hotels were as unreachable as for someone living on the

other side of the planet.

“Things have evolved thankfully. Mauritians can nowadays enjoy some of the resorts around the island during low season at more affordable price. Foreigners visiting the island and staying in hotels only get a glimpse of the breathtaking beauty of the island. They don’t see the day-to-day living and reality of people working there”, Farzana adds.

Authentic but Convenient

Having worked for several Irish inbound tour operators, I am amazed about the similarities in the international travel business. Apparently there is a demand for more authentic and sustainable tourism. On the other hand, I feel authenticity has its limits and tourists definitely don’t want to go beyond their boundaries of convenience. They are on vacation after all.

During my work in Irish tourism, I had requests of people wanting to meet up with a *real* Irish community. They thought they could march into somebody’s living room and see how locals spend their day-to-day life. The bestseller still is the Traditional Irish Night with music and Irish Dancing, claiming that this is what Irish people do. It is in a way, but not night in night out in front of a huge, pre-booked audience. Nothing authentic about that. My husband always comments that with “If they want a traditional Irish night, they should come to our house and watch us fall asleep on the couch at 9 pm.”

The Tourism Façade

In all seriousness, of course I get the concept of showing traditions and folklore to tourists. It gives them an impression of local customs and culture. But that’s about it – an impression. Obviously a travel group of 40 people cannot just pop into a spontaneous trad session in the pub around the corner. And that is exactly the point: Large groups and people

on package holidays are very rarely going to experience an authentic Ireland.

Tourism, in whatever way, is an import source of income in most countries. And for a lot of travellers 'ticking boxes' by seeing iconic sites is enough to say they have seen a country. Exactly like Farzana states about people vacationing in Mauritius. I personally find it upsetting when a façade created for tourists is taken for the 'real thing'. In my eyes it is shining a false light on a region or country. The impression given to tourists is hardly ever a mirror of reality. Hence non-authentic by definition.

The Disguise of Doing Good

An even bigger paradox is charity under the name of the most harmful forms of travelling. Massive ocean liners promoting green and sustainable tourism. Hop-on-hop-off busses touring rubbernecks through slums and townships. Agencies who promote "1-day-as-a-farmer-in-a-rice-field" as authentic adventure. It may shine light on a situation that requires attention which is positive. But in my eyes it is far from sustainable or authentic tourism.

I have been thinking for a while now about how international travel could be changed for the better. Revolutionised so to speak. And then Corona hit...Apart from that I have distanced myself a long time ago from mass tourism and package travel. Personally and professionally. I still consider myself as a travel consultant. In what way I will contribute to the tourism sector when it comes to it again, I am just about to work out.

Farzana's Vocation

What would my articles be without my little digressions off topic as per the above. Nevertheless tourism is the biggest and most important source of income in Mauritius, too. Despite that Farzana found her vocation in a different sector which I

personally am very intrigued in. As a trained business psychologist she has worked for various companies in Ireland. Sectors she consulted with include health, aviation, energy development and military forces.

After having had a career break for 3 years for her children, Farzana is currently re-entering the workforce. Her field of expertise covers assessment centres for selection and development, psychometric assessments, competency development, coaching support as well as other human resources related functions. Farzana provides trainings such as change management programmes and performance management training. Their aim is to provide support to organisations or individuals in order to enhance their performance and well-being and reach their goals.

“Shock to the System”

I used to meet Farzana almost every week in our local playgroup that she volunteered to organise by the way. Due to current circumstances I hardly see her anymore. But if, it is mostly on the beach in Greystones where she bravely goes for a swim every day. Rightly so, Farzana considers her daily swim – regardless the weather – one of her biggest achievements over the last year.

“Since September 2019, with a group of mums I have come to know, I got addicted to sea swimming. The cold water wakes me up and forces me to be present and to connect with how my body is feeling. While it is a shock to my system, it is also a breath of fresh air and I have never regretted a swim except when I have tried seas that were too rough for me! The thrill and the feeling after a swim are probably why I always go back. I always feel that I can take and handle everything better after a swim and I am so grateful to be living so close to the sea. Over the last year, I have come to meet so many people who I meet at the beach and with whom I share this passion for the sea swimming.”

To be continued...

There is so much more that I could write about Farzana and her home island Mauritius. And there are also many more questions that I would like to ask her. I'll leave that for a chat face-to-face over a cup of coffee somewhere in Greystones. Hopefully soon! For now I would like to conclude this article with Farzana's – very apt for these days – philosophy of life: *"There is nothing more constant than change. Life just keeps on changing. I am not living with my parents anymore. My kids are not babies anymore. I am not a young graduate anymore and so on. So make the most of the present because this will change and evolve!"*

Foreigners of Greystones – Ana's Story

Why not Spain?

A strange question to start off with, you would think? You'd be right! What does that even mean? Maybe it helps if you knew that my very first blog article was called ["Why Ireland?"](#) Still unclear? Let me explain!

I moved to Ireland in 2014 after I had fallen in love with the island during a 6-months internship as a student. But before that, I had already lost my heart once (actually twice) – to Spain!

During my apprenticeship as a Tourism Assistant 18 years ago (wow, just realising that's a long time ago) I started studying Spanish and absolutely loved the language. Hence I spent my course-mandatory internship in Spain. More precisely

in [Santiago de Compostela](#), the destination of so many pilgrims from all over the world.

Ireland vs. Spain

I could probably write a book about those 3 months alone. They were my first experience abroad. But that was not the end of my relationship with Spain. Years later I studied [Tourism and Leisure Management](#) in University and spent a semester in Spain in 2008. This time 6 months in [Salamanca](#) in [Castile and León](#) in the West of Spain. Apart from exploring the surroundings of Salamanca extensively, I travelled half the country before I returned home.

To answer the question from above – if Ireland hadn't completely blown me away afterwards, I might have ended up emigrating to Spain instead of Ireland.

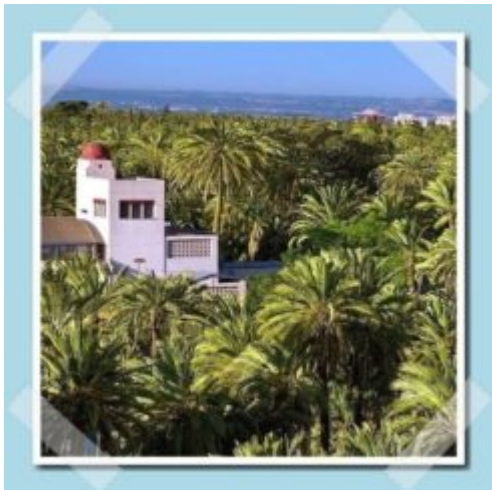
Spanish is not just Spanish

I have to admit that I had my difficulties getting used to the Spanish life style at first. Even though I am a night owl and love my siesta, I am not a night owl in the Spanish sense. According to my experience *“going to bed early on a school night”* in Spain meant staying up until midnight at least.

However, my love for the language and the Spanish culture stayed strong. And here we are, back with [cliches](#), because there is not just *one* Spanish culture. Living in the north of Spain compared to the south can be as different as being in two countries.

And there is not just one Spanish language either. Apart from Spain's official language Castilian, there are Catalan, Basque, Galician and Aranese which are not only dialects, but 4 unofficial languages. Whilst I even learned some Galician words from my colleagues in the Pilgrims Office in Santiago de Compostela, I am now happy when I am able to form a full sentence in any Spanish. I hide when I hear someone talking in

Spanish, afraid I might be tempted to reply in what's left of my Spanish skills.



A great Example

Seeing Ana talk to people with just the few words she had in English when I first met her, communicating by friendly gestures and being super nice all the time, I knew I had to overcome my fear and talk to her in Spanish. Not that Ana needed help – *she* was fine.

I just wanted to show her some appreciation for her constant efforts of approaching people, blending in and even making newcomers like herself welcome. But above all, I wanted to hear her story and get to know her better.

Ana's Story

To me Ana's story is one of bravery and determination. Ana

moved from [Elche](#) at the Spanish [Costa Blanca](#) to Ireland in November 2017. Her granddaughter Nora was almost 4 months old at the time and Ana's daughter was preparing to go back to work. Ana had come to Greystones to mind Nora full time.

November is not exactly the best time of the year to come to Ireland. The weather can be quite dull, the days are short and hence people spend most of the day indoors.

It is a wonder how Ana met people in Greystones, which she was going to call her home now for an undetermined time. I remember Ana telling me in one of our first chats in a mix of English and Spanish that the short days during the Irish winter were particularly hard. Whereas in Elche, in the South East of Spain, people would meet up outdoors and enjoy the mild and bright nights, that was not the case in Ireland.

Cultural Shock? Not at all!

"And everything closes so early in Ireland", says Ana, shrugging her shoulders. "There is no time to meet anybody for a casual coffee after 6 pm." Whereas I would consider that as a huge cultural shock, Ana stays positive. "I didn't notice a big cultural change as most of the Irish I've met were very easy going, loved to chat and broke the ice with ease. Irish hospitality is legendary!", Ana adds.

Needless to say that Ana is a very positive and happy person. Above all, she values moral principals and considers it very important to respect everybody she encounters. This is how she describes herself in just a few words. Characteristics that will definitely help her to settle into her new environment. If only the cafes wouldn't shut that early...

Granddaughter opens up a New World

"One day I was out walking with my granddaughter Nora and met a mother who invited me to attend the local Parent & Toddler Playgroup. This was where I met other mummies, fathers,

grandmothers and au-pairs from different countries. That has been an absolute life changer for me here in Greystones.”

Still with little English, Ana has made an effort from the start to engage with people during the weekly playtime. Rather than sitting in the corner only talking to her fellow countrymen or women, she has been mingling with the crowd. She has such presence, smiles at everybody and helps out wherever she can. I have seen her comforting little ones whose parents were out sight for just a moment. Ana generously shared snacks with the kids (provided parents were ok) and brought goodies for Christmas. When our daughter was born, Ana even gave us a very thoughtful gift. It was not surprising that she soon knew many parents and children by name.

It was almost impossible not to notice Ana in the playgroup. With her friendly and kind manner she integrated herself in no time. I am sure Ana is a familiar face in Greystones too by now.





The Lockdown brought us closer

With the start of the Corona lockdown in March I decided to contact Ana. First of all to see how she and Nora were, as we had parted the last playgroup not knowing what was lying ahead. Secondly I wanted to use that time to brush up my Spanish by writing to Ana. I was hoping to improve before I met Ana face-to-face again.

So Ana and I got into a lovely exchange, texting about all sorts of things. We discovered that we both liked cooking and baking, especially during lockdown with limited possibilities to buy groceries and going out for dinners. Ana told me that she took part in numerous cooking classes back home in Spain and when she sent me pictures I was intrigued.

Food without Borders

Spain is renowned for its culinary specialities and you definitely can't beat the Spanish cuisine when it comes to sweet things. [Churros con chocolate](#) are probably the most famous sweet Spanish export, but Ana's repertoire goes far beyond that. When I told Ana that I had tried to make my own [Torrijas](#) as they still reminded me of my Easter trip to [León](#) in the North West of Spain in 2008, she revealed her special recipe to me. I can't wait for Ana to bring the original ingredients over from Spain so we can have a bit of Spain in Ireland together.

Ana fits right in

Besides being passionate about food and cooking, Ana has many other interests as I learned from our online chats and the interview for my article. When I asked her about what she values most about Ireland and its culture, her answer showed me that Ana has a way deeper affection for Ireland than just liking its people and their hospitality.

“Ireland has made a great contribution to literature with brilliant writers and poets. The traditional music, combined with Irish dancing and all the myths and legends reflect the country’s expansive culture. You can find stunning castles or their ruins almost everywhere which is a proof of Ireland’s rich history. Also its more modern architecture with the coloured doors that you can see all over Dublin, make Ireland an interesting place to travel and explore“, Ana raves.

Torn between two Countries

I sympathise with Ana. I see what she loves about Ireland, but also what she left behind in Spain. Although under completely different circumstances, I made that choice once – in favour of Ireland. I remember that I couldn’t rationally explain to myself why, let alone to other people. When I told family and friends that I was going to emigrate to Ireland, after I had enjoyed the time in Spain so much, nobody really understood. Reading through my interview with Ana, I can see now that they had a point. Apart from the warm weather (except in Galicia where it is more like in Ireland), Spain has a lot to offer that makes you want to live there.

Hence, hearing Ana talk about her hometown Elche and its surroundings makes me a bit sentimental. I get out old photographs from my travels through Spain. I order a book about the Camino de Santiago and flick through an illustrated book about Spain that had gathered dust on the shelf. Reminiscing about old memories gives me great joy and so does the research about the region in the [Province of Alicante](#)

where Ana is from. Probably one reason why it takes me so long to finish a blog post.

Top of the League

Spain is after Italy the country with the second most UNESCO cultural heritage sites in the world. The Historic [Palm Grove of Elche](#) is one of the currently 42 UNESCO attractions in Spain. In addition to that, the [Pusol School Museum](#) and the [Mystery Play of Elche](#) have both been recognised by the UNESCO as outstanding intangible human heritage.

The Mystery of Elche

A couple of days after Ana had answered the interview questions, she sent me an email with additional information and photographs of the “Misteri d’ Elx” how it is called in the own language of the [autonomous community of Valencia](#). I reckon that Ana wanted me to put a focus on this particular event. When I looked at the pictures and read up on it I knew why.

Not just a Theatre Play

The [Mystery of Elche](#) is a musical drama about the Virgin Mary. It has been taking place in the [Basilica of Santa Maria](#) and the streets of the Old Town of Elche for almost 600 years. It is a living testimony of European religious theatre of the Middle Ages and the Mary Cult. Its two acts are entirely sung and are performed annually on 14th and 15th August.

Rather than just actors playing on a stage, hundreds of participants follow the morning and afternoon procession carrying candles. The ‘funeral’ procession of Mary leads through the streets of Elche, finishing with the enactment of the burial. The ‘Assumption’ and Mary’s Coronation follow in the Basilica. Over 300 volunteers feel honoured to take some part in the experience and so are the people of Elche.



You have to be there!

“I have included a video of the performance”, Ana writes in her email to me, “but nothing compares to seeing it live and feeling the music and voices reverberating in the basilica whilst golden glitter is raining down from the ‘sky’.”

Elements of different cultures and epochs feature within this extraordinary event. From Gregorian chants, over songs of the Spanish Renaissance up to Baroque melodies, all performed a capella.

...Dream, Travel, Repeat!

There are all these things in the world that deserve to be explored. Things that you sometimes haven't even heard of before. But once you know they exist, you can't wait to see them with your own eyes.

Or to say it in Ana's words: "Live, enjoy, dream, travel ... and if you have time, repeat."

(All photographs are courtesy of Ana. Thanks also to my lovely husband for helping me with the editing of my text.)

Foreigners of Greystones – Spot the German

My husband's theory that you can spot Germans from a million miles away was recently backed-up by a discussion in a forum that I was following. Apparently, they always wear rain or hiking gear of a certain brand, couples even in matching colours. I guess that speaks to the German virtues of wanting to be prepared at all times and lack of spontaneity.

When I was still working in tourism they used the term of "planned spontaneity" to describe the German target group. I thought that was hilarious, but I could see how it worked as a generalization for their purpose.

Being German myself, I *do* lack spontaneity, but on the other hand I am not very good at planning ahead. This shows that [cliches](#) are not always true, but surely carry some truth.

Common Ground

When I met Anja for the first time in the [Greystones Breastfeeding Support Group](#), I definitely didn't "spot the German". In fact Anja spotted me. The giveaway was me speaking German to our 4-month old at the time rather than me wearing an all-weather jacket. Anja was there with her newborn

daughter and this is how it all began.

I think it is natural that people of the same nationality are automatically drawn to each other when living abroad. That doesn't mean I was particularly looking to build my own little German community. However common ground makes it easier to start off in a new place.

Anja had already been living in Greystones for 3 years when I met her and on and off in Ireland since 2007. But to be honest, I didn't *need* Anja to find new contacts in Greystones. We just got on from the start. Having newborn babies almost the same age gave us even more common ground than just our nationality.

Last but not least we found out we were living just around the corner from each other. It is surprising our paths hadn't crossed before. But then we were both working before we had the kids – Anja in her home office and myself in Dublin City. Our children were our connector after all.

The Delgany Ladies

On our buggy strolls through Greystones, Anja and I met other mummies. Very soon we had a regular lunch group. (Shout-out to the [Beach House](#) for treating us like VIPs every Thursday when we were taking up all the comfy couches with our babas!) From that time on my husband started calling us 'The Delgany Ladies' (we live between Greystones and Delgany). He pictured us like some elegant 1920's women with big hats, parasols, chit-chatting on the beach with our little ones quietly playing beside us. Similarly, Anja's husband David refers to us as 'Ladies who lunch' or 'Yummy yummy Friends'.

These lovely nicknames by our husbands don't exactly mirror reality. Often we barely had a chance to finish our lunch with minding the little explorers. We can't deny though that we always had a great time! When most mummies of our "cohort" went back to work, Anja and I became even closer because we

stayed at home and didn't return to our old jobs.



Opposites attract

Like myself, Anja is a passionate stay-at-home mommy and her now almost 3-year old daughter and our eldest are best friends. I doubt we would have met without the kids since Anja's interests differ from mine. Whereas we both enjoy Irish nature, Anja's is quite an artistic person. An active member of the [Bray Choral Society](#), Anja loves (classical) music. It is her dream to learn how to properly play the piano one day. Besides that and her profession as literary translator, Anja is interested in literature and languages. Well, the latter is another interest we have in common.

We probably wouldn't have met in Germany either as we are from the opposite sides of the country. Thirty years ago not only the distance would have been significant, but also the huge

wall that divided “Anja’s Germany” in the West and the place where I grew up in the East. We are probably the first generation for whom the German East-West conflict isn’t a thing anymore. It surely has been lingering in the air long after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Anyway, not a topic that I want to focus on in this post.

Biggest, Highest & Circus Elephant

Anja’s description of her hometown or better its surroundings sound very much like [County Wicklow](#) where we both now live. Green hills, interspersed with forests and lush meadows. Widely spread nature reserves and remote farms. The so called [‘Bergisches Land’](#) (literally translated into ‘Hilly land’) is situated between the former industrial area [‘Ruhrgebiet’](#) and the low mountain range of the [‘Sauerland’](#). Whilst the name ‘Bergisches Land’ is apt, it is misleading at the same time, since it was named after the Counts of Berg, who was ruling the area in the Middle Ages and not its geographical surface.

Many people are familiar or have at least heard of [Cologne](#) with its magnificent [cathedral](#) that is not too far from [Wermelskirchen](#), Anja’s hometown. However, it looks like there is much more to explore than just the usual iconic sites of that region. And it wouldn’t be Germany if there wasn’t one of the oldest, highest, most famous [fill in blank].

So how about visiting the oldest drinking water reservoir in Germany? Or the highest railway bridge [‘Müngstener Brücke’](#) spanning the stunning Wupper Valley in a monumental steel arch reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower? An unrivalled curiosity is the circus baby elephant ‘Tuffi’ who once jumped out of the Wuppertal suspension railway. Whilst visitors can still take a ride in the world’s oldest electric elevated railway with hanging cars, the elephant is long gone, I am afraid.

The “heart-shaped” Wupper Valley

No visit to Germany would be complete without seeing a

medieval castle. You are certainly spoilt for choice here, but if you equally value culinary highlights, then pick [Schloss Burg](#) (funnily it literally translates as 'Castle [named] Fortress'). It is famous for its 'Bergische Kaffeetafel' which would be similar to an Irish Afternoon Tea. Just replace 'tea' with 'coffee' which is here served in a traditional 'Dröppelminna' (= antique coffee pot made from tin) and with heart-shaped waffles.

No wonder that Anja and her husband David got married here. Well, not in the castle itself, but the lovely Wupper Valley. I am sure that something "heart-shaped" was involved anyway.

The Irresistible Irish Men

Like in [my own story with my husband John](#), Anja was put into David's life (or the other way around) by some helping hand. After gaining some experience abroad with her friend to improve her English skills, Anja left Ireland in 2009 after 1.5 years. It wasn't an easy decision, but she had only intended to stay for 1 year and thought it was time to go back to her family in Germany. Moreover, her plan was to start working as a translator which she had trained for.

However, Ireland wasn't ready to let her go and put David on the scene. Both fell in love by writing to each other online. Hence Anja didn't stay in Germany for too long. After she had met David on neutral ground face-to-face for the first time, Anja became a frequent guest in Ireland again. Being flexible as self-employed translator helped with her "jet-setting" life. In 2014 Anja and David moved from his Dublin City apartment to Greystones and the rest is history.

Deal Breaker Bus Timetable

Due to her excellent language skills and easing herself into the Irish way of life, Anja didn't really suffer a cultural shock when moving to Ireland for good. The Irish and German life styles are not too different after all. And you know that

you are well suited for another country when you consider the bus timetables the biggest challenge.

I have to agree with Anja that it doesn't make sense to display the times the bus is leaving the terminus at, rather than the departure time from the bus stop like in Germany. On the other hand you can kill some waiting time by working out when the bus is supposedly getting there. Or it gives you the perfect opportunity to pull the "foreigner card" and start a chat with a local.

"Make Friends by Doing your Own Thing"

When I ask Anja what she found most challenging about getting to know Irish people she says: "Actually it was much easier than I expected. Whilst my first friends in Ireland were foreigners themselves, I made Irish friends over time by just following my own interests rather than actively looking for contacts. Hence I met one of my first Irish friends in the choir of Trinity College."

"The Irish mentality is very welcoming and sociable so that you hardly feel excluded", Anja continues. "Besides, they are a nation of emigrants themselves and according to my experience the Irish perception of Germans is quite positive. So once you are open to it, friendships will happen automatically". Even when you don't use the bus timetable debacle as an icebreaker.

My "Wing Woman" for Mammy Friendships

Looking back, I can confirm what Anja says about meeting locals. At the beginning however, I found it hard to become part of existing structures. After work (Irish) people went home to their families or went out with their group of friends. I needed a door-opener who already had Irish friends which was my husband John for me. Once you have kids, there are many locals who start from scratch too after leaving their work environment. That really helps. But even then I prefer to

have a “wing woman” for going out. This is how Anja and I made many lovely mammy friends.

“Be Happy or Change”

I am grateful to have Anja as my friend. Apart from the fact that I like spending time with her, she is very positive and optimistic which perfectly counteracts my moody character. Her philosophy of life “Be happy. If you are not happy, change something” perfectly summarises her life-affirming attitude.

It looks like Anja doesn't need to change anything in her life right now. Her answer to what she misses most from our home country Germany (except family and friends) includes just minor things that she can easily live without. Hence Anja doesn't have the desire to return to Germany which suits me just fine.