

Emigrating to Ireland? What to Consider

On 1st January eleven years ago I emigrated to Ireland. When people ask me if I would do it again, the answer is yes. I have no regrets whatsoever and consider myself lucky calling Ireland my home and that of my family. Whilst my intuition played a big part in my decision making, I considered a lot of practical things too. Here is what I would advise people to take into account when emigrating to Ireland.



No Vacation can prepare you for that!

We have all had that magical summer vacation that makes you want to pack everything up and move to the place of your dreams. Until the rose-coloured glasses come off and you get a more realistic picture. When I came to Ireland first for a 6-months internship in 2008, I knew very little about the country. Finding an affordable place to live and getting screwed over by one of the first Irish people I encountered in the process, was an eye opener. Especially after I had just

read on the plane how welcoming and



Five years later I made the decision to emigrate to Ireland for good. Despite my initial struggles and disappointments I had fallen in love with the island after all. But I had already seen it from its ugly side. During the long, damp winter with its short days. Living in a cold and shabby apartment with an obnoxious Irish flat mate. Commuting for hours on the bus into Dublin City Centre. Stretching my student budget to barely get by.

No vacation could have prepared me for emigrating to Ireland. Making acquaintance with the bureaucracy and the health system, or being stood up by tradesmen repeatedly, put my love for Ireland to the test. There is no harm in reading up on culture, people and economy. But be aware that guide books often play with stereotypes and not all of them are as romantic as portrayed. And whilst you will never be short of a friendly chat in the pub, the "Let's keep in touch" is not always a genuine one.



Less dreaming, more preparing!

To many Germans Ireland is the symbol of unspoiled nature, traditional music and hospitality. During my career in the Irish travel trade I was often asked to include a "Traditional Irish Night", a "Sheep Dog Demonstration" or a "Rural Farm Visit" into the travel itinerary. And whilst those are somewhat part of the Irish culture, they are also very romanticised and one-sided. Great for a 2-weeks holiday, not so much part of the day-to-day when emigrating to Ireland.

When I finalised my plans for emigrating to Ireland, I was well aware of my limitations which were mostly of a financial nature. I had secured a job in Dublin, pursuing my career in Irish tourism. I knew about the risk I was taking, too. Turning my back on a good job and my modern apartment in Hamburg. However, emigrating to Ireland had been on the back of my mind since I had left as a student. I was determined to make it work.

There were a few variables I couldn't plan for. But I was glad I had prepped for those I could. Time, money, language skills. I allowed myself two weeks to find a place to stay before my work contract started. From experience I knew that I would have to be on site to enter the rapid rental game of the tough housing market. Whilst I was under no time pressure and with enough offers available, I had to increase my budget in order

to find an acceptable one-bedroom apartment. (By no means German standard!)

Even though my salary was higher than in Hamburg, I dug into my savings on a monthly basis. Thanks to my German (and English) skills, an unexpected step up the career ladder allowed me to continue my dream, rather than boarding a plane back to Germany.

Know yourself – Adaption & Acceptance



A friend of mine who I used to travel with a lot told me once that she was “too German” to emigrate. She had always been the organised one when we were backpacking together – planning our trips and reading the guide books. She was never fussy about foreign food or basic accommodation. We perfectly complemented each other and were on the same page as globetrotters. But when I emigrated to Ireland, she confessed that she preferred German reliability and standards over living abroad.

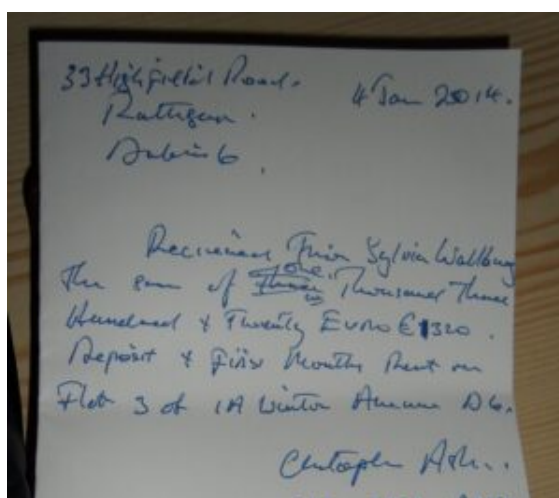
I also lived in Spain for some time. And whilst I am a big fan of the country, language and culture, I learned that there were certain traits and customs I wouldn't want to get used to. If I had only been vacationing in Santiago de Compostela or Salamanca, I would have returned in a heartbeat. No matter how much you feel at home travelling, ask yourself how well you are able and willing to adapt to different circumstances for the rest of your life.

When I first came to Ireland I often caught myself saying:

“This wouldn’t have happened in Germany.”, or “Everything is much more expensive here”. It took me a while to get used to things being different. Over the years I stopped comparing Ireland and Germany altogether. To me an important step of my integration process. Accepting Ireland for what it is with all its ups and downs, and appreciating both.

Practicalities to Consider

Job & Accommodation



Receipt for Apartment Deposit

Foreign natives usually have an advantage on the job market due to their language skills. Ireland is home to many multinational companies, constantly seeking for employees. An up-to-date [LinkedIn Profile](#) helps to create a network and for headhunters to send relevant job offers. Otherwise there are [job search engines](#) to filter by qualifications and region.

Whenever I was looking for accommodation in Ireland (2008, 2014 & 2016), it was difficult. The market is fast-paced and overpriced*, especially in the major cities such as Dublin, Cork and Galway. The standards are catastrophic and rental procedures often unprofessional. You have to be quick once an offer goes [online](#) and ideally bring a cash deposit to the viewing for the landlord to consider you. [Buying a property](#)

might be worth looking into, but is not any easier or cheaper.

Health Insurance

Ireland has no compulsory health insurance like Germany for example. Private providers like VHI or Laya offer health plans to pay privately every month. Some big companies offer health insurance, but this is not a standard. Costs for health insurance depend on the cover, age entered and pre-conditions. I lived without a private health insurance in Ireland for about 4 years and paid for GP and dental visits myself (usually €60 – 80 per visit, consultants are €120 – €150).

Children up to 8 years of age have free [health care](#), but can also be added to a family plan in order to avoid waiting times for public treatments etc. I availed of the public maternity scheme despite longer waiting hours to see the consultant and sharing a room with up to seven women plus babies. Nevertheless, my experience after three deliveries and aftercare in the Coombe Hospital are throughout positive.

Early Childcare & Irish School System

Another hot topic when it comes to emigrating to Ireland (especially from Germany) is childcare. As opposed to Germany, all pre-school childcare in Ireland is private and hence, expensive. Despite the enormous fees of up to €1500 per month for a full-day crèche, spaces are limited. Parents already need to apply during pregnancy and are still not guaranteed a space. Alternatives are childminders or nannies which might be slightly easier to find, but at no lower cost.

The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) is a free (or subsidised) programme that children can avail of from the age of three. We received three hours per day of state-paid childcare for our children from the age of three to five in an outdoor Montessori (usually 9 to 12 in the morning). From there they transitioned into Primary School which is free of charge and goes up to the age of twelve or thirteen

respectively. Secondary School finishes with the Leaving Certificate at the age of 18 .

Quite a few people come to Ireland to practise homeschooling. I personally like the [Irish education system](#). Easing children into out-of-home childcare from the age of three suits us. So does the school start with Junior and Senior Infants which focuses on the learning of basic and social skills in a flexible and interactive environment. We chose a school with a Catholic ethos and a uniform over the non-denominational Educate Together.



Kitchen in my
Apt. 2014

Emigrating to Ireland – yes or no?

Would I encourage people to emigrate to Ireland today? Yes and no. No one could have stopped me from following my dream. And I appreciated every encouragement I could get. If it is meant to happen, there will be a way.

There is also no denying the challenging circumstances, especially when it comes to affordable living. Thoroughly evaluating your possibilities and resources rather than acting on a gut feeling is what I would have said then and is even more valid now.

***At the moment the average rent per month in Dublin is almost**

40% higher than in [Munich](#) and 70% higher than in [Berlin](#).

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Our Christmas in Ireland



It is the 10th year John and I have been decorating together for Christmas in Ireland. Well, he is decorating and I get veto rights. He loves Christmas and is always super excited when it is time to get out the decorations. The more colourful the better. I would prefer a more natural, red and green colour scheme. I like the idea of it being based on red apples

hung on an evergreen tree to teach the story of Adam & Eve before people could read.

However John and the kids overrule me every year. So flashy lights and tinsel it is. In the end all that matters is the sparkle in the children's eyes. I gladly have our house looking like a landing strip in return. At least I managed to ban John's 1970's Christmas streamers [when we moved into our house](#). Apart from that we compromise – like in every good

marriage and in favour of the festive spirit.



Christmas is where Home is

I have always been traditional when it comes to Christmas. As a child I was very particular of how to celebrate Christmas. Just with family, no changes. My sister and I used to decorate the tree in the morning of Christmas Eve with Russian fairy tales playing in the background. Hot chocolate in the afternoon after a walk through the winter wonderland forest. My grandparents brought us to Christmas Mass before dinner where I mostly enjoyed standing up for the singing as it was freezing cold on the pews. We would then come home to a cosy Christmas room, followed by dinner and a performance for Santa Claus before receiving our gifts.

Well before I spent my first Christmas in Ireland, our family traditions changed. Some changes were big and inevitable like celebrating Christmas without my grandparents. Others were small like the Christmas tree being in a different corner of the room, or my favourite ornament getting broken. As much as I tried to hold on to the Christmas of my childhood, there was no point in making cookies without granny or replacing my favourite decoration. The magic had somewhat disappeared.

It didn't go down without a dispute when I announced that I wanted to celebrate Christmas in Ireland from now on. I, who had always insisted on celebrating Christmas the same way each year, broke the family tradition after all. But when John and I were about to have children of our own, I felt it was time

to establish *our* family traditions.



What Christmas is about

Eight years in we have a good few family traditions ourselves. I took up my granny's job of filling our own advent calendars for the kids which wasn't as popular when I came to celebrate Christmas in Ireland at first. I still remember the smell of oranges and German lebkuchen in the little bags that sweetened up the waiting time for me and motivated me to get out of bed on cold winter mornings.

It is important to us that our kids what we are waiting for in Advent and why we celebrate Christmas. For many families in Ireland it is about an abundance of gifts, elves and an expensive visit to the Santa Grotto. We are proud of the fact that our children know the Christmas story and enjoy playing with our nativity scene. Our clay Baby Jesus starts his journey to 'Bethlehem' at the beginning of December, all the



way through the house. He usually takes a few tumbles off ledges and shelves en route, but we successfully mend him each time. The youngest member of the family gets to put him into the crib on Christmas Day. For us a more genuine alternative to the Elf on the Shelf.

On 1st Advent we get our tree and the kids have free reign decorating it. We make sure soft and non-breakable stuff goes

at the bottom though, and John's ornaments with the original sweets from the 1980's at the top to avoid a trip to the A&E with food poisoning over the holidays.

Christmas in Ireland: Charades & Panto

Of course Christmas is about presents, waking up to a half empty glass of milk, cookie crumbles and a gnawed carrot, too. Unlike in Germany we do gifts on the morning of 25th. This way the children get to play with their toys during the day rather than sitting up all night on Christmas Eve. (The lack of sleep might be the same due to the early rise on Christmas morning though.)

After mass John is getting straight back into food preparations. Every year he is making a feast of turkey, ham and a gorgeous homemade chocolate mousse. We have Christmas crackers with silly toys and jokes, and charades of course! No Christmas in Ireland without charades! Whether you are at your company's Christmas party or at your in-laws, be ready and read up on movie classics and celebrities beforehand!

The Christmas Magic

Obviously we can't predict which part of Christmas will make it into the treasured childhood memories. It could be the tiny toy cars our son still remembers from his very first advent calendar. Or our spontaneous Family Christmas Play we put on during the Corona lockdown. Maybe our annual trip into Dublin City to see the Christmas lights and the very funny, typically Irish [Panto](#).

We won't know until our children try to bring back the Christmas magic for theirs. Having children, and making their eyes sparkle every year, certainly brought back the Christmas magic for me.



What is it with the Germans? A Holiday Review

No Foamed Lattes and Cash Only!

“We only open at half twelve”, the woman emerging from the shut kiosk replies harshly. Even though the connected restaurant has just sent me over to get my coffee-to-go here. Awkwardly I check the time on my phone, balancing the baby in my arms. I wait the three minutes to opening time and eventually order my coffee. “No lids or card payment”, she

says, as she hands me a small paper cup with black coffee from a percolator. It smells nice and strong and I have to add four plastic containers of coffee cream to make it drinkable. Welcome to Meck Pomm*, I think to myself as I return to our spot by the lake shore of the [Fleesensee](#), waiting for the rest of my family to arrive.



Swimming in Chilly 24 Degrees

The surface of the water is smooth. Just once in a while tiny waves ripple towards the edge when paddle boats pull into the small marina. Ducks and seagulls bob up and down in the water, seemingly enjoying the free ride. I dip my feet into the shallow water, sand squishing through my toes. Behind me, the beach promenade is slowly coming to life. Restaurants are busy taking in deliveries and some joggers are trying to get ahead of the big heat. Back home in Ireland we are spoilt with gorgeous beaches at our doorstep, but not with 24 degrees at 10 in the morning and a water temperature of 23 degrees. Germans don't even bother showing up for a swim at 'chilly' 24 degrees, I was told.



Tourism Hot Spot...

When I walk with the buggy down to the beach again the next day, I notice the well-tended farm-style houses in the red-brick architecture, characteristic for the region. Surrounded by lush gardens and orchards they stick out like gorgeous little islands among the clean, almost sterile, holiday rentals that definitely outweigh them. That makes me wonder what it is like to be one of the 520 residents of [Göhren-Lebbin](#), dealing with ca. 450.000 overnight stays a year. Considering it is the end of the season, it almost justifies the brusqueness we have been experiencing by some locals. But does it excuse an above-average amount of retirees wearing neon pink hair dye or T-shirts with dubious prints? I am not sure.





The resort we are staying in has the character of a village onto itself. Consisting of colourful timber-framed houses with self-catering units, restaurants, children's facilities and several adventure playgrounds including water play and a petting zoo. Our apartment on the ground floor is spacious and definitely designed with a family in mind. There is plenty to discover and do for all age groups. Our terrace is facing the fields, lined by a forest in the distance and is a lovely space to unwind. There are kids everywhere on the compound, bustling about on Go-karts or pulled along by their parents in handkarts. We are absolutely comfortable having our 7- and 4-year old roaming around on their own.





...and Unspoilt Nature

Another morning I bring the baby for a walk on the sandy path right behind our apartment. It is hot as I push the buggy through the dust, welcoming every gentle breeze rustling through the trees. I appreciate their shady patches, giving the dirt track an alternating pattern. I truly enjoy those morning walks, focusing on the regular breaths of my sleeping baby, accompanied by the humming of bees. My destination is Kirch Poppentin, a red-brick church from 1882 with its attached cemetery. Surprisingly I don't encounter a single soul, despite of three big hotels based in the neighbourhood. Eventually I meet two well-gearred up cyclists with friendly faces who ask me for directions. Three indicators that they are not local.



English – Nein danke!

For Sunday mass we locate a Catholic church in the nearby town of [Waren](#). When we arrive, the car park is bursting out of its seams. People are welcoming and friendly, but keep their distance once they hear we are speaking English. An older gentleman is brave enough to approach us for a chat, encouraged by the Southern German number plate of our rental car. When I tell him – in German – that we live in Ireland, he nods friendly and swiftly makes his goodbyes.

It surprises me that the region of Fleesensee advertises itself as the largest Golf resort in Northern Europe and yet we stick out as English-speakers everywhere. Even our holiday resort seems to survive on a German-only policy, apart from Reception. I feel for the staff in the shop who had to explain to my husband one morning – using gestures and hand signals – that the pre-ordered chocolate croissants hadn't arrived.

What is it with the Germans?

As we potter through Waren, an old lady with a zimmer frame (but no pink hair dye) peeks into the buggy. I prepare for another shower of compliments on our baby when she tells me assertively that I am to put socks on the poor child. Baffled, I follow her slow movement as she shuffles on without another word. What is it with Germans getting involved in how we handle our kids? Only the other day a parent told our 4-year old to not twist her baby sister's arm when she was playing with her on the beach, and I was standing right beside them. Um, excuse me?



Friendliness in Disguise

On our last day, I stroll down the foresty path to Lake Fleesensee one more time. As I drop into the village store, I open with a comment on the weather as you would when entering a shop in Ireland. Not expecting a huge response, I am all the more surprised when the girl behind the counter pours her heart out to me. When I finally leave, I smile to myself, remembering how curt she was the first day I came in.

Down by the lake I decide to give the woman in the coffee trailer a second chance, too. Judging by her still grim facial expression, I fear to get told off for changing my order half way through. Instead I get a “no problem” and a hint of a smile. Delighted I toddle off with my *Bulette im Brötchen**, excited to introduce this typical German snack to my family.

The Charm of Mecklenburg Vorpommern

I am no stranger to the ‘Nordic charm’ as I would call the ‘friendliness in disguise’ in Mecklenburg Vorpommern. In my

twenties I spent four years in Stralsund, studying Leisure and Tourism Management at the local university. And despite some raised-eyebrow-moments during our vacation, I knew that people weren't intending to be rude. However, having lived in Ireland for over ten years has changed my perception of my fellow countrymen, [to being a tourist in my own country](#).

Fleesensee doesn't strike me as a big international player in the resort business. It rather feels like a rural holiday destination with charming flaws, representing the innate culture it is surrounded by: straight forward and down to earth. I value its authenticity over an all pleasing service industry. Although a few more friendly faces around could do no harm. The all prevelant cash payment adds to the holiday feel and so does not having a stable 4G connection at all times.

The natural beauty of the area and its amenities are great for a fun and activity-filled holiday, complemented by pretty towns with its regional architecture. That is what makes Fleesensee attractive to us as a family of five. The [BEECH Resort Fleesensee](#) is the ideal place to combine all our interests and give each of us their own little space to relax. We will be back for sure!

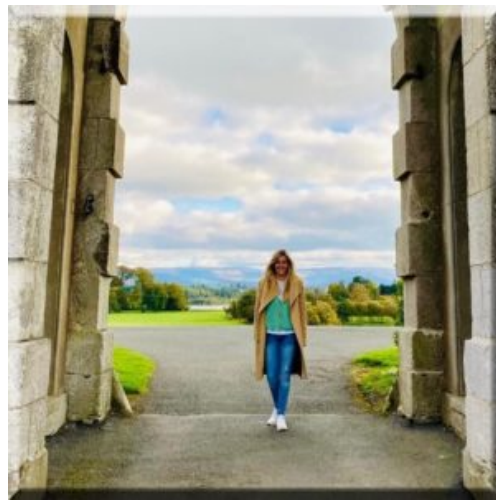


***MeckPomm = Short for Mecklenburg Vorpommern: One of Germany's**

16 federal states. Located in the North East, it was part of the former GDR. Bordering the Baltic Sea it also features extensive lakelands inland.

*Bulette is the name for a meat snack, similar to a burger patty, in Berlin and the North East of Germany (from French "small ball"). It is usually served in a roll. Its name varies depen.

**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.

Greystones on 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](#).

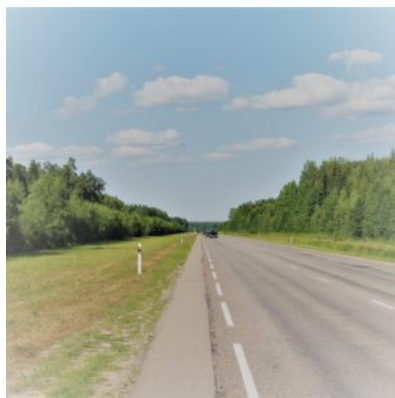
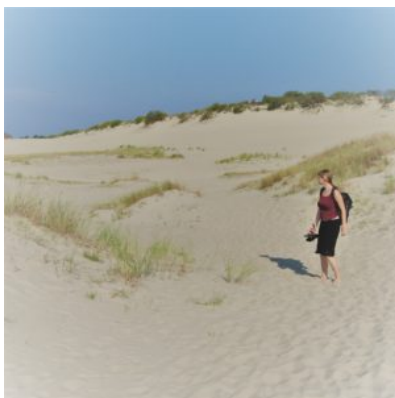
I agree with Kris that the way we see things changes over time as we get older and hopefully wiser. "Our philosophy of life is probably based on our beliefs, moral code, life experience and expectations. I would say – being authentic and accepting everything else as a part of my own development and growth 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.

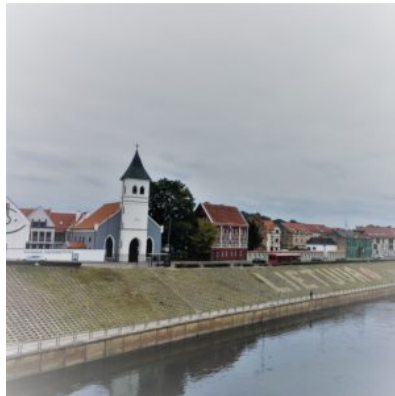
The endangered strip of golden sand is a UNESCO World Heritage site and rightly so. I consider myself lucky having seen it and having been able to walk on this unique natural site that stretches from 400m in width up to almost 4km. (We were told the dunes might be closed off to visitors in future in 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.”

How on Earth could you leave Mauritius?



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

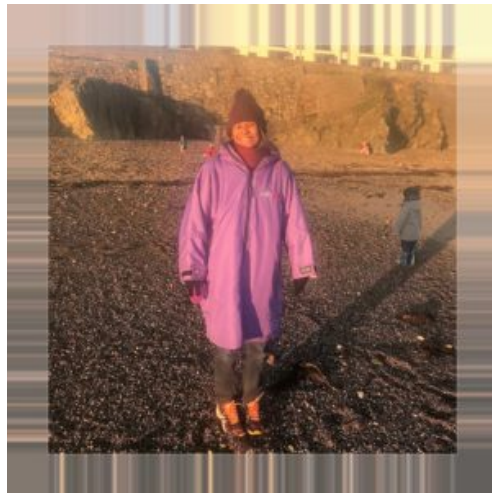
It would be a short story if this ‘happily ever after’ was actually the end of it. Instead Farzana, her husband and their meanwhile 2 children lived in Dublin for 8 years, before they decided to go back to Mauritius. Understandably, they wanted to be closer to their families, now that they had one on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

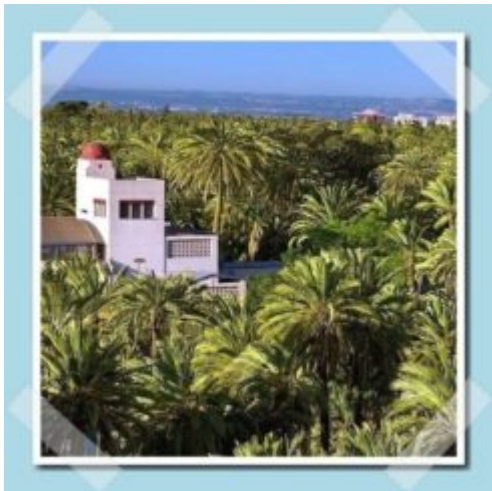
To answer the question from above – if Ireland hadn't completely blown me away afterwards, I might have ended up emigrating to Spain instead of Ireland.

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.

Who are the Foreigners of Greystones?

“Foreigners of Greystones“ is my first journalistic project. So far my blogging has revolved around myself and my life as a German expat mammy in Ireland. Recently I have experimented with a new post format featuring my [tree photography](#) and [abandoned places](#). Besides writing, these are two other interests of mine. I would like to focus now on other people and I am really excited to share their stories.

The Blow-Ins

As the title already suggests, it is going to be about the “Foreigners of [Greystones](#)“ like myself. Why did they choose Ireland and what brought them to Greystones? A topic that has always interested me. I am delighted that quite a few

“Greystonians” from different countries have agreed to take part in my little project.

Whilst we all have a very different cultural background, we met through our kids (well, most of us) which gives us a connection. It is not surprising that we were drawn to the [family-friendly community](#) of Greystones, an attractive seaside town in [County Wicklow](#), about half an hour south of [Dublin](#) .

A Bit about Greystones

Before we moved to Greystones in 2016, I had been here maybe twice before. To me it was always the destination of the [Cliff Walk](#) that you can take from Bray over the summit into the village of Greystones. On the way, with the sea always to your left, you have a great view over the Dublin Bay. Greystones and Bray are both easy to reach on the [DART](#) which I have taken advantage of many times before, while staying in Dublin as a tourist. There are [gorgeous beaches in and around Dublin](#) just a short train ride away from the buzzing city centre.

Main (Street) Attraction

The only place in Greystones that I remembered before we bought our house was the [Gastro Pub Burnaby](#) on the main street. This was where I had enjoyed a cool cider after finishing the Cliff Walk one day. I was one among many weekend visitors at the time who come out from Dublin in hundreds once the weather is nice. Most of them would rather queue at the [Happy Pear](#) for food though, which is healthy, innovative and above all (inter)nationally famous.

Besides great little restaurants for almost every taste, Greystones main attraction is the beach. Whereas the wind-shielded bay ‘The Cove’ is often quite packed with swimmers and sunbathers, the beach itself has plenty of space to accommodate locals and day visitors alike. The former little fishing Marina is slowly but surely turning into a swanky hot-spot and residential area with modern top-end properties. Nice

for taking a stroll, but a bit too much concrete in my eyes (literally!).

Living where Others go on Vacation

...is what my husband says when we take our weekend walk around Greystones. And there is not much more to add. We have the sea on one side, the mountains and the forest on the other side. With the 501 m high mountain [Great Sugar Loaf](#) in walking distance from the town, we have one of Wicklow's nicest hiking trails right at our doorstep.

The [Wicklow Mountain Nationalpark](#), a pure hiker's paradise, is what the Germans would classify as [typically Irish](#): Green hills, grazing sheep, remote little cottages here and there, waterfalls and mossy trees. The stunning landscape would be reason enough to move to Greystones. On top of that all the facilities and activities for kids makes it a paradise for families too.

Mini-Melting Pot

Who are these people who make up this family-friendly community? You are going to get to know a few of them throughout my blog series "Foreigners of Greystones". They are people who are out and about with their children. Usually they stop for a chat or at least shout a friendly "How are ya?" across the road. I have found the "Foreigners of Greystones" to be outgoing and contributing to social life in whatever way possible. I feel Greystones is a small melting pot of different nationalities. But rather than anonymity it comes with a great sense of togetherness. At least this is how I personally experience it.

Home is where my Heart is

Before we get to my fellow "Foreigners of Greystones", a few words about myself. Most of my story you can find in my [blog articles](#) or in [About me](#). I set foot on Irish ground for the first time in 2008, long before I knew I would end up here for

good in 2014. A lot happened in between and I can now say with certainty, that I won't ever leave this island again (except for visits and travelling of course).

[God, destiny, luck or whatever it may be called](#) brought me here and paved the way so I could stay. I emigrated to Ireland purely based on a gut feeling and the rest just magically worked out. I am not saying that it was always easy, but I definitely had a "helping hand". It was just meant to be.

Why Ireland?

This question I have already thoroughly answered in a [guest blog post with the same title](#) (in German only). Whilst this was about my motives to emigrate to Ireland in the first place, I have now even more reasons to stay: A loving husband, two half-Irish kids (according to my husband 100% Irish) and a [our deam house in one of the most beautiful counties in Ireland](#).

Profession vs. Vocation

It was handy that I already worked in Irish tourism when I was still living in Germany. So I had an easy enough start when I moved to Ireland 6 1/2 years ago starting a job with [a big inbound travel company](#).

A few months after I got an even better offer and moved on to [a smaller agency](#). When [our first child was born](#) I knew instantly that I didn't want to return to my old job. In fact, that there wasn't a job that I would rather do than [being a stay-at-home mom](#). For over 3 years now we are a happy [Home-Office-Family](#) with me doing occassional writing jobs for [my former employer in Germany](#).

Euphoric Recall

I consciously made the decision to move to Ireland because I had fallen in love with the island during a 6-months internship as a student. Hence I didn't want to get away from

[my home country](#), but just be in Ireland. Also, I didn't do it *for* someone or because of a job. I was as free as a bird at the time like never in my life before. I believe that this has a lot to do with me settling in here so well. Because no matter what happens, *I* wanted to be in Ireland for myself and no other reason.

I can't deny though that I did struggle at the beginning, especially with meeting people and locals in particular. However I knew from experience that this would have happened to me in any other new place and I therefore had [to overcome the inner temptation to isolate and get out and actively do something](#).

Questions answered

People who are thinking about emigrating often have the same questions in mind. Therefore I hope that my little series about the "Foreigners of Greystones" is going to be valuable to expats for considering all aspects of their decision.

On the other hand I am sure that the locals of Greystones are going to enjoy learning more about some familiar faces they have probably met in town before.

Last but not least I think it is nice that my family and friends in Germany get to know the people who I spend my day-to-day life with and who have become dear to me in my time abroad.

With regard to myself I have already [interviewed myself](#) a while back and contemplated the question [if I would emigrate to Ireland again](#) on my [Ireland Blog](#).

Coming Soon

Hence we can dive straight into the other "Foreigners of Greystones" starting with my fellow German mammy friend Anja. When we met for the first time we discovered a circumstance that made it even easier for us to get to know each other and

become close friends. What that was and more about Anja you can read in my coming blog post!

If you are of a foreign nationality, live in Greystones and would like to take part in “Foreigners of Greystones”, just [send me a message](#) or leave a comment below. You can also contact me for questions about emigrating or living in Ireland as an expat or (stay-at-home) mom.

I hope you enjoy reading the upcoming articles. Please feel free to share your opinion or add own experiences in the comments!

Welcome to the Home Office

..of the Payne Family

We are in the very lucky position that my husband, our 2 kids and myself are always at home together. Well, some might argue that this is exactly the problem with the [self-isolation](#). However we are coping, because we are used to it. I am not saying that it is always easy. But for us it still is the most suitable way of living. Here is how is our experience as a Home Office family.

Home Office Pro

My husband John is working for an international company with clients and business partners all over the world. He has to adapt his working hours to different time zones. Sometimes he is starting around noon and not finishing until midnight. Or the other way around. Needing to be flexible makes home office the only viable option. For the past 3 years working from home has proven to be the perfect solution for all of us.

Self-Isolation doesn't change our Routine

As long as John has been working from home I have been a [stay-at-home mom](#). Neither of our two kids go into childcare. All together we make a great team. The Corona crisis might shake things up a bit, but it doesn't have a huge impact on our domestic routine.

What a Way to start the Day

When the kids wake up in the morning the four of us are having a bit of family time together. John and I are sipping our coffees while our almost 3-year old is munching his muesli. Meanwhile our daughter is practicing crawling before she is joining the rest of us in bed for cuddles. We prefer that over a formal sit-down breakfast. No hasty getting ready in the morning or rushing anywhere. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Home Office for Future

One reason we get to do that is because John saves about 3 hours commute every day by working from his home office in [Wicklow](#). Not everybody has the privilege to work from home. But when the Corona crisis is over there will be more Home Office workers for sure.

It can be hard to never see any co-workers, but there are a lot of upsides from a family perspective. Instead of being stuck in rush hour traffic day in day out John gets to see the kids a lot and has had a great bond with them right from the start. Despite me being the main child carer during the day, we both rank equally as parents from our kids' perspective.

Family Rules for Working from Home

Instead of stating the more or less obvious Home Office pros and cons I put together some simple family rules that make working from home run smoothly for us.

1. Do not enter!

The home office is off limits for playing. Especially when John is working obviously. As soon as he closes the door, he turns from the jokey cuddly family daddy into a tough business man. Not for us, but for everyone else who is dealing with him in there (ouch!)

Of course this is hard to explain to a toddler. And some days it is harder to follow this rule than others. John knows that I am doing my best, but am not able to keep the noise down all the time. On the other hand, I am aware that especially during important phone calls I have to put all the effort in to keep the kids quiet. With the increase in people working from home during the Corona crisis we have encountered an even higher level of understanding from John's business partners and clients though.

2. Beware of the Cuddle Zone!

The same way the door functions as 'teleporting machine' in Rule #1 when John enters the office, it works the other way around when he comes out. So the minute John sticks his nose out the door, he is likely to be 'attacked' by the little cuddle monsters. In our house every door creaks differently. So no silently sneaking in or out of the office. Nevertheless John crosses lines quite frequently during the day to the delight of the kids which leads us to Rule #3.

3. Work Schedule before Family Routine.

This might *sound* negative. But what it basically means is that we drop everything whenever John has an unexpected break or a cancelled meeting. The kids are delighted when he throws in an extra round of rough play even if it is just for 5 minutes. Especially now with the great weather we all take the opportunity to hang out together in the garden for a bit

before everybody resumes what they were doing beforehand.

4. Leave the Work behind.

A big downside of working from home is that the workplace is just around the corner at all times. So why not quickly nip into the Home Office to answer an email. Or even worse, do it at the dinner table. Therefore this rule is very important to me. I would rather miss out on a family dinner to make sure John gets to finish his work and doesn't look at his phone or computer for the rest of the day.

5. Everybody needs a break.

John doesn't take regular breaks throughout the day. If he was commuting he would at least have the chance to wind down a bit which doesn't normally happen after a day in the Home Office. For a long time Rule #2 caused him to jump into his daddy job straight away. That is why we invented downtime for John after work unless hell is breaking loose.

If hell is breaking loose, even during the day, I ask John for help provided his work permits it. Occasionally he has to rock the baby during a phone conference or our toddler gets to wear the big 'Mickey-Mouse' headset to say hello to the CEO (Editor's note: the 'person' on the screen in the picture is not the CEO!).

6. Last but not least, Exceptions to the Rule.

Whilst above rules have proven themselves to be working for us, there are certainly days when not everything is going according to plan.

On such days the office might turn into a playground with the office chair as a merry-go-round. Or our toddler storms in mid-meeting asking John for a face to be painted on his

plaster*. Quietly playing in the hallway turns into a full-on soccer match. And instead of a peaceful break for John at the end of the day we all settle for some episodes of Peppa Pig together and cuddles on the couch. (*When I ask our son what daddy does for work he says that he has a phone, a computer and pens.)

'Love in Times of Corona'

I can definitely say that our 3-years home office experience is a huge advantage for successfully dealing with this exceptional situation during the self-isolation. Whilst we also feel an impact of the lockdown, especially on our mental health, we don't see it as a challenge on our family life. On the contrary, it brings us even closer together. Hopefully people who are Home Office Beginners will see the upsides to it and manage to cope in a similar positive way.

I cannot help it but say it once more how grateful I am for the way of life we chose, meaning me being a stay-at-home mam and John the sole breadwinner. It might not be (possible) for everyone, but for us it is the perfect solution which gives us another advantage with the current situation too.

Instead of juggling Home Schooling and Home Office (which I consider to be extremely difficult) or disappointment because kids can't go to crèche, nothing has changed for us and everybody is happy at home.

How I keep the children happy at home without big effort or too much screen time, I share in my next blog post. Stay safe until then and make the most of working from home.

How to become the Employee of the Month as a Stay-at-Home-Mom

Numerous times I have been awarded Employee of the Month. It usually is a small ceremony. Few words, big emotions. Sometimes even tears. The last time I dressed up for the occasion but unfortunately someone spilled on my top. No big deal, it happens.

For the last two and a half years a young man has been managing the procedure. In September a sweet little lady joined the committee. Together they monitor me all day long and you never know what's going on in their heads. Sometimes I expect adoration and get shouted at. Other times for no reason at all I receive supportive smiles. They are harsh critics and they don't make a secret out of it. Their expectations are high and occasionally I struggle to meet them. I often have doubts that I am doing my job properly. The more surprised I am when I receive approval for my efforts.

The Challenge

The job itself is popular. Many people want to do it sooner or later. On the other hand you hear a lot of negative things about it. The job description sounds pretty straight forward at first. You'll find out soon enough though that you have to be flexible, able to improvise and multitask. Funny enough these are all skills that I didn't think I had. What I like about it is that I can work from home most of the time. That also means unfortunately that it is not 9 am to 5 pm.

When I took up the challenge in May 2017, I didn't have a clue what to expect. I thought I was well prepared, but in hind sight there was still a lot to worry about. I left my secure office job to jump into something completely new, which I

didn't know if I wanted for the long term. Now I am glad that I had the courage to do it. I couldn't think of anything else that I would rather do. Of course there are days when I am fed up with it all, but I had these in my old job too. So I definitely made the right decision.

More than a Job

By now I am quite passionate about my work and that really helps. Once you got into it, it is hard to go back to a job behind a desk. A very important part of my day-to-day tasks are the people I am dealing with. Different characters and sometimes even multiple personalities in one. This makes it prone to conflicts and it is on me to keep it all under control. This is something I really had to learn. I have always liked a structured and tidy working environment. And this isn't one. You are basically trying to keep the chaos to a minimum most of the time.

My shiny Award

Looks like I am one of those people myself who has a lot of negative things to say about this mysterious job. So I should mention at that stage that the reward I am getting makes all the stress and overtime worthwhile. And I presume it is also time to tell you what this 'Employee-of-the-Month thing' is all about if you haven't already guessed.

Instead of a gold-plated plaque to hang on the wall I receive colourful scribbles on paper. I get handcrafted cards with Thank-you-stamps and random animal stickers on it. Muddy little fingers bring me in daisys from the garden. I get cuddles and hugs, accompanied by heartwarming smiles and loud laughter. After a long day I am served 'homemade', imaginary meals. When I lie exhausted on the couch someone leans his tiny head against my shoulder without saying a word. With sparkling innocent eyes looking at me I get told "Mammy I love you". Then I know that I have the best job in the world and that for two little people I will always be the Employee of

the Months. No shiny award needed.

How child-friendly is Ireland?

(This article is neither referring nor in any way related to the abortion debate. Please check out my blog post [Life is Life](#) on that topic.)

When I moved to Ireland about 4 1/2 years ago this question wasn't relevant to me. Now it is. Though it can no longer affect my decisions, as my little one runs around my feet as I write this. However I am still interested in the topic. In the following article I share my personal experience throughout and after my first pregnancy in Ireland. Starting with the medical care up to child-minding options. Hopefully my evaluation can be of use to those considering having children here. As well as for people with kids thinking about emigrating to Ireland. I am also interested to hear how others feel about parenthood in Ireland.

Medical Care during Pregnancy

The first thing that came to my mind when we were about to have a baby were child-minding costs. When I did a bit of research on that I was shocked. I knew straight away that having a child and pursuing my career at the same time were close to impossible. However I was only at the beginning of my pregnancy at that stage. All that mattered to me then was proper medical care.

I never had any worries about Ireland in regard to medical care. I also didn't know what to expect. I wasn't familiar with the health care for mothers-to-be in my home country Germany either. Coincidentally a friend of mine in Germany was pregnant at the same time. Not only could we exchange our joys and fears, but also compare the quite different health systems.

Shared Maternity Care

Compared to Germany where your GP (gynaecologist) would look after you throughout the whole pregnancy, the maternity care in Ireland is divided between the GP and a maternity clinic of your choice. This has the upside that come D-day (delivery day), you are already familiar with the place where you are going to have your baby. Instead of just getting a show-around, you are in touch with the medical staff in the hospital and know where everything is. No harm in getting a hang of the "labyrinthal" floor plan well before the big day.

Well prepared, theoretically

At the time of my pregnancy I didn't have private health insurance. I could still avail of several public healthcare courses in preparation of birth and parenthood. Apart from the classic Antenatal Class (including a funny nappy challenge for the daddies-to-be), I took part in a physiotherapy course to hear all about the physical joys of childbirth. I felt like an expert myself afterwards. Well, in theory at least.

I was an absolute newbie when it came to small babies. I had never changed a nappy in my life nor minded kids when I was younger. My husband used to mind his nephews and had a clear advantage over me. Anyway, we both attended as many courses as we could. Why not take the opportunity when given.

I am not going to go into much more detail here. But I would like to point out how pleasantly surprised I was about the variety of classes provided by the hospital. From baby safety

to alternative birth methods there was not a thing that wasn't covered in the programmes.

The Midwife is Part of the Deal

The midwife owns a huge part of the prenatal care in Ireland. I didn't have to find one myself (like in Germany) nor did I have to pay extra for her service. During the check-ups in the hospital everything discussed was neatly recorded and there was always enough time for questions to be answered. So even if it wasn't the same midwife every time, I always felt well looked after. I can't really say much about the midwife that was on duty the night I had our son. I am sure she was great, but my mind was kind of focussed on something else I am afraid.

Why reinvent the Wheel...

As soon as I was discharged from hospital, the regional health nurse was informed. She came to the house a couple of days later to check that the baby and I were doing well. She was very supportive. Easing our worries and helping us with questions. In addition to the home visits and being available over the phone, she held a weekly clinic. I proudly told my parents about this great institution they invented in Ireland. My mam smiled and said that they used to have exactly the same service in the GDR and she gladly availed of it as well when I was born. Unfortunately it is not available as standard in Germany anymore. I think this is something which should be reconsidered.

Support when needed

When I heard about a breastfeeding support group for the first time, I thought the name was a bit inappropriate. Support group to me sounded like something you need when you are in trouble. I couldn't possibly think how these two could go together. I know now. Though I was one of the lucky ones who didn't have any difficulties at all with breastfeeding.

I was also lucky that people made it easy for me and even in public I never felt uncomfortable breastfeeding or looked at in a strange way. One time I had to feed in a mall and one of the shop owners brought me a glass of water. I still tell people about this thoughtful and kind gesture.

First Child, what now

I was convinced I wasn't the type for "mammy friendships". And for sure I wasn't going to have coffees after going for a walk in a convoy of baby buggies. Sure as hell I was never ever going to exchange recipes for sugar free baby muffins. I was wrong. I am now part of a nice and small group of mummies and their cute little babies. And yes, we do talk about healthy cooking and all the other stuff I thought I never would be interested in. As a stay-at-home parent our weekly meetings have become an important part of my life. And the same way it was recommended to me, I am going to pass it on to other mothers-to-be: Get out and build yourself a "mammy-network".

Clap Hands till Grumpy is gone...

I am not a morning person. I like to start my day slowly and above all quietly. Why on earth do all musical playgroups start before 10 in the morning? I should probably mention that our little one is not exactly a morning person either. We don't know if it is genetic or just rubbed off. Anyway, when I open the blinds before 8 a.m. all I get is a dissatisfied grunt. With the cuddly toy on his face to shield it from the incoming light, he rolls over in disbelief wondering what made me come in so early. He should know by now though that Thursday is playgroup time and we all have to make sacrifices to attend. At the latest when my mammy-friend and her always smiling daughter are waiting for us at the gate, we both overcome our morning grumpiness and are ready to clap along.

Let me entertain you

There are a good few playgroups and activities for kids of

several age groups in our area. They are all focussed on community, meeting new people (and the kids each other of course) as well as exchange of information (such as healthy cooking recipes). The organisers – some of them volunteers – are very enthusiastic and welcoming. I cannot speak for all of Ireland, but for what I know there is no shortage of mother and toddler activities. Not all of them are for free. Some of them can be rather expensive. In our neighbourhood it is the Church Parish and the town library that host activities for small or no money. Social media is probably the easiest way to find out what's on in which area. Alternatively, word of mouth (or should I say mothers) has never failed.

Horrendous Childcare Costs

Childcare is probably the most delicate topic when it comes to my initial question "How child-friendly is Ireland?" Only recently I read an article in The Irish Times titled ["High childcare costs keeping women out of workplace."](#) Indeed it is not worthwhile going back to work when the costs for full-time crèche are approximately €1000 per month. When I enquired about childcare when I was still pregnant the lowest offer I got was €950 a month. It came with a significant wait list. The most expensive one was €1650. Another 2 or 3 crèches were somewhere in between.

Career vs. Full-time Parenting

To us it became clear very quickly that I would put my career on hold whilst minding the baby. Apart from personal reasons it was financially and logistically absolutely not viable for me to go back to work. I think I am not an exception among women with a low or medium income. In order to drop off my child at the crèche and pick him up on time I would have needed to work less than full-time. The monthly ticket for the commute would come out of my already reduced salary. To be able to spend the little time left with my son, we might have hired a cleaner for the house – extra costs again. At the end

of the month I would have worked for the childcare costs and some pocket money at the cost of being away from my son for over 40 hours a week. To us this was a quite simple equation.

Demand for Cheaper Alternatives

However, some people might not want to give up their careers or simply need the extra money, no matter how little it may be. And obviously they want to know their child is in safe hands while they are working. I have heard quite a lot of grandparents or other family members taking over the role of a full-time carer for the child. Also au pairs and private childminders are a more reasonable alternative compared to a crèche. Nevertheless, it seems to become more and more obvious that women drop out of the workforce due to the above mentioned reasons.

It's getting (slightly) better

With older children, the financial outlook regarding childcare is slightly more positive. From 3 years of age children are entitled to a state-funded preschool place with the [ECCE programme](#). However it doesn't help the mother to re-integrate into work life since it only covers mornings from 9 am – 12. Whilst primary education starting at 4 or 5 years of age is free, there are costs that parents have to face during that time. The average cost for a primary school kid in 2018 is €830 per year (Source: [Zurich.ie](#)). For a child in secondary school an average annual cost of €1,495 has to be covered by the parents (Source: [Zurich.ie](#)).

Childcare or Caring for your Child?

I think we can all agree that the maternity support in Ireland is pretty decent. So Ireland ticks the box regarding child-friendliness in that regard. It looks slightly different when it comes to costs for childcare. Does that mean affordable childcare would make Ireland more child-friendly? I disagree. Me staying at home with our little one only has upsides for

both of us. We get to spend precious time together. I am there for his first big milestones. I can teach him things the way I want to. I can comfort him when he is upset. I think this is the best for our son. The first 3 years of his life, that are financially not worthwhile for me going back to work, are also the most significant in our child's development. To be there for him 100% during that time is pretty child-friendly, isn't it?

Dublin's Beautiful Beaches...

...and what they mean to me

Well before I was roaming Dublin's beautiful beaches, I ended up living by the water many times. Growing up over four hours away from the nearest sea, it was a privilege attending university with the Baltic Sea at my doorstep. Living in Hamburg afterwards, by the mouth of the river Elbe, and so close to the North Sea was another significant period in my life. A coincidence each time, like my journey that eventually brought me to Ireland.

The Beach that changed my Life

I remember sitting in a hotel room in Dublin on the October bank holiday weekend. That was usually reserved for meeting up with my Dublin girls who I had met when I came to Ireland for the first time in 2008 for a 6-months internship. The five of us had hit it off straight away and had spent the time of our lives together in Dublin. What would have been the fifth anniversary of our reunion, didn't happen for various reasons.



But I needed my annual Ireland fix and had taken the trip on my own. That morning in the hotel room I hit a low, wallowing in self-pity over our busted get-together. I had wandered the city plenty over the past few days and didn't fancy another stroll through drizzly Dublin.

But I certainly did not want to waste my precious last hours in Ireland in a hotel room. Hence I gave myself a kick in the butt and jumped on the Dart before I could talk myself out of it.

No turning back

It only took minutes on the train before the scenery changed from busy office fronts to the most amazing beach promenade. Even in the mist and with the rain drumming against the window, it was beautiful. The last time I had been to Killiney Beach, it was warm and sunny, nothing like this day. But still, the prospect of the fresh sea breeze lifted my spirit. I was a bit reluctant to step off the train and into the dampness, but I was here now and nobody else seemed to be. The beach was absolutely deserted and I stood sheltered for a moment, watching the choppy ocean. 'No turning back now', I thought to myself, not knowing how symbolic this would become

for the walk.



For by the end of it the seed of moving to Ireland had been planted. It didn't need a pleasant, lighthearted experience surrounded by friends. Just me, out there in inhospitable conditions, on the verge of loneliness, to show me that I can do it. I could emigrate to Ireland and be happy, despite rough waters and in the pourings of rain. All I needed was a kick in the butt.

Collecting Shells and Memories

It didn't take me long to put my plan into action. Back home I applied for just one job in Dublin. Two weeks later I flew over for an interview. And by November I had decided that I was going to leave Germany for good and follow my heart to Ireland. As all new beginnings it was challenging. But once I was in Ireland, everything fell into place. And here I was again, exploring Dublin's beautiful beaches once more.





One of the first beach memories I made as an expat in Ireland was my visit to North Bull Island. Together with a friend I met on my first day in work, I walked the small peninsula in the north of Dublin City. Wrapped up against the icy wind, it was one of those autumn walks that I will treasure forever. And North Bull is a true treasure island indeed. Never in my life have I seen more, bigger and prettier shells than there. I just couldn't resist stuffing my pockets until they were hanging down, heavy with shells and dripping wet. Against the backdrop of the ferry slowly pulling into the harbour, surfers on the water, and kites in the sky, one of my favourites amongst Dublin's beautiful beaches.



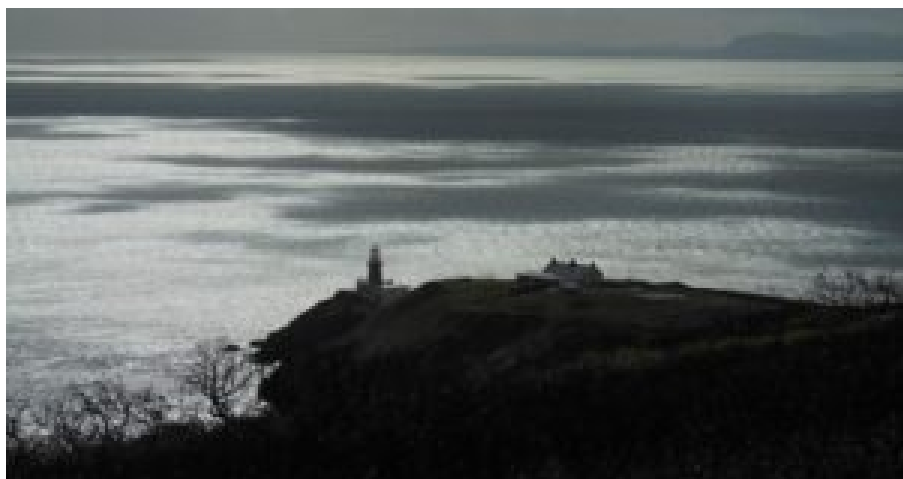
My Slightly Different Hen Party

Within the first year in Ireland, I found happiness. An unexpected step up the career ladder secured my future in expensive Dublin. And even before that I met my soon-to-be husband. We got engaged on our first anniversary and started [planning our wedding](#) soon after. With friends and family coming over from Germany and America, we wanted to show them some of our favourite spots, including Dublin's beautiful beaches. [Howth](#) already held a good few memories for me from previous visits. So we picked the peninsula with its gorgeous seafood restaurants for our rehearsal dinner. Up to then nothing had gone according to plan with our wedding. But the lovely meal in Howth, surrounded by our dearest, helped us to centre ourselves for the big day ahead.





After dinner we rushed up to the Summit with its lighthouse at the tip of the headland, before it disappeared in the dusk. Enjoying one of the most scenic views in Ireland with a good friend by my side was a worthy ending to a wonderful evening. I was bursting with emotions. Excited about getting married the very next day. Nervous what else might go wrong. Proud to have family and friends over to show them my home of choice. And joyful over the turn my life had taken within a few months. "Welcome to your belated hen party, my dear", my friend said as she was giving me a tight hug.



A New Year's Day Tradition

Sandymount is another one of Dublin's beautiful beaches and an iconic one too. At least its two [red and white chimneys](#) are as a substantial part of Dublin's skyline and landmark. Ever since my husband John and I got our feet soaked in ice-cold water on New Year's Day, Sandymount found a place in our memory lane. It was great fun walking through squishy sand, jumping puddles and trickles once the tide was out. But we didn't notice the water slowly creeping up on us. Reluctantly I took off my winter boots and cosy socks as John was already wading through freezing water, laughing.





The photograph of our bare feet on Sandymount Beach on our first New Year's Day together became a well treasured one. So much that we went back on 1st January 2024, re-creating it with the additional feet we had grown in the meantime. Not surrounded by water this time, I was even more hesitant to expose my feet to the wet and cold. But it was worth it for having a keepsake of *that* day on Sandymount Beach too. More aware of the danger of the incoming tide this time, we safely got off the beach. Just in time to watch a coast guard helicopter coming in, and scooping up a family who had not been that lucky.



An Abundance of Beaches

Of course there are many more beautiful beaches in and around Dublin. Portmarnock for example where I have watched spectacular sunsets. Forty Foot in Sandycove is probably the most popular spot for swimming in the Dublin Bay, and the Martello Tower with the James Joyce Museum worth a visit. Skerries in the north of Dublin is great for walks along the promenade, with its little harbour and plenty of cafes and restaurants.

We live in Wicklow now and I can't wait to write about my favourite beaches there. Email me or leave a comment about your favourite beach in Dublin. And subscribe to my Blog for

more personal stories and travel tips!

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Need or Greed? Mass Tourism in Ireland



Two news articles caught my attention and slightly bothered me as a tourism professional living in Ireland:

“According to a survey of the US Magazine Condé Nast Traveler, Dublin was voted 3rd and Galway 6th friendliest city in the world.” (Source: Tourism Ireland, Press Release, August 2016)

“According to the Hotel Reservation Provider HRS, Dublin is the 2nd most expensive place in Europe with regard to accommodation. The average room rate was given with €188 per night which is reflecting the continuously growing demand.” (Source: [Irish Times](#))

Visitor numbers in the first half of 2016 have increased by

14% compared to the same period in 2015. This is an increase of 420.000 within 6 months. (Source: Tourism Ireland, SOAR July 2016.) It is an achievement to be proud of indeed. The economy is back and the recession finally seems to be over.

So why am I concerned?

Every travel workshop I attend, I hear about the latest positive developments in Irish tourism. Industry partners are patting each other on the back, cheering to the upwards trend. Rightly so, as it is their hard work and apparently good marketing that brings more and more visitors to the Green Isle every year. And whilst I am part of this proud crowd, promoting travel to Ireland, I also have my concerns. First and foremost, I am too selfish to share my country of choice with large numbers of tourists, queuing at my favourite places during the summer.

And where are these extra guests are going to stay anyway? Whilst everybody seems to be celebrating increasing visitor numbers, accommodation is limited and already at a record high in cost. We live on an island after all with a limited infrastructure. Of course we can build more hotels, open more visitor centres, invent more exciting attractions to please the rising figures in 2017. But that is exactly what I am concerned about. An unproportionally growing infrastructure solely to accommodate mass tourism in Ireland.



Higher, Faster, Further

I somehow feel like I am in a time loop. Does that not all sound familiar and very much like the construction mania during the Celtic Tiger? Blinded by a potential gain, reasoning seems to go out the window in many places. That makes me think no lesson was learnt during the barely overcome crash of 2008 and its aftermath. There are still unfinished housing estates lying derelict while plans for new hotel developments are already being made again. Whilst demand is high and supply needed, building inconsiderably left, right, and centre is not my idea of a solution.



Pressure from both sides

Lately I am experiencing a very unpleasant shift in the group travel sector that I have been working in for years. The usually positive and very cooperative industry has become a daily struggle with long established business partners and suppliers over availability and fair prices.

Clients on the other hand are extremely price conscious, looking for an authentic Ireland experience at minimum costs. I am more and more disheartened in my job of promoting Ireland as a travel destination, and compromising on quality or service all the time. I find it extremely tiring being under pressure from both sides. This way I am not able to show people the real beauty of Ireland as I have come to experience it, nor to sustain positive working relationships with fellow

tourism providers.

What Ireland is about

Despite poor quality food and mass tourism in group hotels, visitor numbers to Ireland are sky-rocketing. The country is ranking high in friendliness and hospitality. So nothing has changed, has it? My husband, born and bred in Dublin, believes otherwise. "People hardly engage in chit-chats in shops anymore or have time for a bit of a banter in the streets", he finds.



Everything has become so fast-paced and even I roll my eyes when people are taking too long at the check-out in the shop. The other day a woman almost fainted on the bus and got off at the next stop. No one – including myself – felt obliged to assist her. Especially in Dublin, crowds are rushing past each other, head down, ear phones in. Definitely not the positive vibes and easy-going lifestyle the Irish are known for. And after only a few years of living in Ireland, I might have become part of this homogeneous mass of Dubliners minding their own business myself. Surely this not how the Irish capital defends its title as 3rd friendliest city in the world.

Not what I came for, this is why I leave



I still appreciate the Irish way of life. Otherwise I wouldn't have [moved here three years ago](#). And because Ireland is going to be my forever home, I feel our 'relationship' can handle some criticism. And whilst I do enjoy the cosmopolitan atmosphere in Dublin and all the hustle and bustle, I prefer rural Ireland whenever I want to experience true "Irishness".

Mass tourism is not an appropriate way of exploring Ireland. To travel Ireland you need time. Time to stop in places that originally weren't on your itinerary. Time to make alternative plans in case the rain does not stop for days. You need time to talk to locals, and to listen to their stories.

Mass tourism might show you the iconic sites of Ireland. It will give you a staged synopsis of food, culture and tradition in a dense time frame. It is in line with the restless crowds I described above, that don't have time or don't want to take a closer look. But it is not the way to get to know Ireland for what it really has to offer. I truly hope the country won't destroy its real assets and attractions in order to gain from the short-lived mass tourism trend.

Either way I won't be part of the industry anymore. Partly because of what I wrote about in this article. But mainly because I am expecting our first child and will be focusing on a different chapter in my life.

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