

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.

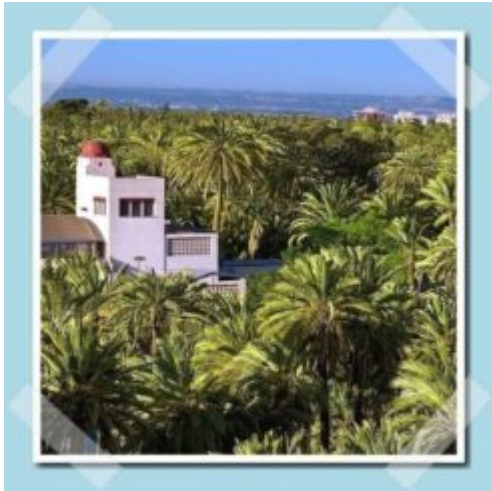
Spanish is not just Spanish

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.

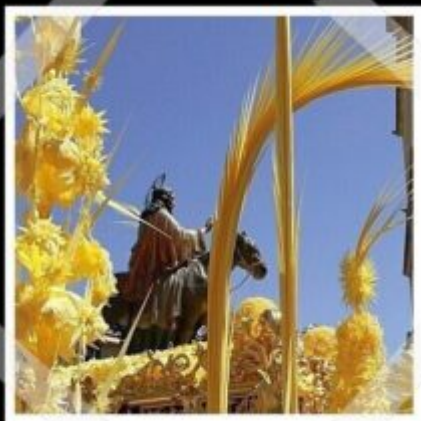
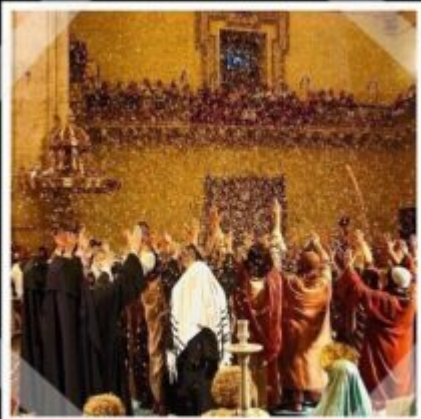
The Mystery of Elche

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 dream 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 occasional 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!