

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.)