



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Ireland is roughly the same size as Sierra Leone and somewhat larger than the U.S. state of West Virginia. The country covers five-sixths of the island of Ireland, which is off the northwest coast of Europe. It shares the island with Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom (UK).

Some say Ireland is like a badly baked pie—crusty around the edges and soggy in the middle. Rugged coastal hills and low mountains surround the island's fertile central plains, numerous lakes, and bogs. No part of the country is more than 70 miles (112 kilometers) from the coast. The Shannon is the longest river.

Snow falls only on a few days in winter and quickly melts because of the moderating effect of the North Atlantic Current; winters are therefore wet and mild. The coldest temperatures average 30 to 40°F (-1 to 4°C). Summers are cool, with average high temperatures ranging between 64 and 68°F (17 to 20°C). The warmest months are July and August. Ireland's dampness, fog, and rain make the country lush and green.

History

Early Peoples and Conversion to Christianity

People have inhabited Ireland for several thousand years. As early as the seventh century BC, the first of several waves of Celts arrived on the island, bringing with them iron tools and organizing the territory into kingdoms that would last for a thousand years. Patricius, a Roman citizen enslaved in Ireland

as a teenager and later canonized as Saint Patrick, returned to Ireland from Britain as a missionary in AD 432, popularizing Christianity and converting many by connecting traditional beliefs with the church's teachings. His work laid the foundation for the Roman Catholic Church's prominent role throughout Irish history.

A pattern of conquest by Europeans shaped Ireland through the Middle Ages. Norse Vikings began raiding the Irish north coast around 795, lured by the wealth of numerous monasteries. These Vikings gradually established seaports in Ireland before conquering larger inland regions and founding Dublin, the city that would later become the capital. The Celts eventually defeated the Vikings in 1014 after more than a century of war, trade, and intermarriage. The next invaders to arrive in Ireland were Anglo-Normans from England and Wales around 1169.

English Rule

The arrival of the English on the island began a difficult relationship between the Irish population and English landowners over land, religion, and autonomy. The Anglo-Normans, also called the "Old English," were awarded the richest lands by the English king in 1171 to solidify English control over the island. Over several centuries, this group became largely integrated into local culture, adopting the language, customs, and religion of the Irish. After Henry VIII renounced Catholicism in 1534, all of the Catholic Church's properties in Ireland were confiscated. His daughter Queen Elizabeth I awarded lands in Ireland to Protestant lords loyal to her, displacing Catholic landowners, including those of English heritage.

An uprising by Irish Catholics in 1641 to retake the

northern region of Ulster resulted in the deaths of as many as 12,000 Protestants. A continuing rebellion by Irish Catholics was effectively ended in 1649 when an English military force led by Oliver Cromwell defeated the largest groups in Dublin and Drogheda; his forces then conducted a brutal campaign across the country over the next few years, killing thousands of civilians and destroying hundreds of churches. By 1695, Irish Catholics were prohibited from owning land, attending church, voting, teaching, or holding public office. These harsh conditions endured until Irish civil rights were restored in 1778. In 1801, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (UK) was established with the Act of Union, which dissolved the Irish parliament and incorporated Protestant Anglo-Irish members into the British parliament.

The Great Potato Famine and Independence

Under the land ownership system implemented by the English, the Irish worked as tenant farmers on lands owned by Protestant Anglo-Irish landlords. Potatoes were a subsistence crop for farmers and their families. When crops failed and farmers were unable to pay the rent, they were often evicted from their tenant farms. Between 1845 and 1852, Ireland was devastated by the Great Potato Famine; at least one million people died, and another three million emigrated to other countries, especially the United States.

After the famine, political conflict intensified due to the widespread misery caused by the combination of the potato crop failure and the land tenure system, spurring several rebellions and continuing to fuel agitation for self-governance in the last half of the 19th century. The Easter Rising of 1916, when Irish nationalists briefly occupied strategic sites in Dublin, set off several years of armed conflict that culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. This treaty established the Irish Free State as an autonomous British dominion and allowed six northern counties with Protestant majorities to remain part of the UK as Northern Ireland. Full independence was achieved with the constitution of 1937, which severed the relationship with the British monarchy; the Republic of Ireland withdrew from the British Commonwealth in 1949.

A Divided Island

The partition of the island and the status of Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland continued to be sources of concern for many Irish after independence. Some groups used violence to support or oppose unification. Militant forces included the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which favored unification, and loyalist, or unionist, Protestant paramilitary groups, including the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which opposed it.

During the 25-year period from 1969 to 1994 known as “The Troubles,” violent conflicts between armed groups and British police and military forces often spilled over the border from Northern Ireland. Sympathies in Ireland were largely with the Catholic population, although there was disapproval in some quarters regarding the use of violence by the IRA and other groups. After numerous false starts, in April 1998, eight political parties and the British and Irish governments reached an agreement on a historic peace accord. The so-called Good Friday Agreement brokered by the United States called for the creation of a local government for Northern Ireland and cross-border cooperation between Dublin and Belfast. All parties agreed to respect the wishes of Northern Ireland's

people. In the years that followed, the physical border between Ireland and Northern Ireland virtually disappeared.

Economic Success and Social Change

Ireland benefitted from joining the European Economic Community (now the European Union) in 1973, transforming from an agricultural economy to an exporter of high-tech goods and services. It experienced rapid economic growth in the 1990s, earning the nickname the Celtic Tiger. Strong growth continued until the 2008 global financial crisis. A European Union (EU) financial assistance program helped the country recover from the severe blow of the crisis, and by 2014, the economy was again growing. Ireland was a key player in the negotiations over the British exit from the EU, because the move affects the open border with Northern Ireland, potentially jeopardizing the success of the Good Friday Agreement.

Political sentiment in Ireland in recent years has become notably more progressive and more willing to disregard the views of the Catholic Church, which many Irish view as discredited by revelations of widespread abuses in the past. In recent years, votes to legalize same-sex marriage and abortion and the election of the country's first gay *taioseach* (prime minister) contradicted the positions of the Church. Sinn Féin, the party associated with the IRA and long considered extremist in Ireland, won the largest number of seats in the 2020 parliamentary election on a platform that included a referendum by 2025 on reunification with Northern Ireland. To prevent Sinn Féin from forming the government, traditional centrist adversaries Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael entered into a coalition for the first time after the 2020 election, in which voters expressed concerns about public services like health care, housing, and security.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Dublin is Ireland's capital and largest city. About one in four people live in Dublin. Other major cities include Cork, Dún Laoghaire, and Limerick. Many Irish have some English ancestry, but today, the majority of the country's population (77 percent) identifies as Irish, or descended from Celtic groups. There is also a strong Norman influence and a small English (Anglo-Irish) minority; non-Irish whites make up around 10 percent of the population. Ireland's population is growing, due primarily to an increase in immigration. The non-European minority is expanding: 3 percent is of Asian descent, another 1 percent is of African descent, and about 3 percent is mixed or unspecified. For much of Ireland's past, emigration was the norm for people seeking employment. Although emigration to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia increased during the global financial crisis, emigration is far less common than it once was.

Travellers (an Indigenous ethnic minority group with its own unique history, traditions, and culture) are estimated to make up 0.6 percent of the population, though many believe their actual numbers to be higher. *Travellers* generally live in mobile camps, separated from the rest of society. The *Traveller* community often faces discrimination, and life

expectancy, education attendance, and income levels of *Travellers* tend to lag far behind those of the rest of the population.

Language

The Irish Gaelic language (also known as Irish) is the officially recognized first language. It is a part of the Celtic family of languages and is related to Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton. Use of Irish Gaelic is limited but increasingly popular. It is spoken on a daily basis in Irish-speaking communities called Gaeltacht and especially in parts of the counties of Kerry, Galway, and Donegal.

English, recognized as Ireland's second language, is spoken by everyone and is the language of instruction in schools; Irish, however, is a required course, and the government has sponsored initiatives to increase fluency. Government documents and road signs are written in both languages. Ireland has a television station that broadcasts all its programs in Irish. *Travellers* speak their own language (called Shelta or Gammon) in addition to English.

Religion

About 68 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and a relatively large number of residents actively practice the religion. Nearly 3 percent belongs to the Anglican Church of Ireland. Roughly 1 percent of the population is Muslim. The remaining 18 percent holds various other beliefs—both Christian and non-Christian—or has no religious affiliation.

Although there is no state church and freedom of religion is guaranteed, the Catholic Church has played a predominant role in Ireland's cultural and political history. Attendance at religious services has been dropping for several decades, and the influence of the Catholic Church is not as strong as it was in the past. In addition to growing secularism, reasons for this decline include a series of investigations in recent years that have revealed rampant sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, as well as abuse, negligence, and deaths at Catholic-run laundries, schools, orphanages, and homes for unmarried pregnant women. Despite opposition from the Catholic Church, divorce, abortion, and same-sex marriage have been legalized in Ireland over the last 25 years.

General Attitudes

The Irish tend to be easygoing, lighthearted, good-humored, polite, and cheerful. They are usually quick-witted and have the ability to laugh at themselves. A general attitude that things will work out in the end affects their daily lives. The pace of life is somewhat influenced by the old maxim “When God made time, he made plenty of it.” The Irish word *craic* (CRAK) means “fun” or “good atmosphere” and expresses an idea that is highly valued by the Irish. Traditions are important, but some groups are calling for social and political liberalization, including greater tolerance for nontraditional lifestyles.

Traditional Irish values include having a good education and a secure job, owning a home, and possessing a good sense of humor. In recent years, tensions have grown between the traditional relaxed attitude of the Irish and the capitalistic urge to earn more. However, material goods still do not top

the list of Irish priorities.

Individualism is admired, but aggressiveness, arrogance, and fanaticism are not. The Irish avoid personal confrontation; they rarely say “no” to a person's face but communicate it in a different way. Most Irish resent outside criticism of their society or politics. Many Irish consider it important to be politically neutral. For example, Ireland did not participate in World War II.

Because Ireland and Northern Ireland share a common cultural heritage, much is similar. The differences have their roots in centuries-old conflicts over exploitation, politics, and religion.

Personal Appearance

European fashions are most common, although people also incorporate Irish styles. For example, traditional earth tones and warm colors are popular in Ireland. Sweaters and other woolen items are common because of the cooler climate. Fine-quality tweeds and linens are produced in Ireland. Casual dress is acceptable in most situations, but attire worn in public is generally conservative and shorts are uncommon. Light rainwear is necessary for anyone living or traveling in Ireland.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

The Irish may shake hands when being introduced or when greeting a friend or associate. Close friends may kiss on the cheek when meeting. Women kiss both male and female friends, while men kiss only female friends. Rural Irish greet each other when passing on the street, even if not acquainted, but urban residents reserve such greetings for neighbors and people they know.

English phrases such as *Hello* and *How are you?* are used throughout the country. Depending on the situation, the Irish may say *Good morning*, *Good evening*, *Hello*, and so on. A typical Irish-language greeting is *Dia Dhuit* (God to you), to which the response is *Dia is Muire duit* (God and Mary to you). *Slán* (meaning “safe”) is used for good-bye. The more formal farewell is *Slán agus Beannacht* (Safe and blessed).

When addressing friends, relatives, and acquaintances, the Irish generally use first names. Titles (*Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, *Miss*, *Dr.*) and last names are used formally or with people of higher status.

Gestures

The Irish do not use hand gestures excessively during conversation, but neither do they keep hands entirely still—some gesticulation is common.

The Irish value politeness and generally do not push each other (even if in a hurry), cut in lines, eat on the street (or on the run), comb hair in public, or otherwise offend those around them. If one breaches social norms, apologies are usually in order.

People generally hold the door for someone coming in behind them. It is also common for people to give up a seat on a bus or train so that a pregnant woman or elderly person may

sit down. It is considered polite to thank a bus driver when exiting the bus. Drivers on quiet country roads usually acknowledge one another with a small wave.

Some common Irish gestures stem from the country's strong Roman Catholic tradition. Many homes keep a holy water font beside the front door, and it is customary for people to dip their fingers in it and then bless themselves as they leave the house. Older people often make the sign of the cross when passing a church, a funeral procession, or a cemetery, or when an ambulance passes with its sirens on.

Visiting

The Irish are generally warm and hospitable. They often spend time together in pubs (public houses) or invite others to their home for dinner. Pubs serve more than just alcohol; they are prized for their food and atmosphere. People are allowed to go to pubs before they reach the legal drinking age, and Irish of all ages like to get out and gather for conversation there. Some say conversation is the national pastime. Many pubs feature folk music as entertainment. People generally take turns paying for a round of drinks for their group. Not paying for drinks when it is “your round” is considered extremely rude.

Visiting in the home is much more common during holidays, especially between Christmas and New Year's Day. Parties are also popular during other holidays. *Calling by* (visiting) is a common custom. It stems from the tradition of gathering groups of people together by going from house to house. In rural areas, stays are usually longer and more informal. Guests are always offered tea or coffee. If it is *teatime* (dinnertime), visitors are invited to stay for dinner. It is polite to take a gift to someone if overnight accommodations are provided.

Eating

The Irish tend to eat three meals a day, with the main meal in the evening. When possible, families sit down together for meals. Supper, the final meal of the day, often is served later in the evening.

Sunday dinners with extended family are a common tradition. The Irish eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Table manners are important, and guests are expected to take care not to make a mess eating. Loud eating noises, such as slurping and lip smacking, are not acceptable at the table.

Many types of restaurants, including U.S. fast food, are found in Ireland. Traditional foods are often served in pubs. Tipping is not customary but is becoming more common in high-end restaurants.

LIFESTYLE

Family Structure

Family cohesiveness is very important in Ireland. When work or study takes a family member to distant parts of Ireland or to other countries, he or she makes a great effort to return home as often as possible—especially for Christmas. In the

past, extended families often lived near one another, but this arrangement is becoming less common today.

The average family has two children. The number of single-parent families has increased in recent years. Stigmas associated with divorce and having children out of wedlock are nearly nonexistent in today's Ireland, and abortion was legalized in 2018. Many attribute these changes to the Catholic Church's waning influence on society.

Parents and Children

Children generally live with their parents until they leave to attend university, move in with a partner, or become financially independent enough to pay for their own apartment. In rural areas, children often leave home at 18 or 19 to attend universities or look for jobs in bigger cities. In urban areas, particularly Dublin, young people commonly live at home longer, as housing prices are prohibitively high for many to move out. Adult children living with their parents are generally expected to contribute financially to the household, though in many cases the amount is quite small.

Adult children care for their aging parents, either by caring for them themselves or arranging care in a nursing home. While in previous generations, the norm was for elderly parents to move in with their grown children when they could no longer live independently, today nursing homes are an increasingly common option, especially in urban communities. People make an effort to visit their elderly parents in nursing homes as often as possible.

Gender Roles

Due to the high cost of living, often both parents work in order to make ends meet. However, Irish women stay at home to care for the children and household more often than do women in some other European countries. Many younger women are career oriented, and more than half of all adult women are in the workforce. Competitive salaries and support services for women lag behind those for men.

Housing

Modern

Since the second half of the 20th century, bungalows (one-storey structures that can be built relatively cheaply and easily) have been replacing more traditional and (in many people's eyes) more aesthetically pleasing houses. While the Irish sometimes lament this trend, they realize that bungalows provide an opportunity for people to buy their own homes. In many ways, bungalows are a symbol of contemporary middle-class Irish living, and their ubiquity is a sign of Ireland's emergence as a modern nation. Still, aspirations to expand the base of home ownership and showcase modern Ireland are balanced against the desire to retain historic Ireland's beauty and preserve its archaeological heritage.

In suburban areas, housing estates (residential developments where homes are planned and built at the same time) are common and provide a more affordable option to city living, although residents often make long commutes to work in the cities. Ireland's housing and construction market, once seen as the flagship of Ireland's economic progress, was severely damaged during the 2008 economic downturn. As a result, many homes in these *housing estates* were left unfinished.

Traditional

In the Irish countryside, homes are not always clustered in villages. Instead, they are often spread relatively far apart along roads and through fields, giving the landscape a somewhat haphazard look. Traditional thatched-roof cottages can still be seen in some rural areas, but such dwellings are no longer built today.

Ownership

Although many young families rent an apartment (*flat*) or house, most eventually own a home. Home ownership is highly valued, partly because of the country's history of having harsh landlords. Many young families buy homes in "commuter towns" and drive into the cities for work.

Arguments go back and forth as to whether it is now too easy or too difficult to obtain planning permission for building new homes. The rapid growth of cities like Dublin and Galway has led to the sudden development of large suburban areas, where crime is sometimes a problem.

Many families also have resort homes for vacations. Many resort homes are located in the "Sunny South East" region near Waterford and Wexford; some resort homes are found on the southwest coast as well.

Dating and Marriage**Dating and Courtship**

Going to pubs is a popular social activity for people of all ages. Teenagers enjoy going to movies and dancing. They may meet each other at *discos* (clubs for teenagers that do not serve alcohol), school events, or extracurricular activities like sports. The tradition of taking a special date to the graduation ball (similar to the prom in the United States) has developed in the last decade. *Debs* (graduation balls) call for formal suits and dresses, a large meal, and a dance at a local hotel.

Marriage in Society

Couples tend to live together before marrying, although it is rare for cohabiting couples to have children. The average marriage age has steadily increased in recent years. Today, most people marry in their mid- to late thirties. Men generally propose marriage, though women occasionally propose. In 2015, Ireland legalized same-sex marriage.

Weddings

Most couples choose a Catholic wedding. The remainder choose a civil wedding. Ceremonies held in a church consist of two parts: a religious ceremony and the civil component of signing the civil register.

Catholic weddings and some civil weddings are performed in a church and are automatically accepted as legal. Civil weddings may be performed in a registry office. In 2007, it became legal for couples to be married civilly by a registrar in a venue other than the registry office. Now, many people choose venues other than churches and the registry office. Catholic weddings are generally performed as part of a Mass.

After the wedding ceremony, most couples hold a reception. Receptions are usually held in a hotel ballroom and include a formal meal followed by speeches from members of the wedding party (usually, the groom, the best man, and the couple's fathers). The evening usually finishes up with music and dancing.

Divorce

Ireland's constitution prohibited divorce until 1997, when a law passed after the Irish people voted by a margin of 1 percent to legalize it in 1995. The current law permits Irish couples to divorce after four years of separation. Ireland has one of the lowest divorce rates in the European Union (EU).

Life Cycle

Most Irish people—even those who rarely go to church—observe traditional Catholic life cycle rituals. Important events include baptism and confirmation, the celebration of which brings families and friends together.

Birth

Some consider it bad luck to buy a gift for an unborn child. Traditionally, babies were named after their grandparents. This tradition is less common now, though baby boys are still commonly given family names.

Christenings, usually held when the child is about three months old, are important events. After the ceremony, the family often holds a celebration at a restaurant, in a pub, or at their home.

Mothers and fathers are entitled to 26 weeks of parental leave without pay.

Milestones

An important Catholic milestone is receiving the first communion at age eight. Girls wear white dresses, and boys wear formal suits for the occasion. After the ceremony, the child usually visits the homes of relatives and neighbors, who admire the new outfit and give the child a gift (almost always money). This is usually followed by a meal at home or in a local hotel. These rituals are repeated at the child's confirmation five years later, though girls do not wear white to this ceremony.

Other milestones center around education. Important events include the first day of primary school, the first day of secondary school, and leaving home to begin university.

Death

Funerals are occasions for big gatherings. Ceremonies are nearly always religious. In the past, the body was laid out in the family home, and mourning women carried out the *keening* (crying). In rural areas, the body may still be kept at the home, with friends, relatives, and neighbors coming to pay their respects. Tea, sandwiches, and *biscuits* (cookies) are usually served. Someone generally sits up all night with the body; this could be family members, friends, or neighbors.

In urban areas, the body is generally kept at a funeral home, where mourners gather for a somber wake to pay their respects. Friends and neighbors usually help arrange the wake and take care of details that arise. A funeral service is held the day after the wake, followed by the burial.

While cremation is an option in Ireland, the vast majority chooses to be buried. The deceased is generally buried three days after death. After the burial, mourners gather for a more lively time at the family home or a pub, where a drinks and a light meal—perhaps soup and sandwiches—are served and guests reminisce about the deceased.

Diet

As an agricultural country, Ireland produces many fresh vegetables. Fresh dairy products, breads, and seafood are also

widely available. Potatoes are a staple food for the Irish. Since Ireland joined the European Union (EU), a wide variety of fruits have become available.

Traditional Irish dishes are simple and hearty. In addition to Irish cuisine, European dishes are popular. Smoked salmon is considered an Irish specialty, as are Irish stew and Irish lamb. Other local delicacies include *crubeens* (pig feet) and *colcannon* (a cooked mixture of potatoes and cabbage). Tea is the most common drink. Breakfasts usually are large and include such foods as bacon and eggs. The main meats eaten for dinner include chicken, pork, beef, and lamb.

Recreation

Sports

The Irish are sports oriented, and most weekends include some sporting activities for the family or for the individual. Soccer and rugby are popular, and many people follow UK professional teams. Other favorite sports include golfing, cycling, hunting, shooting, and horse racing.

Popular traditional sports include two national pastimes: *hurling* and *Gaelic football*. *Hurling* is played on a soccer-type field with wooden sticks and a small leather ball. The women's version of *hurling* is called *camogie*. *Gaelic football* is played with a round ball and is somewhat of a cross between soccer and basketball. Players can touch the ball with their hands, but they cannot pick it up from the ground. The ball is punched, not thrown, and it can be kicked. Teams score by getting the ball into a net as in soccer, but they can also make points for putting it over the top of the goal.

The Irish enjoy both playing and watching *hurling* and *Gaelic football*. Although no professional teams play either sport, amateur county-based teams compete throughout the country. County members are very loyal to their teams and will often travel to away games. Each September, teams compete in the All Ireland Finals.

Leisure

The Irish enjoy reading, and book clubs have become popular in recent years. People enjoy keeping up with current events, which are a popular topic of conversation. People also enjoy socializing and drinking in pubs.

Sailing is popular among those who can afford to own yachts and sailboats. Fishing is another common recreational activity, with trout and salmon fishing being the most common. Walking and hiking are popular as well, with *hillwalking* clubs active throughout the country. Many families make it a Sunday tradition to go for walks in the countryside.

Vacation

Most families take a vacation each year, the length and destination of which depend on the family's economic means. Low-cost airlines have made foreign destinations (especially those within Europe) more accessible to the average person. People also enjoy vacationing within Ireland, particularly along the coasts.

The Arts

Literature is a major part of Irish culture, and the country has produced many distinguished writers, such as Samuel

Beckett, Seamus Heaney, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and William Butler Yeats. Irish literature is written in Irish Gaelic and English. Much traditional folklore is in Irish Gaelic and records genealogy or tells stories of patron saints, ghosts, and fairies. Ireland's artists and writers have been inspired by the country's mythology and history.

Ireland's musical tradition is thousands of years old. When the native language was suppressed, history was transmitted by songs with historical and patriotic themes. Traditional Irish music, often blended with contemporary forms, is popular around the world. Common instruments include flutes, bagpipes, fiddles, button accordions, concertinas, harps, *bodhráns* (Celtic drums), and penny whistles. Successful modern musicians include U2, Sinéad O'Connor, the Cranberries, Hozier, and the Frames. Many Irish enjoy participating in events or clubs that focus on the arts. They also enjoy handicrafts such as knitting and embroidery.

Holidays

The main public holidays in Ireland are New Year's Day (1 January), Saint Patrick's Day (17 March), Easter (Friday–Monday), Labour Day (1 May), the bank holidays (the first Monday in both June and August and the last Monday in October), Christmas (25 December), and Saint Stephen's Day (26 December).

Christian Holidays

On Saint Patrick's Day, the Irish honor their patron saint by throwing street parades (the largest is in Dublin). However, some people in the United States celebrate the day more fervently than people in Ireland.

Easter is celebrated with a traditional meal and candy eggs. On this day, it is said that the sun dances for joy as it is rising. Traditionally, children were encouraged to get up early to watch the sunrise. A bucket of water was provided so that children could see the sunrise in the reflection on the water instead of looking directly at the sun—and so that parents could lightly disturb the water to make the sun “dance.” While most people are familiar with this tradition, it is no longer widely practiced.

Christmas is the main family and social celebration. Families return home to share a traditional meal of turkey and ham. It is also a popular time for the wealthy to take a “sun” holiday in a warmer climate.

Saint Stephen's Day commemorates the death of the first Christian martyr. Celebrations in Ireland center around a legend that tells of a wren that pointed out Saint Stephen's hiding place to his enemies. Men and boys, called *wrenboys*, celebrate Saint Stephen's Day by carrying around an effigy of a wren and going from house to house singing songs. *Wrenboys* dress in traditional costumes made from straw or in colorful assortments of old clothes. In the northern part of Ireland, they are called *mummers* and go around in the weeks leading up to Christmas rather than on Saint Stephen's Day.

Seasonal Celebrations

The ancient Celts celebrated the beginning of each of the year's seasons. While these celebrations began as pagan holidays, they have since been largely Christianized. However, they still maintain many pagan elements. The

seasonal celebrations are based on the Celtic calendar and, therefore, do not align with the traditional summer and winter solstices.

The beginning of spring (1 February) is marked by Saint Brigid's Day, which is less celebrated today than in the past. On this day, people make Christian crosses out of rushes and straw and eat traditional foods such as *bruitin* (a mixture of mashed potatoes, onions, and milk). The beginning of summer (1 May) is celebrated with the Feast of Bealtaine. The tradition of lighting bonfires on this day survives only in the city of Limerick. In some rural areas, Lughnasa celebrations mark the beginning of fall (1 August) with bonfires and dancing.

The beginning of winter (1 November) is marked by Halloween, which is based on the Celtic holiday Samhain. On Samhain, the Celts believed that the dead were free to walk among the living. Many of today's Halloween traditions—such as costumes, practical jokes, and creatures like witches, ghosts, and goblins—have their origins in ancient Samhain traditions. Children dress up and go house to house asking for candy, while adults often attend parties. *Barm brack* (a fruit cake) is often served. The cake usually has a ring hidden inside it, and whoever finds the ring is said to be getting married within the year.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

Ireland's government is a parliamentary republic and is headed by a popularly elected president, who serves a seven-year term. The president has few executive powers but can exercise considerable influence on national politics. The head of government is called the *Taoiseach* (TEE-shuch) and is essentially a prime minister. The *Taoiseach* is nominated by the House of Representatives and appointed by the president. The cabinet is drawn from members of the legislature.

The bicameral legislature includes the 158-seat *Dáil Éireann* (House of Representatives) and the 60-seat *Seanad Éireann* (Senate). Members of the House are elected through proportional representation at least every five years. Eleven members of the Senate are appointed by the prime minister. The remaining 49 are elected by universities and vocational panels. Members of the Senate serve five-year terms.

Ireland's highest court is the Supreme Court, which helps decide matters of constitutionality. Judges are appointed by the president. For local government purposes, Ireland is divided into 28 counties; 3 cities are on the same administrative level as Ireland's counties. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and so is not considered part of Ireland.

Political Landscape

Traditionally, Ireland's two biggest parties do not offer separate ideologies, but rather evolved from different sides of the Irish Civil War, which was between those who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty and those who opposed

it. The two parties, Fianna Fáil (which opposed the treaty) and Fine Gael (which supported the treaty), are both center-right parties and have been the defining parties of Irish politics since independence. The leftist Sinn Féin is the main opposition party.

A few other political parties hold seats in the legislature as well. Political parties are required to have at least 30 percent of their candidates be women and at least 30 percent be men; parties that do not meet these requirements lose public funding.

Major issues of concern to Ireland's government include Ireland's relationship with the European Union (EU), the status of Northern Ireland, and overcoming economic difficulties caused by the eurozone crisis.

Government and the People

The government respects many freedoms, including the freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and the press. All citizens may vote at age 18. Voter turnout regularly exceeds 60 percent for parliamentary elections, though a significantly lower percentage of voters participate in electing the president.

Economy

Ireland has a small, open economy that was growing rapidly until the global financial crisis of 2008 hit, sending the country into recession. Prior to the recession, Ireland was able to drastically reduce inflation, encourage more exports, and attract foreign investment, especially from high-tech companies. Because of this economic boom, Ireland is sometimes referred to as the Celtic Tiger. In 2010, Ireland accepted a bailout loan of 85 billion euros (about 95 billion dollars) from the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the government used austerity measures to lower what was once one of the world's largest budget deficits. The economy picked up in 2014 and has seen growth since.

Although agriculture was once the main sector of the economy, only 5 percent of the labor force is employed in it today. Instead, a diversified economy now relies more heavily on the services and technology sectors, as well as industries such as textiles, chemicals, machinery, computer hardware and software, and pharmaceuticals. In agriculture, ranching and dairy farming are important. Key crops include potatoes, barley, and wheat. The country is generally self-sufficient in foodstuffs, although fruits and some other items must be imported.

Tourism is a large and growing sector of the economy. Ireland relies heavily on trade, especially with EU countries and the United States. In 2002, the euro replaced Ireland's old currency, the *punt*.

Transportation and Communications

Private transportation is a very common way to get around. Most families have at least one car. Vehicles travel on the left side of the road. Buses are the most common form of public transportation. Government-run and private bus companies provide an efficient way to travel between cities. Dublin has a very efficient bus system. Taxis are regulated by the government. Most

people use them to come home after a night out; if they are shared among two or more passengers, the prices are reasonable. Irish rail systems provide links to major cities, and Dublin has an efficient tram system called the Luas (the Irish word for “speed”). Roads generally are paved and in good condition; however, some infrastructure improvements are needed. Ireland has many airports; the main international airport is located in Dublin.

Although the communications system is small, it is modern and efficient. There are several radio and television stations in Ireland. A variety of daily newspapers are published throughout the country. Freedom of the press is generally respected, though defamation laws hold journalists guilty until proven innocent. Nearly everyone has a cellular phone (called a mobile), and high-speed internet connections are found throughout the country.

Education

Structure and Access

The Irish constitution specifies that parents have the freedom to provide for the education of their children, whether it be in public schools (the most common), in private schools, or in their own homes. But homeschooling is very rare, and parents must meet government requirements to teach their children at home. Schooling is compulsory for 10 years.

Irish children are required to start school at age 6, but some start as early as age 5. Primary school lasts from ages 5 to 12. Secondary school is divided into two cycles: the junior cycle (ages 12 to 15) and the senior cycle (ages 15 to 18). The majority of students complete secondary school. Students may also choose to attend vocational or technical colleges.

The government provides free education in primary and secondary schools and gives substantial aid to post-secondary institutions. Students pay for textbooks and uniforms. Low-income families receive a government subsidy to help with these expenses.

School Life

Most schools are funded by the state and run by the Roman Catholic Church. Though the teaching staff are generally not affiliated with the church, many schools still maintain a Roman Catholic philosophy, with religious artwork on the walls and students studying religion as part of their education. A growing number of schools offer non-religious education, though this is more common at the secondary level than the primary level.

Almost all Irish schools have a uniform, and students address teachers as *Sir* or *Miss*. Local boards composed of parent representatives, teaching staff, and relevant religious authorities manage primary schools. Subjects such as English, Irish, math, science, social studies, music, art, and physical education are common. In secondary school, students take classes in seven or eight different subjects. English, Irish, and math are required. Students choose the remaining four or five subjects based on their interests and what their school offers.

Irish students take two sets of state exams in secondary

school. The Junior Certificate is taken at the end of the junior cycle, at age 15. The results determine which subjects the student should study and at which level. The Leaving Certificate is taken at the end of the senior cycle, at age 18. These results determine students' entry into universities and institutes of technology.

Health

Ireland's population is generally healthy. Well-equipped public medical clinics are located throughout the country. Care in public hospitals is provided at government cost. Many people choose to go to private doctors and facilities to avoid the waiting lists and other inconveniences of the public system. Long-term medical services are free to persons with infectious diseases and to children suffering from certain conditions.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Ireland, 2234 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 462-3939; web site www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa. Irish Tourist Board, web site www.ireland.com/en-us.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Dublin
Population	5,323,991 (rank=121)
Area (sq. mi.)	27,133 (rank=118)
Area (sq. km.)	70,273
Human Development Index	8 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	21 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$102,500
Adult Literacy	NA
Infant Mortality	3.2 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	80 (male); 84 (female)
Currency	Euro