

## Did You Know?

- Around 70 million people worldwide claim Irish ancestry.
- Ireland has fewer people now than it did in the 1840s, when many Irish left the country because of famine and economic problems. Ireland had a population of more than 8 million people in the 1840s, compared to around 5 million now.
- Potatoes were not originally grown in Ireland. They were brought to the area from South America.
- Samuel Beckett, a Nobel Prize–winning Irish writer, wrote one of the world’s shortest plays. A performance of *Breath* lasts only about 35 seconds.
- The University of Dublin, also called Trinity College Dublin, is Ireland’s oldest university and was established in 1592. Irish Catholics were not allowed to attend the school until 1793.
- There are no snakes in Ireland. Legend has it that St. Patrick forced them to leave by beating a drum.
- Until 1997, Ireland’s constitution outlawed divorce.
- Legendary pirate Grace O’Malley ran raids off the west coast of Ireland in the 16th century.
- Between 2008 and 2013, over 300,000 Irish people *emigrated* (moved out of the country). Nearly a quarter of all households have a family member who has *emigrated*.

## Flag

The green on the flag stands for the Gaelic tradition of the original inhabitants of Ireland. The orange represents the followers of William of Orange who settled in Ireland. The conflict between these two traditions grew into a conflict between *nationalists* and *unionists*, with *nationalists* wanting an independent Irish nation and *unionists* supporting the union with Great Britain. The white on the flag represents the peace between these two traditions.



## National Image

The harp is used as a national symbol on all Irish coins, the presidential flag, and all official documents. For centuries, the harp was featured on the unofficial flag of Ireland, which was carried in rebellions against English control. The harp also represents the Irish love of music and storytelling.



## People and Places

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 27,133  
Area (sq. km.): 70,273

The Republic of Ireland covers most of the island of Ireland. It shares the island with Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, and Wales are also part of the UK). The nation is about the same size as Panama, or a little larger than the state of West Virginia. Ireland’s landscape consists of a central plain



surrounded by low mountain ranges and hills located near the coasts, giving it a shape much like a saucer. Rich farmland and pastureland can be found on the central plain. Ireland is dotted with hundreds of lakes.

Irish weather is famously changeable, and Irish people often say they have all four seasons in one day! Winters are wet and mild. Summers are cool. Ireland is often called the Emerald Isle because the dampness, fog, and rain make the country green like an emerald.

## Population

*Population: 4,832,765*

Most Irish live in cities, with more than a third of the population living in the capital city of Dublin or the surrounding areas. Because of today's economic problems, it is difficult to find jobs in Ireland, and many Irish *emigrate* (move away) each year, mainly to the United Kingdom, the United States, or Australia. But in recent years, a growing number of people are also returning to Ireland from other countries to get jobs. Ireland's population is very young, with a third of Irish under the age of 25.

## Language

Irish (also known as Gaelic) is Ireland's national language. Most Irish spoke this language until the early 19th century. Speaking and teaching Irish was discouraged when Ireland came under English rule. Also, the Irish potato famine of the 1840s hit hardest in poor Irish-speaking areas, killing many people and forcing others to leave the country. By the end of the 19th century, most of the population no longer spoke Irish.

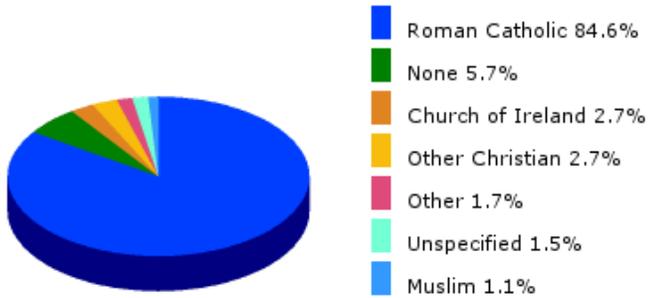
Today, Irish is still in limited use, but students are required to learn it in school, and the popularity of Irish is growing. *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish language schools) are also becoming more and more popular. In these schools, all subjects are taught in Irish. A lot of Irish children and teenagers spend some weeks in the *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking regions), attending Irish colleges during summer holidays. The *Gaeltachts* are mostly along the west coast of the country, and the Irish colleges teach classes in Irish, traditional music, singing, and *ceili* (folk) dancing. English, which is also an official language, is spoken by nearly everyone. Government documents and road signs are written in both Irish and English.



## Can You Say It in Irish?

Hello	<i>Dia dhuit</i>	(JEE-ah GWIT)
Good-bye	<i>Slán agat</i>	(SLAWN AH-gut)
Please	<i>Le do thoil</i>	(LE DE HUL)
Thank you	<i>Go raibh maith agat</i>	(GU RA MAH HA-gut)
Yes	<i>Sea</i>	(shah)
No	<i>Ní hea</i>	(NEE HA)

**Religion**



Source: *The World Factbook 2014. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2014.*

Most Irish are Roman Catholic, and a large number of them actively practice their religion. The Catholic Church has played an important role in Ireland’s history and continues to influence the values of the people and laws of the land. However, attendance at religious services has been dropping, and the influence of the Catholic Church is not as strong as it used to be. Nearly 3 percent of the population belongs to the Anglican Church of Ireland. The rest belong to other churches or are not members of any church.

**History**

**Time Line**

8000 BC	
8000 BC	Ancient tribes who live near the coast occupy Ireland
300s	The Celts conquer Ireland
AD 400	
AD 432	St. Patrick begins preaching Christianity in Ireland
795	The Vikings begin to invade Ireland, raiding monasteries and establishing some of the first towns
	
1100	
1171	King Henry II of England becomes the king of Ireland and forces the people to accept English rule
1300s	The Normans control most of Ireland

1534 King Henry VIII tries to force Irish Catholics to join the Protestant Church; he begins to take away property and freedoms from Irish Catholics



1558 Queen Elizabeth I increases persecution of Irish Catholics



1600

1603 England defeats the last major Gaelic leaders and gains full control of Ireland

1700s The Penal Laws are passed, taking land from Irish Catholics and preventing them from buying property, voting, practicing their religion, and holding public office

1801 The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland is established with the Act of Union

1829 The last of the Penal Laws are *repealed* (ended) under the Catholic Emancipation Act

1840s The Great Potato Famine devastates Ireland and causes more than a million deaths over five years; more than two million Irish move to other countries



1900

1916 The Easter Rising, a revolt against Great Britain's control of Ireland, takes place but is crushed by the British

1921 Ireland is divided into the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland; a civil war begins



1937 The Irish Free State changes its name to Ireland

1949 Ireland becomes independent (the Republic of Ireland), except for six northern counties (Northern Ireland) that remain part of the United Kingdom

1955 Ireland joins the United Nations

1968 Inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States, people in Northern Ireland demanded equal voting rights and an end to discrimination

1969 Attempts by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to force the reunification of Ireland and Northern Ireland are followed by decades of violence

1972 Bloody Sunday occurs on 30 January when 26 unarmed civil rights protesters taking part in a peaceful march in Derry are shot by soldiers of the British Army (SAS)

1973 Ireland joins the European Common Market (which later becomes the European Union)

1990 Mary Robinson becomes the first female president of Ireland



1997 Divorce is legalized in Ireland for the first time

1998 Voters in Ireland and Northern Ireland approve the Good Friday Agreement, an attempt to end the long-standing conflict in Northern Ireland

2000

2002 The *euro* replaces the *punt* as Ireland's currency



2005 The European Union (EU) recognizes Irish as an official language of the EU

2008	Ireland's economy suffers as a result of the global financial crisis
2009	Unemployment reaches a new high; 100,000 people in Dublin protest the government's handling of the economic crisis
2014	President Michael Higgins becomes the first-ever Irish head of state to make an official state visit to the United Kingdom; many see it as a sign that the relationship between the two countries is improving
PRESENT	

## The Celts

One of the earliest groups to settle Ireland was the Celts. They came from the European mainland and settled the island in the fourth century BC. Under Celtic rule, Ireland was divided among many different kingdoms. These different groups often fought wars with each other. But the Celts also made some important contributions to Irish culture. They developed Brehon law, a system of laws to help resolve *disputes* (arguments). Brehon law survived until the 17th century. Also, the Celts had no written language, so the best way to pass on their history and culture was by telling stories about their heroes and the battles they fought. The Irish seem to have inherited a love of storytelling from the Celts.



## English Rule

In 1171, King Henry II of England invaded Ireland and proclaimed himself king of Ireland. This began more than seven hundred years of English influence in Ireland. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the English tried to force Irish Catholics to give up their religion in favor of Protestantism. The English took property away from Irish Catholics in the north and gave it to Scottish and English Protestants. The English passed laws that prevented Catholics from speaking their language, buying property, voting, practicing their religion, and holding public office. The Irish tried to challenge English rule on a number of occasions but were never successful in winning back control of their country. In 1801, the Act of Union made Ireland part of the United Kingdom.



## Potato Famine

In the 1840s, a *blight* (disease) attacked and almost completely destroyed Ireland's potato crop. Potatoes turned black and rotted in the ground. The poor were particularly affected because they depended almost completely on potatoes for their survival. Furthermore, many didn't own their own land. They rented tiny plots. The landowners were often English *absentee* landowners, who did not live locally but in England. The land was managed for them by Irish agents.



The "Great Hunger," as it was called, caused more than a million Irish to die. Many of those who didn't die from hunger were killed by disease. And when the poor couldn't pay their rent, English landowners often destroyed their homes and forced them into the street. Because of the terrible living conditions during this time, more than two million people left Ireland and *emigrated* (moved) to the United States and other countries.

## Struggle for Independence

In 1916, a group of Irish revolutionaries took over the General Post Office and other buildings in Dublin. The rebellion is known as the Easter Rising. The revolutionaries declared Irish independence. But the British government quickly ended the rebellion and executed the leaders. However, this event created an even greater desire for independence among some Irish. Following elections in 1918, a group of elected leaders decided to set up a government in Dublin and once again declared Irish independence. This led to the War of Independence, also known as the Black and Tan War because of the color of the uniforms worn by the British soldiers between 1919 and 1921.

When the war ended, 26 southern counties in Ireland were combined to make the new Irish Free State. Six mainly *unionist* (those who support the union with Great Britain) counties in the north became Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom. Some Irish thought this was a good idea, but others felt strongly that Ireland should be a single independent country. The conflict led to civil war, lasting until 1923. In 1949, the Irish Free State finally broke away completely from the United Kingdom and became the independent Republic of Ireland.

## Conflict over Northern Ireland

The conflict over what should become of Northern Ireland continues to the present day. Many people (called *nationalists*) in Ireland and Northern Ireland want a united Ireland that is entirely independent of the United Kingdom. Others (called *unionists*) are convinced that Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom. Because of centuries of conflict between Ireland and England and between *nationalists* and *unionists*, there are very strong feelings about what should happen. Also, groups on both sides have sometimes used violence to try and get their way. In the process, thousands of people have been killed or injured in shootings and bombings.

The Good Friday Agreement, signed by the British and Irish governments and by *nationalists* and *unionists* in Northern Ireland, has achieved what most Irish people believe and hope is a lasting peace. This was symbolized for many in 2011 when Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain came to Ireland on a state visit and laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance memorial for those who died fighting for Irish freedom.



## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

The Irish love sports. Two popular sports are *hurling* and *Gaelic football*. *Hurling*, which has been played in Ireland for close to two thousand years, is similar to field hockey. Players use wooden sticks to hit a small leather ball. The women's version of *hurling* is called *camogie*. *Gaelic football* is like a cross between soccer and rugby. Players can touch the ball with their hands, but they can't pick it up from the ground. The ball can be punched, kicked, or carried, but not thrown. Teams score by getting the ball between two goalposts, either over or under the crossbar. Handball is another Gaelic sport. It is similar to racquetball but is played without racquets. Players instead strike the ball with their hands. Other popular international sports are soccer, rugby, boxing, swimming, cross country running, cycling, and basketball.



## Holidays

St. Patrick's Day (17 Mar.) is Ireland's national holiday. St. Patrick is the nation's patron saint. He is credited with introducing Christianity to the Irish. St. Patrick's Day features street parades in every city. The largest is in Dublin. In honor of St. Patrick, the Irish wear shamrocks (St. Patrick used the shamrock to remind people of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit) and organize big feasts. Of course, people outside Ireland celebrate St. Patrick's Day as well.



Christmas is an important family and social celebration. Candles are lit and placed on the windowsill, a symbolic welcome to Mary and Joseph since there was no room for them at the inn in Bethlehem. It's also a time when families return home to share a traditional meal of turkey and ham.

Halloween is also very popular in Ireland, and since the holiday originally comes from the Celtic festival of Samhain, you could say the Irish invented it! On Samhain, the Celts believed that the dead were free to walk among the living. On Halloween, Irish children go trick-or-treating. They also play games like bobbing for apples and eat *barm brack* (fruit cake), which is traditionally baked for Halloween. A ring is added to the dough before baking, and tradition says that whoever finds the ring in the slice they eat will be married within the year!

## Food

Potatoes have long been a part of the Irish diet. The Irish still eat more potatoes per person than people in any other country in Europe. Potatoes are used to make chips (which they call *crisps*), french fries (which they call *chips*), cakes, breads, and soups. Along with potatoes, the Irish eat a lot of meat and vegetables. Soda bread, made with buttermilk, is very popular. Fresh dairy products, breads, and seafood are also widely available. Smoked salmon is considered an Irish specialty, as are Irish stew and Irish lamb. Other local favorites are *crubeens* (pig feet) and *colcannon* (a cooked mixture of potatoes and cabbage). Tea is the most common drink. Irish tastes have become more international in the past few years, with pizza, pasta, and Chinese *takeaway* (takeout) becoming more popular.



## Schools

*Adult Literacy: 99%*

Irish kids go to school between the ages of four and fifteen. *Primary* (elementary) schools are usually either boys' schools or girls' schools, but that is starting to change and more schools include both girls and boys. The Catholic Church runs most *primary* schools, but the government decides what will be taught. Irish children study math, reading, writing, science, and music. They must also learn both English and Irish. The government provides free education in *primary* and *secondary* (high) schools. University education is free to those who are able to get in.

Irish *primary* schools typically have classes from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., including one short break and a lunch period. Students usually bring packed lunches. Sports are very important in Irish schools, as are other extracurricular activities such as debate, drama, musicals, and day trips. Students attend *secondary* school from ages 12 to 18, but it is legal to leave school at 15. The Irish *secondary* school examination system is divided into a junior cycle and a senior cycle. The junior cycle is made up of the first three years of *secondary* school, and the senior cycle includes the final two years. Most Irish students have the option of taking a transition year, which is a year in between the junior and senior cycles when students can explore subjects without having the pressure of exams. This year usually includes work experience or a foreign trip.

Irish schools are required by law to be open for a minimum of 167 days at the *secondary* level and 183 days at the *primary* level. This means that Irish schools have very long holidays. Students usually get one week off at Halloween

(midterm break), two weeks at Christmas, one week in February (midterm break), two weeks at Easter, and twelve weeks in the summer for *secondary* schools or eight weeks in the summer for *primary* schools. State exams are held in June, during the first month of the summer holidays for *secondary* schools.

## Life as a Kid

The average Irish family has two children, so most kids have just one brother or sister. Although a lot of Irish families now live in cities and towns, kids still like to visit their relatives in the countryside. Music is an important part of the culture, so many Irish boys and girls grow up learning to play a musical instrument such as the flute, the fiddle, or the piano. Many children also learn Irish dancing and participate in competitions called *Feiseanna*.



Because most Irish people are Catholic, events such as their first Holy Communion and confirmation are important rites of passage for Irish children and usually involve gifts and a family celebration. Most Irish teenagers own a cell phone, called a *mobile* in Ireland. *Mobiles* are extremely popular, and there are more *mobiles* in Ireland than there are people! Irish kids also go to school, play with their friends, watch television, and spend time with their families.

## Society

### Government

*Capital: Dublin*

*Head of State: Pres. Michael D. Higgins*

*Head of Government: PM Enda Kenny*

Ireland has an elected president, but the *Taoiseach* (prime minister) is the one who leads the government. There's also a national parliament (*Oireachtas*). The *Oireachtas* consists of the president and two houses: *Dáil Éireann* (House of Representatives), with 166 elected members, and *Seanad Éireann* (the Senate), with 60 members. A member of *Dáil Éireann* is called a *Teachta Dála*, or TD, and is elected by the people to serve as a deputy. The members of *Seanad Éireann* are called senators. Some are appointed by the government, some are appointed by local authorities, and some are elected by selected members of the public. *Dáil Éireann* decides what Ireland's laws will be. *Seanad Éireann* can only make recommendations. The voting age is 18. Ireland is divided up into 28 counties and three cities. Some Irish refer to Northern Ireland as the "six counties."

### Money and Economy

*Currency: Euro*

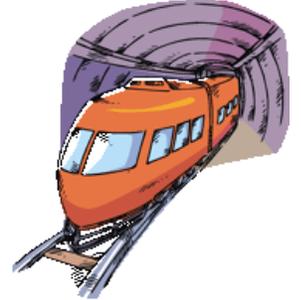
The Irish economy used to depend a lot on farming and ranching, but agriculture plays a smaller role now. The country's major crops include grass, barley, wheat, and oats. Ranchers and dairy farmers are also important to the agriculture sector. Food makes up half of Ireland's *exports* (goods sold to another country), but Ireland's economy now depends much more on industry. Irish companies make things such as medicines, fabrics, software, machines, and food products. Tourism is also significant since several



million visitors travel to Ireland each year. In 2002, the *euro* replaced Ireland's old currency, the *punt*. Ireland was hit hard by the global financial crisis in 2008, and the nation is still struggling to recover and manage its debt.

## Getting Around

Most Irish families have at least one car to help them get around. The Irish drive on the left side of the road, not on the right side like drivers in the United States. When choosing public transportation, most people use the bus because buses go all over the country and are quite cheap. Trains are also a good way to travel, but their use is often limited to larger cities. In Dublin, you can use the rail system, which is called DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transport), or the tram service called LUAS. There is also an inexpensive and convenient self-service bike rental system in Dublin. Forty-four stations are located around the city, and bikes can be rented using a membership card or credit card. Taxis are also available but tend to be expensive.



## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Irish Music

Ireland's musical tradition is thousands of years old and has been important to the development of Irish culture. Irish history was preserved and passed on in song and story. Today, people learn about Irish music at home, at church, and in school. Some of the instruments used in Irish music include flutes, bagpipes, fiddles, button accordions, concertinas, harps, *bodhráns* (Celtic drums), and tin whistles. Even though Ireland is a small country, its music has reached a worldwide audience. Irish folk music is very popular. Also, many people enjoy listening to contemporary Irish musicians like U2, Snow Patrol, and Enya.



### Learn More

Contact the Embassy of Ireland, 2234 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 462-3939; web site [www.embassyofireland.org](http://www.embassyofireland.org). Or contact Tourism Ireland, phone (800) 742-6762; web site [www.ireland.com](http://www.ireland.com).

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# Ireland



Lough (pronounced LOCK) is the Irish word for lake.

No part of the country is more than 70 miles from the coast.

Carrauntoohil is the highest point in Ireland, at 3,415 feet (1,041 m).

The Shannon is Ireland's longest river.

Ireland covers 27,135 square miles, making it somewhat larger than the state of West Virginia.

