IRELAND, EIRE

Location and Size

Ireland is a European island located in the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean and west of Great Britain. Ireland makes up five-sixths of the island. Northern Ireland, which shares a 360 kilometer-long border with Ireland, occupies the other sixth, which is located in the northeastern part of the island. Ireland’s total area is 27,136 square miles (70,280 square kilometers), which is about the size of West Virginia in the United States. Its geographic coordinates are: 53 North, 8 West. Ireland is on Greenwich Mean Time, which is five hours ahead of New York. Clocks are moved ahead one hour for daylight savings between March and October. Dublin, a city located on the eastern coast, is Ireland’s capital. Other major cities include: Cork, Limerick, Waterford, and Galway.

Geography

Ireland is noted for its strategic location between North America and northern Europe. The land is relatively flat with a few hills and mountains. The highest point in Ireland is Carrauntoohill, located in the southwestern part of the country, which reaches a height of 3,415 feet (1041 meters). Approximately 1,400 square kilometers of Ireland’s total area is made up of rivers, lakes, marshes, and peat bogs. Some of Ireland’s lakes are: Lough Derg, Lough Ree, Lough Mask, Lough Corrib, and Lough Neagh, which is the largest lake. The largest river in Ireland is called the Shannon.

Climate

The climate is controlled by the surrounding waters, making summers cool and winters mild. The temperature range is only about 20 degrees F, with an average of 60 degrees F (16 degrees C) during the summers (July and August) and 40 degrees F (6 degrees C) in the wintertime (January and February). Average rainfall is 31 to 47 inches in the flat areas and about 80 inches in the mountainous areas. The majority of the rainfall occurs between September and June. The climate and soil are both very damp, limiting that amount of agricultural production.

History

During the 400's to the 300's B.C., the Celts entered Ireland and quickly and easily defeated the indigenous population. The Celts were mostly pagan, but in 432 A.D., Saint Patrick arrived in Ireland and spread Christianity throughout the entire country. Then, in the 800's, Ireland was
invaded by Vikings. They remained in control until Irish king Brian Boru defeated them in 1014. In 1171, King Henry II of England established ruling over the country. In 1801, Ireland joined Britain in the Act of Union, thus creating the United Kingdom. Ireland was allowed representation in the English Parliament. The potato famine struck in 1845, killing almost one million Irish men and women in a period of less than five years. A large population of Irish began emigrating, especially to the United States. After World War I, the Irish insisted upon their own Parliament, thus declaring independence. The British refused until 1937, when Ireland (or Eire) was finally recognized as an independent country. In 1948, Ireland cut all ties with the British Commonwealth and became a republic.

**Government**

![Ireland’s flag.](image)

Ireland is a republic. It is divided into 26 counties. Their legal system is based on English common law and has an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. The head of state is a president who is elected and serves a seven-year term. The voting age is 18. The current president is Mary McAleese, who was elected on November 11, 1997. There is also a prime minister, who is nominated by the House of Representatives and appointed by the president. The prime minister serves a five-year term. The current prime minister is Bernie Ahern, who was appointed on June 26, 1997. The House of Representatives is divided into two sections: the Dáil Éireann (the lower house), which has 166 members, and the Seanad Éireann (the upper house), which has 60 members.

Ireland is a member of the United Nations, the Common Market, and the Council of Europe.

**Important Dates**

Ireland’s national holiday is Saint Patrick’s Day on March 17th. This day is spent honoring Ireland’s patron saint, Saint Patrick, who established churches throughout Ireland in the 430’s. Another important date is Ireland’s independence day (from the United Kingdom) on December 6, 1921. Other holidays include: Good Friday, Easter Monday, the four Bank Holidays (the first Monday in May, the first Monday in June, the first Monday in August, and the last Monday in October), Christmas Day (December 25), and Saint Stephen’s Day (for Catholics) and Boxing Day (for Protestants) which are both on December 26.

**Population**

The total population in Ireland is approximately 3,633,000. More than one-third of the
population lives within Dublin area. Cork is the second-highest populated city in Ireland. The population growth rate is about 0.38% per year with a birth rate of 13.58 births per 1,000 people per year and a death rate of 8.43 deaths per 1,000 people per year. The population density is about 130 people per square mile, or 50 people per square kilometer. The life expectancy for the total population is 76 years, averaging at 73 years for males and 79 years for females.

Transportation

Ireland has 87,000 kilometers of paved highways, 1,947 kilometers of railways, 9 major ports, and 44 airports (16 of which have paved runways). There are more than 30 merchant marine ships. Cars are fairly common and the Irish drive on the left-hand side of the road. Signs are posted with both miles and kilometers. The national speed limit is 55 miles per hour, or 88 kilometers per hour. There are also many buses, which are slower and cheaper than trains.

Communication

There are over one million telephones, over 1.2 million televisions, and over two million radios in Ireland. There are approximately 46 television broadcast stations and 55 radio broadcast stations.

Currency

The monetary unit in Ireland is called the pound. The pound is often referred to as the “punt” and is abbreviated “P.” The pound is divided into 100 pence. The currency comes in both notes (in 5, 10, 20, and 50 pound denominations) and coins (in 1 pound, and 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 pence denominations). Currently, $1.00 U.S. approximately equals 0.68 pounds. This exchange rate has fluctuated between 0.62 and 0.70 over the past ten years.

Education

Schooling is mandatory for all children ages 5 to 16 in Ireland. Approximately two-thirds of the children continue after age 16. The Department of Education provides a free education for primary, secondary, and university students. Ireland also has private schools, both religious and non-religious, and vocational and technical colleges. The Irish government grants a fair amount of aid to students attending private schools. Ireland has five universities, the largest of which is Trinity College, located in Dublin. Ireland has and excellent literacy rate of 99%. 
Languages

Both English and Irish (a Gaelic dialect) are spoken in Ireland. English is more popular, and Irish is spoken only along the western coast. The Irish-speaking areas are referred to as Gaeltachts. Government documents are written in both English and Irish, and some street signs and television and radio shows are in both languages.

Religions

The majority of Ireland’s population (about 94%) is Roman Catholic, although very few are regular practitioners. 3% is Anglican, and less than 0.05% is Jewish. The remaining population is of other or no religious beliefs. In 1995, the ban on divorce was lifted. Abortions remain illegal in Ireland, though it is currently a big topic of debate.

Agriculture

Agriculture used to be a much more significant factor in Ireland’s economy that it is today. Currently, agriculture accounts for about 8% of Ireland’s total GDP. The main agricultural products include: turnips, barley, potatoes, sugar beets, and wheat. They also have a significant amount of beef and dairy products.

Imports and Exports

Ireland’s main imports, which total about $43.7 billion annually, include: food, animal feed, data processing equipment, industrial machinery, live animals, and animal products. Ireland imports from the United Kingdom (34%), the United States (15%), Germany (6%), and France (6%).

The country exports: chemicals, data processing equipment, industrial machinery, live animals, and animal products. Exports bring in about $60.9 billion annually. Ireland’s exporting partners are the same as its importers: the United Kingdom (24%), the United States (11%), Germany (12%), and France (8%).
Food

The Irish usually consume three meals per day. A typical breakfast includes: bacon or sausage, eggs, fried bread, and coffee or tea. Lunches and dinners usually consist of a variety of fresh produce. Traditional foods are: potato and vegetable stews, soda bread, and roast beef. Fast food is becoming more common in Ireland.

Popular Irish beverages include whiskey, such as Power’s, Paddy’s, and Jameson’s, and dark beers -- served at room temperature.

Landmarks

Popular places to visit in Ireland include:

- the beautiful Wicklow Mountains (81-mile range) located south of Dublin.
- the Irish National Heritage Park in Wexford, which features full-scale, exhibits from Ireland’s history.
- the 12th-century Norman castle in Kilkenny.
- a 13th-century monastery in Ennis built out of limestone.

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