



Alex Learns English Naturally · Episode 01 / 20 · B1–B2 · 16:09

Ireland

Ireland: What Locals See That Visitors Miss

OVERVIEW

Summary

Erin crosses the open border from Donegal into Derry and explains the Ireland that locals carry in names, counties, sport, emigration, humor, language, memory, and peace.

THE STORY AHEAD

In this episode

- crossing the open border from Donegal into Derry
- Derry, Londonderry, place names, and identity
- county pride, Gaelic football, hurling, and local clubs
- emigration, family ties, and belonging
- the Irish pub as a community meeting place
- indirect speech, the word grand, and slagging
- weather, landscape, ruins, and local memory
- the Irish language inside Irish English
- modern immigration and a changing Ireland
- peace and the memory of the old border

Transcript

We crossed from Donegal into Derry without slowing down. No barrier, no guard, no sign large enough to notice. It's the same island, and there really was not much to tell you that we had entered another country, except my father was very quiet. He was never quiet. Not like that.

My father could talk for an hour about a field. And often did. He would tell you who owned it, who owned it before them, who should have owned it, and why the wall on the far side was badly built. He knew every house along the road. "That roof is new. They should never have cut down that tree. Your man there used to play for the county." He could give you the full history of a family after seeing one person standing outside a shop. But when we crossed the border, he said... nothing.

I was fourteen. I looked out of the window and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. The road stayed the same. The sky stayed the same. The fields looked the same. There was no line across the ground. A few miles later, my father started talking again. He said the road was in poor condition. That was all.

For me, it was only a road. For him, there was much more. He remembered soldiers and waiting. He remembered cars being stopped and searched. He remembered when the journey would take much longer because of one small line on a map. I had grown up after most of that was gone. I did not see the border because there was almost nothing left to see. My father saw it because he remembered everything that used to be there. That is Ireland.

You can look at a place and see one thing. A local can look at the same place and see five.

My name is Erin from Alex Learns dot com, and I grew up on this island. If you come here, I would not tell you to ignore the cliffs, the castles, or the green fields you came to see. They are beautiful. But the real Ireland is often in the things you might not notice. There are stories of stories.

Take Derry. Some people call it Derry. Some call it Londonderry. Visitors sometimes think they only need to learn which name is correct. That is not the right question. The name a person uses may tell you something about their family, their politics, their religion, or the community they grew up in. It may also tell you nothing at all. Some people use both names. Some avoid the question. Some call it Stroke City, because of the line between Derry and Londonderry.

Take my name, Erin is a name for Ireland itself, from the Gaelic word Éirinn. That is a very Irish answer to a difficult problem. Make a joke, but do not pretend the problem is not there.

Names matter here. The island is full of places with an English name and an older Irish name beneath it. Sometimes the English name is close to the Irish one. Sometimes it is not close at all. The Irish name may describe a hill, a river, a church, a wood, or a bend in the land. It may tell you what people noticed hundreds of years ago. The island was named by people who knew it closely.

This is one reason Irish people can be very exact about where they are from. We do not only say Ireland. We say Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Cork, Kerry, Tyrone, Galway. And even that may not be exact enough. A person may be from one village, one parish, or one side of a mountain. Two people can live ten miles apart and speak with different accents. They may support different teams. They may have different jokes about each other. They may even disagree about the correct way to make tea. yes, there really is a correct way to make tea. and don't you forget that!

County identity is strong. You see it most clearly in Gaelic football and hurling. To a visitor, it may look like sport. It is sport, of course, but it is also family, place, memory, and pride. The players are from the county they play for. They grow up in local clubs. People remember them as children. Someone watching a final may say, "I taught his mother," or, "His grandfather was a great player."

Before an important match, flags appear everywhere. Houses, shops, tractors, cars, gates, dogs, babies, anything that will stay still long enough. People who have not watched a match all year suddenly become experts. A priest may change the time of Mass because of the game. A man who says he does not care may spend the full match standing in front of the television. If the team loses, nobody speaks for a few minutes. Then everyone explains why it happened. This can continue for months.

But the deeper point is not the match. The club is where children train, parents help, money is raised for local families, and people meet one another. Someone can return after years away and still know where they belong. Belonging. That word matters in Ireland. For a long time, many Irish people had to leave. They went to Britain, America, Australia, and many other places.

Nearly every family had someone away. A brother in London. A sister in New York. A cousin in Sydney. The person left the island, but they did not fully leave the family. Letters came home. Money came home. Later, phone calls came home. At Christmas, people asked who was coming back. At funerals, they asked who could not. Even today, Irish families can be spread across the world.

This is why an Irish person may ask where your family is from. They are not always asking about your nationality. They are trying to place you. Who are your people? What part of the country? What road? What parish? In Ireland, knowing where someone comes from can explain half the conversation. The other half may be explained by the pub.

Visitors often think the Irish pub is mainly about drink. Drink is part of it, certainly. But the pub is also a room where the whole area meets. News comes in through the door. Someone has died. Someone is getting married. A farmer has sold land. A local team has won. A road is closed. A man who left for England thirty years ago is home for the week. A good pub conversation can move from football to politics, from politics to family, and from family to a dog that was famous in the village in 1983. Nobody plans this. It simply happens.

Irish people are often indirect. We do not always say no by saying no. We may say, "I will see." Or, "That could be difficult." Or, "I might leave it for now." This usually means no. And "grand" can mean almost anything. It can mean good. It can mean fine. It can mean not fine, but we are not going to discuss it. It can also mean the conversation is over. You learn the meaning from the face.

Irish humor works in much the same way. People may insult the friends they love most. This is called slagging. A man may say his friend is useless, lazy, badly dressed, and unable to park a car. Then he will drive two hours in the rain to help that same friend move house. The words sound hard. The action tells you the truth. But visitors should be careful. Slagging depends on trust. You need to know the person. You need to know where the line is. Irish humor can be warm, but it can also hide pain. People joke about things because the joke makes the thing easier to carry. This is true of the weather.

We complain about it every day. Too much rain. Too much wind. Not enough sun. Then, if the sun comes out for ten minutes, the whole country changes. People stand outside. Chairs appear. Coats come off. Someone says, "This is the summer." The weather moves quickly here. Rain can cross one field while the sun is still shining on the next. Clouds open, light falls on a green hill, and the sea turns silver. A visitor may stop to take a photograph. A local

may stop too, though they will pretend they are only checking the road.

We are proud of the landscape, but usually we are proud of one part of it. People from Donegal will tell you Donegal is the most beautiful county. People from Kerry will tell you the same about Kerry. People from Cork may tell you Cork is not only the best county, but the true capital of Ireland. Dublin will not take this seriously. Cork will. The island is small, but local pride is large. A person may love one beach, one mountain road, or one view over a bay. They may tell you about it with great feeling. Then they may refuse to tell you exactly where it is. “There are enough people there already,” they will say.

The land is not empty. This is something visitors often miss. A green field may look simple. A local may know there was once a house there. A low circle in the ground may be an ancient fort. A narrow road may have been built during the Famine. A broken wall may belong to an old church. A well beside the road may have been visited for hundreds of years. The island is full of ruins, but not all of them have signs.

My father once pointed at a rough field and said, “There were houses there.” I could not see them. There were no roofs, no doors, no clear walls. “How do you know?” I asked. He looked at me as though the answer was obvious. “People know.” At fourteen, I thought this was a poor answer. Now I understand it. In Ireland, memory often lives in people before it lives in books. Someone remembers the family who lived there. Someone remembers why they left. Someone remembers a story their grandfather told. Someone has an old photograph in a drawer. The place looks empty. It is not empty.

The Irish language is like that too. Many people in Ireland do not speak Irish well. Some speak it every day. Some learned it at school and remember only a little. Some understand more than they can say. But the language is still under everything. It is in place names. It is in family names. It is in songs. It is in the shape of Irish English. An Irish person may say, “I am after doing it.” That means, “I have just done it.” They may say, “There is a sadness on him.” They may ask, “Do you have Irish?” These sentences are English, but they carry the older language inside them. Irish was pushed back for many reasons: conquest, poverty, the Famine, emigration, and the need to live and work through English. But it did not disappear.

That matters to people. Even those who cannot speak it may feel proud of it. They may also feel guilty that they do not know more. Ireland is full of that kind of feeling. Pride mixed with loss. Love mixed with complaint. We complain about the country because it is ours. We complain about the roads, the rain, the government, the price of houses, the health service, and Dublin. Especially Dublin. But when someone from outside says the same thing, we may suddenly defend every road, cloud, politician, hospital, and person in Dublin. That is family behavior.

Ireland has changed greatly in a short time. The country my father grew up in was poorer and more religious. The Church had great power. Jobs were harder to find. Leaving the country often seemed normal. Modern Ireland is richer, more open, more international, and less controlled by the Church. People have come here from Poland, Nigeria, Brazil, India, Ukraine, China, and many other places. They have opened shops, built homes, raised children, joined clubs, and changed the sound of towns and cities. Ireland once sent people into the world. Now the world has come to Ireland. That change is not always easy, but it is part of the island now.

The old Ireland and the new Ireland live beside each other. You may see an ancient stone wall behind a technology office. You may hear Irish music in a pub where the person serving you was born in Brazil. You may meet a child with a Polish surname playing hurling for a local club. That child may grow up with the same strong county pride as anyone else. This is how culture stays alive. Not by remaining still. By making room.

There is one more thing locals are proud of, though they may not say it often... Peace. The peace on this island is

not perfect. People still disagree. Old fears remain. Politics can still be bitter. But the fact that we crossed from Donegal into Derry without stopping was not a small thing. It only looked small to me. There was no guard. No search. No line of cars. No danger. My father had lived long enough to remember when the road was different. I had lived my whole life believing the road had always been open. That may be the best result peace can give you. A child who does not understand why the older people go quiet.

A few miles after the border, my father began talking again. He pointed at a house and told me who had built it. Then he told me the man had paid too much for the windows. After that, he returned to football. A Donegal player had been sent off the week before, and my father was still angry about it. He said the referee had clearly never understood the game. He may also have said the referee was from Tyrone. And just like that, the border was behind us. At least, it was behind me. My father still carried it, because he remembered what used to be there.

That is what I would tell you about Ireland. Do not only look at what is there. Look at what is no longer there. Listen when someone becomes quiet. Ask why one road has two names. There are stories here worth telling, and we love to share them.

I hope you have enjoyed our time together. If you have, come back for more at [Alex Learns dot com](http://AlexLearns.com).

COMPANION LIST

Vocabulary

barrier

something that blocks movement or access

No barrier, no guard, no sign.

county

a local administrative area

County identity is strong in Ireland.

parish

a small local district traditionally connected to a church

People may identify with one village or parish.

hurling

a traditional Irish field sport played with sticks and a ball

Closely tied to county and club identity.

belonging

the feeling of being connected to a place or group

A central theme of the episode.

emigration

leaving your country to live elsewhere

Many Irish families had relatives abroad.

indirect

not stated in a completely clear or direct way

“I will see” may really mean no.

slagging

friendly teasing or joking insults

It depends on trust and knowing the line.

ruins

the remains of old or destroyed buildings

Not every ruin in Ireland has a sign.

Famine

a severe shortage of food; here, the Great Irish Famine

It shaped roads, language, poverty, and emigration.

conquest

taking control of a place by force

One reason the Irish language was pushed back.

bitter

angry and difficult because of past conflict

Politics can still be bitter even in peacetime.

LISTEN FOR THESE

Grammar notes

Used to and would for past habits

Erin describes repeated behavior with forms such as “he would tell you” and contrasts the present with what used to be there. Listen for would plus the base verb and used to plus the base verb.

Past simple for a personal story

The border journey uses the past simple for completed events: crossed, looked, waited, remembered, and started. Short past-tense sentences keep the opening story clear and dramatic.

May, might, and can for possibility

The episode avoids overgeneralizing with modal verbs: a name may tell you something, visitors might not notice, and grand can mean almost anything.

Present perfect for change and experience

Forms such as “Ireland has changed” and “people have come here” connect past developments to life in Ireland now.

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