

Irishness: What It Means to Be Irish [B2]

Numerose persone in Irlanda e nel mondo sono orgogliose della loro cultura e della loro storia. Ma cosa significa essere irlandese e come si è evoluta l'identità nazionale nel tempo?

Ireland and Irishness might evoke idyllic or folkloric images, such as that of a [leprechaun](#) at the end of a rainbow. In reality, though, the country has a complicated and sometimes volatile history, and defining Irish identity as any one thing is reductive. Shaped by around ten thousand years of inhabitation, with a history marked by a devastating [famine](#) plus hundreds of years of occupation by a colonial power, the Ireland of today is an immensely diverse nation with a population of over seven million. Once desperately poor, the country has a [thriving](#) economy and is one of the most prosperous in the EU.

RICH CITY/POOR CITY

Ireland is a divided country and not everyone who lives there identifies as Irish. Following over seven hundred years of resistance to foreign [rule](#), first by England and later by the British Empire, in 1921 Ireland was divided into two self-governing political entities: Northern Ireland, part of the UK, comprised of six counties in the north; and Southern Ireland (now, the Republic of Ireland, ROI), comprised of twenty-six counties in the south.

THE LONG TROUBLES

This division provoked a period of violent conflict along political and religious lines known as the Troubles (1968-1998). The 'trouble' occurred between Unionists, mostly Protestants who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and Republicans, mostly Catholics who wanted Northern Ireland to be part of the Republic of Ireland. Irish reunification — as one country — remains a [divisive issue](#), complicated [further](#) by Brexit. It is the foundation of diverse identities among people from Northern Ireland, in particular, with

many from the North identifying as Irish, British, Northern Irish or a combination of the three, and some also identifying as either Unionist or Republican.

IRISHNESS AROUND THE WORLD

In Ireland, identity is often linked to the past and to politics, but globally, Irish identity is primarily expressed through one sentiment: [pride](#). If you visit the US, don't be surprised to encounter someone who proudly tells you they're Irish, before admitting that they are only part Irish and don't know where their Irish ancestors were from. The Irish diaspora is one of the largest of any nation: up to eighty million people in the world have Irish ancestry, with most living in English-speaking countries. By far the largest number, at over thirty million, live in the US.

THE IRISH FLAG

If you watch any event in which Ireland is participating, you'll no doubt see people proudly [waving](#) the tricolour — a colloquial name for the green, white and orange Irish flag. However, at no time is Irish [pride](#) expressed more fervently than on St. Patrick's Day, on 17 March, a day when people all over the world celebrate their Irish identity by going to themed [parades](#), wearing green and displaying the [shamrock](#) (both symbolic of Ireland) and participating in cultural activities. In New York City, some 150,000 people participate in the world's biggest St. Patrick's Day parade, and the Chicago River in Chicago is even [dyed](#) green for the occasion.

THE IRISH LANGUAGES

You might be able to identify people from Ireland because of their distinctive accent. But did you know that the Irish have two languages of their own? English is the majority language spoken in Ireland; however, it's a distinctive variety called Hiberno English, which has words [rarely if ever](#) used by other English-speakers: words like 'eejit', meaning 'idiot', and 'slag', meaning '[tease](#)'. It also contains words, grammar, idioms and pronunciation adopted

from Ireland's other language, Irish, such as the commonly used 'craic', meaning 'fun'. The Irish language, also known as Gaelic, has constitutional status as the national language of the Republic of Ireland, and is also an official language of Northern Ireland. Once spoken as the first language [throughout](#) Ireland, it was discouraged during colonisation and went into decline. Today it is a first language only in districts of Ireland known as Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking), home to fewer than a hundred thousand people in total. Although the Republic of Ireland teaches Irish as part of the school curriculum, it is rarely used in daily life. Nevertheless, some Irish phrases remain well-known. They include "Céad míle fáilte romhat", originating in a traditional Irish-language hymn and meaning literally "One hundred thousand welcomes to you". There is also "Póg mo thóin", of unknown origin but reflective of Irish humour: this phrase can be translated as "[Kiss my arse](#)".

PUB CULTURE

Irish people are known for being [warm](#), friendly and having a [quick-witted](#) humour, and there's no better place to experience all this than over a pint and a bag of Tayto (Ireland's famous brand of crisps) at an Irish pub. Associated with a welcoming atmosphere, Ireland's pub culture has been exported globally; you can now find an Irish pub in every corner of the world, serving the quintessentially Irish beer Guinness. This Irish dry [stout](#) was invented in a Dublin [brewery](#) in 1759, and is one of Ireland's most successful exports.

WATCHING SPORT

A love of sports is central to the Irish identity, and Irish people often [gather](#) in pubs to watch their county team on TV participating in a game of Gaelic football (described as a cross between soccer and rugby), or hurling. Hurling is the national sport of Ireland. It is estimated to be over three thousand years old and involves the use of a wooden stick called a 'hurley' and a small ball called a 'sliotar.' There is often [fierce](#) rivalry between teams from competing counties!

MUSIC

If you go to a pub in a popular tourist area in Ireland, you might find people celebrating their [heritage](#) by participating in a traditional music session, known as a 'seisiún'. It might include Irish instruments like the bodhrán (an Irish drum) and the uilleann pipes (Irish bagpipes), and dancers performing reels, jigs, and set dancing — all brought to the world stage in recent decades by the phenomenally-successful Irish music and dance show Riverdance.

A CHANGING IDENTITY

What it means to be Irish has changed radically over time and particularly so in the last few decades, when the country has evolved from being economically depressed, primarily monocultural and heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. Today, it is considered well-educated with a highly-skilled workforce. It is also multicultural, thanks to an influx of immigrants since the 1990s, and secular, as indicated by its relatively-recent legalisation of same-sex marriage and abortion, both opposed by the Catholic Church. These changes have shaped the identity of all who identify as Irish, as they continue to celebrate their [heritage](#), confront ongoing political division, and embrace the modernisation of this new era of Irishness.

IRISH TRAVELLERS, AN ETHNO-CULTURAL GROUP

On the island of Ireland, over thirty thousand people identify as Irish Travellers, an ethno-cultural group that is indigenous to Ireland. Traditionally a nomadic people, most Irish Travellers live in caravans and travel in groups, only [settling](#) in one place for a short time before relocating to another. They have their own culture and values, different to those of settled Irish communities, and although they speak primarily English, they also have their own language, called Shelta. In the past, Irish people were known to suffer from discrimination in other countries, where they were often perceived as [lazy](#), drunken and violent. Sadly, Irish Travellers have suffered from discrimination for decades in Ireland, and according to a recent study, now

suffer some of the worst discrimination and poverty of any ethnic group in Europe. For this reason many Irish Travellers, in Ireland and elsewhere, no longer identify as such.

IRISH CUISINE, TRADITIONAL AND MODERN

Ireland is a country of dichotomies, where the past meets the present. You can experience its multiculturalism and modernisation through its cuisine. Historically a nation of tea drinkers, these days you're as likely to hear someone in Ireland ordering a cappuccino or a latte as you are a cup of tea with milk and sugar. Certainly, traditional Irish food, such as the full Irish breakfast (usually bacon, eggs, sausages, [beans](#) and [black pudding](#), and sometimes other ingredients), Irish soda bread, Irish [stew](#) and potatoes in every form! — are still popular, particularly among tourists, older people and those living in rural areas. However, international cuisine is now served in restaurants and supermarkets across the country, reflecting the evolution of the Irish identity as a whole.

Glossary

- **leprechaun** = folletto, gnomo
- **famine** = carestia
- **thriving** = fiorente
- **rule** = dominio
- **gather** = riunirsi
- **settling** = stabilirsi
- **pride** = orgoglio
- **waving** = sventolare
- **parades** = parate, sfilate
- **throughout** = in ogni parte di
- **warm** = calorosi
- **shamrock** = trifoglio
- **quick-witted** = spigliato
- **divisive issue** = questione divisiva
- **tease** = prendere in giro
- **stout** = birra scura
- **heritage** = patrimonio
- **dyed** = tingere
- **black pudding** = sanguinaccio scozzese
- **fierce** = feroce
- **lazy** = pigri
- **stew** = stufa
- **further** = ulteriore
- **rarely if ever** = raramente se non addirittura mai
- **Kiss my arse** = baciami il culo
- **brewery** = birrificio
- **beans** = fagioli