Returning to Ireland

The Generation Emigration guide to moving home from abroad

IRISH TIMES BOOKS
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Introduction

Thousands of Irish people are still packing their bags and heading off for better opportunities overseas, but as the economy recovers, interest in returning home is growing among many Irish people living abroad.

The unemployment rate in February 2016 was 8.8 per cent, the lowest rate since the crash, down from a peak of over 15 per cent in 2012. With thousands of new jobs being created across the country every month, there are more employment opportunities for returning emigrants now than there have been for many years. But the recovery hasn't been even across all sectors or regions, and it is important to do thorough research into your work prospects, and ideally have a job secured, before booking your ticket home.

Returnees often face certain trade-offs in exchange for being closer to friends and family here. Living costs, especially for rent, are very high, infrastructure is poor in many rural areas, and healthcare and childcare can be much more costly than the country they are moving back from. It can be difficult to readjust socially, too, as old friends may be leading different lives now, especially those with families.

This guide gives an overview of the main points to consider when planning a return to Ireland from abroad, with links to useful online resources where you can go for more detailed information, or to get in touch with other returned expats for advice. The practical information has been compiled by Irish Times journalists using the latest reports, statistics, and official government resources.

But the most useful information comes from the many first-person accounts and advice written by other Irish people who have already made the move back home from abroad. You can find more online at irishtimes.com/generationemigration.

We have endeavoured to ensure that all information in the guide is correct at time of publish in March 2016. We have included links to useful websites where relevant, and would advise anyone making the decision to return home to check these for the most up-to-date information.

We regularly add new first-person stories to the online version of this Returning to Ireland guide. Want to send us yours? Email emigration@irishtimes.com.

Thanks for reading, and best of luck with your decision!

Ciara Kenny

Generation Emigration, The Irish Times
‘We wanted to be back in Ireland for all the big events, good and bad’

Karen O’Reilly and her family have no regrets about moving home to Clonakilty from France

Why did you decide to return from abroad?

We moved to France in 2002, and lived near Perpignan on the Spanish border until 2013, when we decided to move back to Ireland. Our children were eight and six, and we felt it was a “now or never” moment before they got entrenched with friends.

We were both running our own businesses but felt we were being held back by the anti-entrepreneur mentality in France, especially with Francois Hollande at the helm.

We had a wonderful life in France, living five minutes from the Med and an hour from the ski slopes. We loved our big circle of friends, both French and expat, but with the French, we never really got them and they never really got us. We knew our dear expat friends would all eventually pack up and move back “home”, so there was always a temporary element to our expat friendships.

We missed the craic and the banter and the openness and friendliness of Irish people. We wanted our children to grow up to be Irish. We wanted to be home for the communions, the weddings, the significant birthdays, St Patricks Day, 99s in the summer, the country on a high on a rare sunny day, the radio shows, Munster matches, Limerick hurling days, the
enormous charity of a small nation in times of need, creamy Guinness that doesn’t taste the same anywhere else in the world, country pubs, laughing so hard it hurt, taking the mickey out of everything, the inevitable sing song at the end of a party, people smiling, and the warm family hugs.

We also wanted to be back to lend solidarity on the bad days, to be there for the funerals and the sad times. A phone call or a Skype call is not just the same as being there to hold someone’s hand. And so we made the momentous decision, 12 years and two kids after leaving, to come home. A year a half later, we have no regrets.

**Where have you moved to in Ireland? Is this where you are from originally? And why did you choose this place?**

My Mom moved to Clonakilty about 10 years ago and although we are originally from Limerick, every time we came to Ireland on holidays from France, we would stay in Clonakilty. We fell in love West Cork and felt it would be a great place to bring up our kids. We weren’t wrong, and the children are thriving in their new schools. I genuinely feel like we have won the lottery. It’s the people that make a place special and I am still blown away by the generosity of spirit, the friendliness, the wonderful sense of community and how warmly we have been welcomed. It’s also a stunningly beautiful spot, close to the mountains and the sea, and boasting probably the best food in Ireland.

**Did talk of an economic recovery in Ireland influence your decision?**

We were ready to love back so the economic situation in Ireland did not really influence our decision. France is in dire straits economically, and the general public are seriously unhappy. Taxes are rising every year and people really do struggle to survive. Entrepreneurs are penalised at every turn as the socialist government attempts to keep the people down.

**How much research did you do before leaving France? Did you have schools or jobs lined up, for example?**

We had schools lined up for the kids. They go to two different schools, a boys and a girls school. Segregation was new for them, as were the uniforms (a God send!). We were invited to meet the principals in both schools, and they interviewed the children. The atmosphere in both schools is one of nurturing and inclusiveness.

**How have your children adjusted?**

Our children are very happy and love their new schools and friends. They are very sporty, which helps, and they are loving their new GAA sports. We live in a housing estate in Clonakilty and there is great freedom; the kids play on the green every day and cycle everywhere. Our house is an open home which I love, and there are always kids coming and going. This does not really happen in France. They also love having their granny living close by, who spoils them rotten of course.

**What is your impression of the economy in Ireland now that you have returned? Did you have a realistic view from afar?**
We have been fairly regular visitors to Ireland and so were in touch. I think Irish people should go and live in France for a while, pay all the onerous taxes and social charges (and water charges), live on far less income, and then tell me what they have to complain about in Ireland.

Nowhere is perfect and Ireland’s medical system is probably not as good as the system in France, but the average Irish person is far better off than the average French person, who is taxed to the hilt.

**What challenges have you faced since returning to Ireland?**

The one thing we miss the most is the excellent wine we had on our doorstep. Living in the Languedoc Roussillon region, the largest vineyard in the world, we were spoilt for choice.

I took a career break, wanting to get the children settled into their new environment. I am currently looking for work so we’ll see how that goes.

**Has anything else surprised you since you returned?**

In France, people dress very conservatively and so it was a shock to me to see young teenage girls caked in makeup and dressed in tiny skirts high heels. I am dreading those years with my daughter, who is now ten.

**Are there any other downsides to being back?**

I left my only sister in France – we were in business together for over 12 years so I miss her terribly, as well as my niece and nephew.

**What tips or advice would you give others considering the move back?**

Choose carefully where you decide to live. Having family close by has been such a help to us. Be positive and embrace all that is great about Ireland. If you are unsure about moving back, rent for a year (we did) and leave your options open.

**Overall, has the move been worth it? Would you consider moving abroad again in the future, or are you here to stay?**

We have absolutely no regrets. We will definitely stay in Ireland now while the children are in school. I think it’s unfair on the kids to move around unnecessarily. We’ll be here for the next ten years at least. After that, I would love to live somewhere warm for at least part of the year.
‘You can’t expect to move back to Ireland and everything to be the same’

Arts administrator Ruth Mulholland is struggling to find work after moving back from the UK

Why did you decide to return from abroad?

I never meant to be away as long as I was. I was dithering a bit about what I wanted to do after college – I did a Bachelor of Music, so there was no obvious career path for me apart from teaching, which I knew I didn’t want to do. A friend was moving to London to do a Masters, so I decided to go with her and share a flat for a year. She left after nine months, but I ended up staying in the UK for eight years.

My plan was to work in a bar or shop to make some money and try to get an internship in the music industry. Initially, I worked for a jazz agency booking tours for their artists, but about two months into that internship I was offered an interview for a job at a major arts institution. I was surprised when I got a second interview, given my limited experience, and shocked when they actually offered me the job.

I worked there for almost seven years. I was coming up to my 30th birthday and it seemed like a good time to move on. When a maternity cover came up for a larger role in a smaller company, I thought this was the perfect way to gain some valuable experience in a more senior role. It meant a move to Glasgow.

Though I loved the job, the city and the company wasn’t really for me and I decided to leave rather than extend my contract. The year working higher up the ladder hadn’t given me the
career boost I had hoped for and although I applied for lots of jobs in London I wasn’t having any luck moving back.

It was then that my mam suggested coming home for a while. My brother was getting married and my parents were moving house, so it seemed the perfect time to come back to Ireland and spend some time with my family.

**Where have you moved back to in Ireland?**

I’m living in Naas now. I was born and raised in Dublin, but a few months before I decided to come home my parents decided to sell our family home and move out of Dublin. It has definitely been an adjustment.

**Did talk of an economic recovery in Ireland influence your decision? Or was it for personal reasons?**

It was purely personal reasons that I came home, honestly I hadn’t given much thought to the economic recovery, or lack thereof. I was lucky because I left Dublin before the recession got really bad, so I wasn’t forced to emigrate to look for work.

**How much research did you do before leaving the UK? Did you have a job lined up, for example, or had you researched accommodation etc.?**

I didn’t put too much thought into coming back home. I’d been back and forth while I was away so it didn’t seem too much of a dramatic change to come back, even though I didn’t have any work lined up. I was fortunate too that I was able to move back in with my parents, and they’ve been happy to have me back (or at least that’s what they say to my face).

**What were your initial feelings on return? Has this changed in the last few months?**

Moving back was a bit of a whirlwind initially. I came home a week before my brother’s wedding, the day my parents moved into their new house, so my life was full of boxes for a while. It was strange moving back home, without actually being “home”. It took a long time to get used to the idea of living outside of Dublin.

**How have you settled back into your social life? Have you reconnected with old friends, or has this been a challenge?**

Life has moved on quite a lot in the eight years I was away. Some of my friends are married and have children now. I still see my friends from school regularly, but, as most of them are based in Dublin, it takes a bit more arranging to meet up. Spontaneous nights out are harder to enjoy when you have to run for the last Bus Éireann bus home.

**What about work?**

Work has been the biggest stumbling block. I worked in arts administration for eight years, and I couldn’t make employers see that where I did that work shouldn’t matter. One recruiter told me that ten years ago she could have got me work no problem, but things
were different now. I’m temping at the moment, but that’s maybe one or two days in a week if I’m lucky. I’ve got two jobs lined up in the UK, one in June and one in the autumn, and think ultimately I’ll have to go back if I want to continue to work in the arts.

**How does the cost of living compare to the UK? Is Ireland more or less expensive than it was when you left 8 years ago?**

Ireland is definitely more expensive than Glasgow, and maybe on a par or slightly higher than London. I lived in a one bedroom flat 15 minutes walk from the city centre in Glasgow, and there’s no way I’d be able to afford anything similar here on the salary I was earning.

**Have you faced any other challenges since returning?**

The real challenge I’ve found since moving home is remembering that everyone hasn’t been in a time warp for the last eight years, people have moved on, relationships change and that’s life. You can’t expect to come back and have everything be the same as it was.

**Are there any other downsides to being back?**

I miss my friends in London and Glasgow. I had an established a life in London and even though I had moved to Glasgow I was down in London quite a bit. With the best of intentions it can be very much out of sight, out of mind and as hard as you try to stay in contact with people, once you’re out of their immediate vicinity it’s hard to remain as close as you were previously.

**What are the biggest benefits?**

Definitely getting to spend time with my family. It’s still a novelty to see my parents every day. Also my brother met his wife after I’d moved to the UK, so it’s been great being able to spend more time with her and getting to know her better.

**What advice would you give others considering the move back?**

You can’t expect things to be the same as they were when you left. Embrace the change.

**Overall, has the move been worth it?**

It has definitely been worth it for me at this time in my life to be at home, and I’m aware it’s a luxury to have the time to decide what I’m going to do next. Career wise, I think I will have to look at moving back to the UK or make the decision to stay and work in a different industry.

*This article was first published in May 2015.*
Jobs and training opportunities

Economic recovery has been uneven so do your research and ideally have a job lined up before returning

The most important thing for most emigrants who are considering a move home to Ireland to consider is what jobs are available here, and whether they are on par with what they were doing abroad.

The good news is there are more opportunities for returning emigrants than there were a few years ago. The unemployment rate in February 2016 was 8.8 per cent, the lowest rate since the crash, down from a peak of over 15 per cent in 2012. Fine Gael claims 136,000 more people are at work in Ireland in February 2016 than when the Government launched their action plan for jobs in February 2012.

There are stark regional variations, however; the economic recovery has been strongest in the east, especially in Dublin, but unemployment remains highest in the midlands, above 12 per cent.

Skills gaps have been emerging in certain sectors, especially those which experienced the highest emigration rates in recent years, namely construction, healthcare, IT and finance.

But Stephen McLarnon, who has run the Working Abroad Expos in Ireland and internationally for the past 12 years, warns that the best opportunities available now are for people with several years experience in their field.

“The market here is missing 28- to 35-year-olds with 10 years experience, the managerial type person. These are the people who have emigrated over the past few years and gained all their experience abroad,” he says.
McLarnon says it is vital that jobseekers stress to employers the value of their overseas experience, and the skills they have gained abroad, and they should be rewarded accordingly. Research from the ESRI in 2010 showed returned emigrants could expect to receive 7 per cent higher wages than their peers who never left. The “wage premium” is even higher for workers with a postgraduate degree, and for those who have worked outside the UK and EU.

Generally, wages took a big hit during the recession, but are recovering in most industries. According to Central Statistics Office figures for the first quarter of 2015, the average weekly income for Irish workers rose 5 per cent in the past year to €693. The average weekly wage in the public sector is €904.

Resources for jobseekers

#allaboutjobs website and newsletter:
Government hub updated with the latest job and funding announcements, events, and other news. Jobseekers can sign up for a weekly email to notify them of certain vacancies in both the public and private sector. Follow them on Twitter @allaboutjobsIE. merrionstreet.ie/en/allaboutjobs

Supporting SMEs:
An online tool developed by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to provide information about all the business supports available for small and medium enterprises. It contains more than 80 services across 30 Departments and agencies. localenterprise.ie/smeonlinetool/businessdetails.aspx

Skills To Work
For those who may not find work straight away and are looking to train up, the Government’s interactive Skills to Work website skillstowork.ie helps jobseekers and small businesses know which of the new skills programmes they could qualify for or potentially hire from.

ConnectIreland
Established as part of the Government’s action plan for jobs in 2012 to motivate people to recommend Ireland to companies. “Connectors” are rewarded with €1,000–€2,500 for each sustainable job created. More than 65,000 connectors are now registered. connectireland.com

Startup Ireland
The independent, not-for-profit, representative body for Ireland’s startup sector, with branches in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford, Belfast and Derry. startupireland.ie

Jobs Ireland
Searchable jobs board run by the Department of Social Protection. Employers can add vacancies and jobseekers can search by a range of criteria. jobsireland.ie
ICT
IT’S Happening Here (itshappeninghere.ie) is a website run by the Irish software sector (supported by Enterprise Ireland) promoting career opportunities in Irish owned software companies.

Graduate jobs and resources
Grad Ireland (gradireland.com) is Ireland’s official graduate jobs and careers website, run by the Association of Higher Education Careers Services and GTI Ireland (the official careers publishing partner of the Association of Higher Education Careers Services.)
'I’m home a year but the New Yorker in me keeps kicking me on’

Working as an attorney in Manhattan was a buzz but Ireland would always draw me back

Louise Corrigan

When I remember how quickly I jumped on the chance to go live in New York, it is entirely fitting of the city that was about to become my second home. The call to go was as gripping as the city itself.

In July 2008 I was offered a job, and without a second thought I said yes. A month later, I was gone.

I had set foot in the US for the first time two years previously, to take the New York Bar exam, and I was immediately taken by the city. The energy there got under my skin. Two years later, when I set about exploring the job opportunities across the pond, all I was after was a bit of an adventure - a chance to live away from home for a while and experience what it was like to base myself in another country. What I got was so much more.

On my first day in the job, my supervisor and I were walking back to the office in downtown Manhattan, having just left the Criminal Court building. As we passed the Supreme Court, we saw the TV show Law and Order being filmed. The crew were scattered along those famous steps that lead up to 80 Center Street, which for the show becomes Manhattan’s Criminal Court. That was the first of many “only in New York” experiences.
I started as a trial assistant in a public defender’s office in Manhattan, working on cases from petit larceny to attempted murder. This was the stuff I read about in my John Grisham novels and I couldn’t get enough. They weren’t quite the marble corridors I had imagined - the criminal court was old, grimey and loud - but it was the real life courtroom drama that TV shows are made of.

Within a year, I was managing my own caseload, running between courtrooms, juggling court appearances, line-ups, jail visits and crime scene investigations.

Three years in, I was approached about an immigration role in the firm and was soon spending my days in immigration courts, appearing on behalf of people facing deportation from the US. I was driving all over New Jersey and upstate New York, visiting inmates in huge federal detention centres. This brought a whole host of new challenges. Our victories at the Criminal Court had been few and infrequent, but were even fewer and often more devastating at the immigration courts.

There were moments when I would sit in the waiting room of a detention centre, or watch inmates exercising in the yard outside, and I would take stock of where I was, slightly shocked that this was where “adventure” had taken me. I heard someone say recently that New York quickly cuts the corners off you, and I get it. There is no city like it to force you out of your comfort zone.

I quickly realised how lucky I was to be Irish there. People just couldn’t get enough of the brogue, and I was blessed with the added advantage of having red hair, blue eyes and freckles, and I was an Irish dancer. When I arrived into my office on March 18th, 2009 to find a copy of the New York Times on my desk, open on a review of one of our performances the previous day, I realised the power of this very special relationship between Ireland and the US, and the extent to which Ireland is celebrated in the States.

I had a jam-packed five and a half years in New York. I became a New Yorker in some ways and thrived on the energy, the buzz, the pace and the constant drive to do more, achieve more and better myself. Like many of my neighbours, I was up at 5.15am every day to run in Central Park. There was something on every night of the week. I met incredible people, made amazing friends and did things I never imagined I would. New York was the city that kept on giving.

So why did I come home? It’s the first question everyone asks.

The simple answer is because Ireland will always be home.

Coming home is a huge readjustment, and figuring out where you fit back in takes time. It was a surprise to see how much things have changed, and how different I was too. It’s now just over a year since I packed up and came home and I see now, more than ever, how the New Yorker in me is still kicking me on.

I have so much to thank that great city for, not least the Kildare man I met there. Who’d have thought I would go 5,000km to meet a man from 20 minutes up the road from my
hometown? It almost seems part of the magic of New York that when the time was right and the boxes were ticked, we would meet there and come home together.

In my final year in New York, I was chairperson of Irish Network-NYC (IN-NYC), where I saw first-hand the incredible work done for Irish communities abroad by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the very real way it affected us all. Having come home to Ireland, I now chair IN-Dublin, a business network for returned emigrants, together with a fabulous board of people who are similarly connected to the US. On a personal level it is incredibly rewarding to have spearheaded the establishment of this group and to be providing a venue for people like me who have returned from the US or are in the same boat as I was seven years ago, about to embark on a whole new adventure, to share experiences and help each other.

I have recently set up my own immigration practice in Dublin, Louise M. Corrigan & Associates, which is affiliated with O’Malley and Associates in New York. I rely every day on the drive and determination that New York instilled in me. I will always have New York to thank for the resilience I now rely on, but I will always have Ireland to thank for so many of the opportunities that were open to me over there and the Irish spirit that would eventually draw me back home.

This article was first published in August 2015
How much tax will I pay?

After eight years of austerity, taxes are finally coming down

The good news when it comes to taxes is that they are on the way down. After eight or so years of austerity, Budget 2015 finally reversed the trend – or at least partly - when the government introduced some income cuts. This was followed by further cuts to the universal social charge in Budget 2016.

However, this is not to suggest that the burden on taxpayers has significantly eased. Taxes remain elevated, and a significant portion of your income will still go to the Exchequer.

For example, a single person earning €30,000, will take home €484 a week, or €2,096 a month. On an income of €50,000, a married couple with one spouse working will get to keep €759 a week, or €3,289 a month. You can calculate how much tax you will pay by using The Irish Times online calculator, irishtimes.com/business/budget-2016/calculator-2016.

If you intend working for yourself when you come home, you will be hit hard however. On incomes over €100,000 the self employed pay an additional 3 per cent in USC on top of the 52 per cent paid by employees.

And remember, income tax is just one levy on your salary. If you own a property, you’ll have to pay property tax, levied at a rate of 0.18 per cent up to valuations of €1 million. The amount of tax is assessed based on valuation bands, so for example, tax on a property worth €210,000 will be €405 a year. To see the full valuation bands see revenue.ie/en/tax/lpt.
Finally, don’t forget to claim any tax you may be due from the country in which you are working. You can typically either do this yourself, or hire the services of a third party to do it. Taxback.com for example, says that it gets an average refund of $904 from Canada; AU$2,600 from Australia; £963 from the UK; and $550 from New Zealand. Remember however that a fee applies for such a service, although you can typically get an estimate of your refund for free first. For example, it charges $60 for US federal tax returns and a further $30 for state returns.
Returning to Ireland after three decades in the US has been a complicated experience for Clare Waldron

In February last year I made the momentous decision to move home to Dublin after 30 years abroad. Living back in my old neighbourhood, it feels sometimes like I never left. In other ways I’m a complete alien.

Just before I left I did an interview with The Irish Times, explaining that I didn’t want to grow old in the US with no family around me. I was divorced 10 years ago and have no children, and being alone over there was not a sustainable option for the future.

The pull back to Ireland was strong, and every time I came home for a holiday it was getting harder and harder to leave.

As ready as I thought I was, it was desperately difficult saying goodbye to Boston and to my dear friends. Sometimes you don’t know how much you are loved until you leave. I got on the plane with my cat in the hold and cried halfway across the Atlantic.

But as soon as I landed the excitement set in. Everything was a novelty. I was the new girl in town, and everything was strange. Simple things, like using a shopping cart in Dunnes Stores, was an adventure; I couldn’t believe you had to pay and had no clue where to put the money. I had no idea when banks and post offices were open, or what normal shopping hours were.
I deliberately delayed applying for jobs and enjoyed the summer exploring Dublin. I walked the length and breadth of the city, wandering along the canals and taking photographs of all the new squares and buildings.

My eyes pop out of my head when I walk around places like Fade Street and see all the great new bars and restaurants. The centre of Dublin could be any other major city in the world. It’s so cosmopolitan. Dublin in 1982 was a very different place.

The biggest opportunity that coming home has afforded me is time with my mum, who celebrated her 80th birthday in February. We have got to know each other so well over the past year, and being there for her has meant a lot to me.

The other great thing is the craic. There is no other place in the world where I laugh like I laugh here. Irish people have a sarcastic, irreverent, crazy sense of humour, and I had missed that. To this day it feeds my soul.

I got a job very quickly, which was a pleasant surprise after all the negativity I had been reading about the Irish economy. I’m now working in marketing for Novell, a software company, in Leopardstown in south Dublin, about a mile from where I grew up.

The place where my office is, now a densely populated industrial estate, used to be stables beside a reservoir. It is surreal. After living in Jordan, London, South Africa and the US, at 53 I’m back on the same piece of land where I used to hunt for tadpoles as a kid.

I had a sort of bucket list of things I wanted to experience coming back to Ireland, and I’m happy to have ticked many boxes. I’ve seen a hurling match at Croker, and I’ve visited Donegal for the first time. Best of all was being able to cheer my godson Daniel’s rugby team to victory in the under-17s Leinster Cup at the Aviva Stadium.

But it hasn’t all been easy. The weather has been a shock. I knew it rained in Ireland, but I had forgotten how much, or didn’t anticipate the impact the dampness would have on me. In Boston it snowed a lot, but the sun shone year round.

I miss the sense of open space in the United States. You have to go some way out of Dublin to find solitude, and I hadn’t anticipated that.

I wouldn’t have thought it, but Ireland is way behind the US in terms of technology, which has been frustrating at times. In the United States we use our phones for everything, right down to paying for a coffee at Starbucks, but here places insist on having everything printed out.

I have felt lonely, too. I had to come off Facebook because it was making me upset to see posts by my Boston friends, talking about doing bootcamp on the boardwalk or going running together. Though I’ve met some lovely people since moving back, I really miss having close friends around me.

I have no girlfriends left in Ireland now as many of the women I grew up with moved abroad over the years. I was excited before I came home about joining clubs and forming a new
social circle, but I don’t have as much energy for making friends as I used to. I have a lot of friends already; they just don’t live here. I’m coming to terms with that.

But I have been blessed the move has gone so well overall. I bought my apartment at the very bottom of the market, a place that would have cost twice as much a few years previously. Looking out my huge window, from where I can see the Sugar Loaf, reminds me of the reasons why I moved “home”.

The gloss may have worn off a little, but I’m still happy I came back. I said when I was leaving the United States that I had no more moves in me, but now I am not so sure. I would never say never again.

I don’t feel fully integrated here yet, and maybe I never will. Perhaps I’ll always be the expatriate who has come home to a different country.

- In conversation with Ciara Kenny

This article was first published in May 2014
Adjusting socially and emotionally

Many returning emigrants find it much more difficult to settle back into life at 'home' than they expect.

Emigrants often develop an idealised memory of Ireland, but the country to which they return can be vastly different. According to the Returning to Ireland brochure prepared by the Crosscare Migrant Project, a Dublin based advisory service offering support to returning emigrants, it is important to remember that a lot will have changed in your absence, and even those who have visited regularly may not be prepared for how different day-to-day life is now, especially if they've been abroad for a decade or longer.

Returned emigrants who have shared their experiences with Generation Emigration have often expressed surprise at how difficult they found it to settle back.

Despite what many may think, visits home can be build false expectations of what life would be like back in Ireland. The readjustment period can be greatly helped by a fulfilling social life, but some people can find it difficult to slip back into a circle of friends. Old pals might have moved abroad themselves, or to a different region in Ireland. Others may have a family now, and socialise less.

“Fitting in” can also involve a conscious silencing of the experiences which shaped emigrants during their time abroad, and this can be disheartening and upsetting for those who are unprepared for it. Even close friends and family can seem disinterested in their overseas experiences.

“There’s also something a little special about being Irish abroad,” says Noreen Bowden, former director of the Emigrant Advice Network, and author of globalirish.ie, an online...
Returning to Ireland: The Generation Emigration guide

resource for the Irish diaspora. “Friends look out for each other that little bit more because everyone is far from family, for example. When you come home, that changes, and that takes some getting used to.”

Born in New York to Irish parents, Bowden has moved back and forth between Ireland and the US several times. She says that settling back into Irish society after time lived abroad is certainly not as easy as many expect.

“Migration of any sort is unsettling. One woman once said to me that once you leave somewhere and start living somewhere else, it’s impossible to feel at home again, ever. I think I know what she meant - you feel the gravitational pull of the other place.

“Once you’ve moved, you’ve taken away the notion that there’s a place where you naturally belong, because it’s where you’ve always lived. There are those who fit right in again, but many people have said it takes about a year to start feeling at home again, and some people never settle.”
Returning to Ireland? Don’t expect things to be as they were

While emigrating is difficult, moving back home can be surprisingly harder. Feeling like a stranger in a place you once felt totally at home can be very unsettling and shocking.

The Government is now encouraging emigrants to come home, as there are more jobs on offer and there is a definite skills shortage in some sectors.

Since 2009 we’ve had large-scale emigration out of Ireland. The first phase these emigrants experience is the excitement of going. It is strange feeling because there is an underlying and unarticulated sense of loss. But a person never knows how that loss will affect them until they go. This occurs in the midst of feelings of excitement and opportunity.

The interim years since 2009 have been what I call the ping-pong years, as people pop back and forth between various spots called “home” for holidays, celebrations, funerals, and on occasion, even just to surprise.

For some, the ping-pong is over now and they are settling in their new land. Maybe they have met someone they want to spend their life with, or are just enjoying themselves too much abroad to consider permanent return. Many may wish to be in Ireland but returning still seems too hard. There are no perceived opportunities in their field of work or study, so they linger away.
Returning

Others hear the more optimistic tones emanating from Ireland. The time away has taught them what is important, what they love and cherish. The decision is made and they are coming home.

Research tells us that while departure is difficult, returning can be infinitely harder. The process is made even more complicated by the assumption that it’s just a matter of slipping back in the flow of things.

But the one who returns has changed many levels. The experience of living in a new place radically alters their view on things. What they believe, how they perceive, think, feel, and act can be very different. When Jesus went to his home place, he met with strange reactions. People were not ready to acknowledge him for who he was and they rejected him (Mk 6:1-6).

It can be difficult for the family unit they are returning to too, which may also have changed in the meantime. Other siblings may be looking on from the sidelines seeing a great fuss being made of the returnee, and will have their own thoughts, views and feelings on what is happening as well.

‘Migratory mourning’

Return, like a lot of change, has to be negotiated carefully. There is delight but there is also a degree of anxiety. This is all part of the emotional process of emigration and return that can be collectively called "migratory mourning".

When I wrote about this for Generation Emigration previously, I was surprised by the response. The comments alone showed the multi-faceted dimensions of “migratory mourning”. While the focus was on the emigrant, a lot of the comments were from people like parents and siblings who were left behind, or resonances from those who had already returned. They were strong heartfelt comments.

Mourning or grief is as much about change and adaption as it is about loss. It can be as much about place and atmosphere as people. With all these issues in the mix, it is quite clear that returning is never just a matter of fitting in to the old ways; this approach is sure to cause conflict and damage relationships.

Advice

A person may not realise how much they have changed until they come back. When they return they see, hear, sense and feel things differently. It is only then they begin to see how they have changed; this experience can be quite startling in itself.

Feeling they are strangers in a place they once felt totally at home can be very unsettling and shocking. There is no real advice or instruction pack for this transition. In fact a lot of “packs” that deal with migration have reduced themselves to the lowest common
denominator which is information; they keep the emotion out of it because they don’t understand it, perceive it, or they just prefer to ignore it.

The only advice one can give is don’t expect things to be the same as they were before you left. It’ll only cause heartbreak and disappointment.

Fr Alan Hilliard is coordinator of the Chaplaincy Service in Dublin Institute of Technology, and a board member of the Irish Episcopal Council for Emigrants.
'After I moved home to Ireland, nothing felt normal'

It was exhilarating at first, but the pressures of a new job and a long commute were isolating, and I felt the absence of everything I had left behind.

Lucy Michael

Suddenly, in the midst of a cold English winter, I decided I was going home. I held my decision close for months. I had applied for jobs in Ireland selectively over the years, repeating my intention to make a life there, but my colleagues had heard it from Irish people before, and I think they never really believed it. When I finally did hand in my notice they counselled against such a rash move. I still had no job to go home to.

My professional work is about immigration, so alongside job-hunting I read everything I could about returning migrants. I listened to Irish radio to catch up on the chat. I planned for the higher living costs. I even learned to declutter by giving away my books, which prompted friends to take my departure rather more seriously.

Back in Dublin my impending return was no secret. We celebrated my decision. I laughed and joked with friends about what great times we would have when we were all together again, with their kids who had been born and become people while I was away.

I finally found a good job in Ireland, packed up my flat and was grateful to family and friends for welcoming me home with open arms. My boyfriend booked almost weekly visits for the
first few months, to help me settle into my new job without the pressure to travel. I was in the best position anybody coming home could hope for.

I read another story in the Generation Emigration section of The Irish Times about a woman who, home from the US after 30 years, was shocked by the difference and prepared to feel like an outsider for a long time to come. For me it was different. I had been home every two months right through the 12 years I was away. I thought I would slip easily into Dublin life.

It started after about a month. I couldn’t place the breathlessness that would hit me out of nowhere, making me exhausted and tearful. I blamed exhaustion and ongoing bronchitis, but I knew it was more than that.

Nothing felt normal. The exhilaration of the move home had dissipated, the pressures of a new job and a long commute were isolating, and I had started to feel the absence of everything I had left behind. I worried.

For three months I could not put words to the roller coaster I was on. I couldn’t explain it to family and friends in Ireland; it felt like disloyalty to admit missing my other life. I missed my friends in England. A while back a few of us had talked about quitting our jobs and moving to other places. It seemed exciting at the time, but I moved before they did, and then suddenly I was here and they were still there together – and I had left a hole in a fabric I could not see while I was still part of the pattern.

None of my friends could imagine that moving home to Ireland would have any trace of sadness for me; I had talked so much about Dublin. I never expected to grieve for a life overseas I willingly gave up. I suspect at least one close friend in England has not yet forgiven me for the betrayal of leaving. She no longer tells me her secrets, denies me the privileges of our close friendship. I don’t think she really believed I would leave either.

Other close friends acknowledged my future absence and planned early visits. In turn I accepted their need to make plans without me, even though it stung.

But now, the other side of Christmas, it’s easier to see the bigger picture. The “Goodbye and Good Luck!” cards on the wall in my new home don’t make me so sad any more. Photos of friends start to populate the wall, too, reminding me that I used to love living across two countries and travelled easily between them – and to remind me not to be too careless with the friends I left behind.

This article was first published in January 2015
‘Moving back to Ireland has not felt like coming home’

Relationships with friends and family change when we emigrate. So too should our understanding of ‘home’

Gemma Kiernan

This article started about three months ago when I was four hours into a 12-hour bus journey. I was heading away from Toronto, where I had lived for two years, and towards a road-trip in the US. It was there, queuing for what would (hopefully) be my last Tim Horton’s coffee, I realised I wouldn’t be returning to Canada for a long time. It was a strange feeling. During the rest of the journey I became aware that this weird discomfort I was feeling was actually of loss. I wasn’t sad about it, just surprised I had something to lose that I hadn’t been aware of.

There had been many things about Toronto I disliked: the superficiality, the never-ending construction, and the public transport system, to name a few, that I gave up my life there with a flippancy I now find shocking. I had spent so long focusing on the things I didn’t like, and on some romantic ideal of “home” back in Ireland, that I had failed to appreciate what I was losing: the real home and real friendships I had spent two years building.

It used to be that your home was a prescribed space: where you grew up was usually where you found a job, got married, bought a house and raised children. But as more people immigrate and emigrate, we have been forced to re-evaluate this model, and this can sometimes create a tension.
Many of my friends abroad have spoken of the guilt they feel when they start to accept their new country as home. They feel guilty about missed weddings, new lifestyles and friends but mainly, about not wanting to go back to Ireland. As friends and family constantly inquire about when they’re coming “home”, they feel a conflict between assimilating into a new culture and retaining their Irishness.

This guilt centres on the notion that home is a singular place and any aspiration to establish a new one somehow devalues your connection to the old. It wasn’t until I left Toronto that I realised “home” is not the fixed location or concept it once was. Just as our relationships with friends and family have adapted beyond physical closeness, so too should our understanding of home. We need to allow ourselves to feel emotionally connected to other places without thinking that this is somehow disloyal to the motherland.

I never allowed myself to consider Toronto my home, but now that I’m back in Ireland, after three years away, it also doesn’t feel like home. It is the plight of the emigrant, that when you return you still feel very transient. You quickly come to realise that your idealised notion of home does not exist. There are lots of tiny nuances to which you need to readjust, and although things might look the same, they’re not. You begin to understand that your hometown, a place you subconsciously thought of as a paused film reel, has moved on. Your return does not reanimate the scene. The movie has progressed without you.

Everything has changed, including you. Without realising it I have subscribed to the very North American custom of not inquiring too much or giving away too much information. I was in the bank recently when I was asked so many details of my life over the last two years that I found it quite invasive. Yes, it’s nice to chat Ms Bank Lady but shouldn’t you be serving the nine customers behind me instead of asking me how much rent I paid in Toronto?

But despite the change, there are plenty of things that help you remember why you returned, some glimpses of the home you’ve cherished in memory for so long. Listening to that sing-song cadence of a Limerick accent is still a novelty for me (although I doubt this will last), and I love how Irish people can have entire conversations that are the weirdest mix of small-talk and deep personal revelations about illness and family deaths.

And of course, there’s family. If anything is going to help me feel like Ireland is home it’s them. For better or worse, coming back to Ireland means slotting back into a family dynamic that is sometimes infuriating, sometimes wonderful, but always familiar. It’s very freeing to be able to meet up with your friends and family without feeling sad when you leave, wondering when you’ll see them again. I’ve also returned to a good job with an advertising agency in Dublin.

In many ways, coming back has not meant coming home. The place of my memory, which I held up to such unrealistic standards in Toronto, is nowhere to be found. For now home is still undetermined, still intangible.

I know settling back will not be the easy, magical transition I had once imagined, but I also know that with time and effort I will re-establish a sense of belonging. I will weave myself
back in the fabric of Irish society and despite everything that has changed, Ireland will eventually feel like home again.

This article was first published in August 2015
Social welfare and pensions

All you need to know about applying for benefits, the Habitual Residence Condition, and transferring your pension

Social welfare and the Habitual Residence Condition

Returning Irish emigrants should be eligible for most social welfare payments, including jobseekers allowance, the state pension, carer’s allowance or child benefit.

In accordance with EU law, Irish emigrants who are returning to Ireland to live must be treated the same as any other nationality when it comes to applying for social welfare payments. This means you will also be required to satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition in Ireland in order to be eligible – in other words, you must prove you are back in Ireland to live permanently.

Deciding officers in the social welfare office will consider a range of factors, including whether you own or lease a home here, where your close family live, where you have lived in Ireland and abroad, the length and purpose of any absence from Ireland, your employment history, and your future intention to live in Ireland.

Up to 2010, hundreds of returning Irish emigrants were being refused welfare payments every year because they were deemed not to be habitually resident, but guidelines for deciding officers have been changed and there is now no reason a returning emigrant should be denied a payment because of the HRC.
According to the Department of Social Protection’s operational guidelines, if the claimant can show that he or she has returned to the State on a long-term or permanent basis, then he or she may be regarded as habitually resident immediately upon return.

Joe O’Brien of Crosscare, the Dublin-based charity which provides information and support to returning emigrants, says there are still “a lot of misconceptions out there” about the HRC.

“People still think they need to be living in the country for two years before they can access welfare, but this is no longer the case. The purpose of the HRC is for the State to figure out whether Ireland is your home. If you can indicate that’s the case, and you have cut ties with the country you left, you should be fine.”

The more documentary evidence you provide, the more chance you have of your application being approved.

“There are a lot of things you can do before you move back, by collecting evidence that you have left your job, evidence that your tenancy has finished, or that you have closed your bank account. Having kids enrolled in an Irish school is a very strong indicator,” O’Brien says.

Applicants can be waiting anywhere from a few weeks to a few months for a decision to be made, so Crosscare advises having as much money set aside as possible before moving home, to cover costs during this period.

O’Brien says refusals still occur occasionally, but Crosscare provides assistance with appeals, 98 per cent of which are successful.

“Problems do arise for some people who have been living out of Ireland for most of their lives, especially if most of their family is still in another country, but it is still possible for them to pass the HRC, you just have to be more careful with the case you put forward.”

For more information on the HRC and applying for social welfare on return to Ireland, see:

Crosscare’s factsheet: migrantproject.ie/index.php/returning-to-ireland/habitual-residence-condition

Citizen’s Information:
citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/irish_social_welfare_system/social_assistance_payments/residency_requirements_for_social_assistance_in_ireland.html

FLAC (Free Legal Advice Centres) factsheet:

State pensions

Once you leave Ireland, you will stop making PRSI contributions which can impact on your ability to get a full state contributory pension of €233.30 a week. Requirements to qualify
for this payment in retirement are strict, with the “average condition” perhaps the most onerous.

This requires a retiree to have made at least a yearly average of 10 contributions from the time they first started working. But this only guarantees a minimum pension (€92) - to get the full €233.30 a week you need an average of 48 a year.

However, depending on where you worked, you may find that it is possible to transfer your social insurance contributions. If you were in an EU country for example, your contributions will be added to your Irish social insurance contributions to help you qualify. Moreover, Ireland has bi-lateral agreements with Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Japan, Republic of Korea and Quebec, which offers a similar benefit.

You can check your social insurance record with the PRSI Records Section in the Department of Social and Family Affairs using your PRSI number.

The Crosscare Migrant Project will also assist those who fear they don't have enough contributions for a full state contributory pension to apply for the non-contributory pension (€222 a week).

Private pensions

If you start a new job, you may also want to amalgamate an old pension into a new one. If for example, you previously had a PRSA, but are now joining an occupational scheme in your new job, consolidating the two can make sense, given that fees and charges on the PRSA are likely to be significantly higher.

However, it’s not the most straightforward of processes, so you may need the help of the administrators of your new occupational pension scheme to assist you.

Finally, if you spent time working in Australia, you may or may not be aware that you may be entitled to claim back contributions made on your behalf by your employer into a pension fund.

Known as superannuation, Catherine Murphy of taxback.com says that up to 70 per cent of Irish don’t claim back these contributions, even though they can be significant.

Murphy herself for example, spent three years working in Australia, and claimed about AU$7,000 back upon her return.

Payment into a superannuation fund, which can differ depending on the sector you work in, starts when you earn more than $AU450 a month, and contributions work out as 9 per cent of your monthly wage.

As the purpose of the fund is to provide for people’s retirement, strict rules surround accessing the money before the retirement age of 65. This means that if you’re a permanent citizen of Australia you can’t claim it, but if your visa has expired, you should be entitled to claim it back.
If you changed employer, you may have to make claims for a number of different funds. You can claim back the funds yourself, or use the services of a third party such as Taxback.com. It charges a fee of AU$20 for claims of up to AU$1,000, or 20 per cent of everything over AU$1,000. According to Murphy, it offers a free estimate of your potential claim before you have to commit to anything.
Renting or buying a home

Rent and house prices have risen considerably, especially in Dublin city

Renting

If you're not returning to a property you own, it's likely that you'll be looking to rent. If you wish to do so in the capital or one of the larger cities, you may be surprised by just how much rents have risen in recent years. Supply is also a huge issue. The cost and availability of rental accommodation is cited time and time again by people looking to return to live in Ireland as one of the biggest barriers.

A survey from Daft.ie in February 2016 showed that while rent inflation in Dublin has eased, rents in the commuter counties are now rising rapidly. Overall, rents have risen by more than 20 per cent in the past two years, resulting in an average nationwide rent of €979 per month at the end of 2015.

This means that a two-bed will cost from €1,696 in Dublin 4, to €622 in Limerick City and €803 in Cork city. If you're looking for a three-bed family home, you can expect to pay about €1,245 in north county Dublin, or €1,717 on the southside.

To search for a rental property daft.ie and myhome.ie are two of the better options. Another innovation in the rental market you may be unaware of is the proliferation of real estate investment funds (reits) and investment funds in the rental market. This has introduced a professional landlord base, something you may be more familiar with when living abroad.
Returning to Ireland: The Generation Emigration guide

Something else you may have experienced abroad is stronger rights for tenants. In Ireland, while rights of tenants are increasingly on the agenda, little progress has yet to be made on this front.

Remember also that the obligation to pay water charges in Ireland is on tenants – not landlords. If you don’t register for, and pay the charges, then your landlord will be entitled to withhold your deposit.

Average rents across Ireland, Q4 2015

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Source: Daft.ie
Buying a home

House prices plummeted after the crash, but have been rising rapidly again in recent years. The latest Daft House Price Report shows asking prices rose across Ireland by an average of 8.5 per cent in 2015. The average asking price for a house in the last three months of 2015 was €204,000, compared with €188,000 at the end of 2014 and €164,000 at the market trough in early 2013. Prices in Dublin have streaked ahead of other regions due to short supply, but very good value can still be found outside the capital.

Average asking prices in €,000 in 2015

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Source: Daft.ie
Getting a mortgage

With rents so elevated, you may feel it makes better sense to buy a property. Financially, this may be a prudent approach. Figures put together by economist Ronan Lyons show that monthly rent on a three-bed house in north county Dublin will cost €1,245, but to buy it will cost €1,078 a month (on a mortgage rate of 4.3% for a 30-year term).

And the good news is that getting approved for a mortgage if you have been living abroad for some years should not be any more difficult than getting one if you always lived in Ireland. The bad news of course is that it has become more difficult for everyone!

According to Dublin mortgage broker Sean Couch, the main issue you might face when returning home to buy a property is having a job for long enough.

“The bank normally will insist that you're back in work at least six months and finished the probation period,” he said, although adds that some banks will look for 12 months in a job before lending.

Typically, your job will have to be permanent to qualify, although Couch notes that there are a couple of exceptions, such as a doctor on a contract.

“By and large, for 90 per cent of the people, it's permanent,” he says.

Once you've crossed that hurdle, you'll have to prove that you can afford the monthly repayments on a mortgage, and that you have the requisite deposit.

Of course if looking in Dublin, you will need a hefty deposit, thanks to the recent change in mortgage lending rules from the Central Bank. If you have been saving abroad, particularly in the UK or US, the weak euro should give your deposit a decent boost thanks to currency conversion rates, but it may not be enough.

If you're a first-time buyer, you'll be able to buy to a house valued at up to €220,000 with a deposit of 10 per cent. If the property price is over this however, your deposit is likely to be closer to 15 per cent. If you, or your partner, have already purchased a property however – either in Ireland or abroad - you'll have to come up with a deposit of 20 per cent, which is no mean feat given Dublin property prices.

According to figures from the Banking & Payments Federation Ireland (BPFI), the average deposit needed to buy a property in Dublin was €51,000 in 2015, a level of savings which may be out of the reach of many.

The Central Bank also introduced new income multiple limits which may impact how much you can borrow. You can now only borrow 3.5 times your gross income (ie joint salary of €100,000=mortgage of €350,000), although this limit can be exceeded in about one in every five applications.
If you wish to buy a property before you make the move back home, you'll need to be aware of additional restrictions – unless of course your years abroad have been so good that you'll be a cash purchaser.

Banks typically apply stricter requirements for non-resident purchasers. So Permanent TSB for example, will require a deposit of 40 per cent and will also want borrowers to be earning more than €100,000. In addition, non-resident borrowers can expect to pay a higher rate of interest on their borrowings.

Another change you should be aware of is that mortgage interest relief, which offered relief on the interest part of a mortgage is no longer available, while a first time buyers grant was abolished in 2002.
Cost of living

Prices have come down for some things since the boom but the cost of living is still high

Ireland may have been expensive during the Celtic Tiger years, but while prices have diminished since then, you may still be surprised at the cost of living in Ireland.

A survey from the European Commission in December 2015, for example, found that the cost of living in Ireland is the sixth-highest in Europe.

The good news however, is that prices aren’t rising, with inflation running close to zero, according to the Central Statistics Office.

A key driver in this has been the fall in oil prices – something you probably have benefited from no matter where you have been living.

Competitive pressure on supermarkets has also seen grocery prices fall. The arrival of discount German supermarkets Aldi and Lidl has had a welcome downward pressure on food prices, and given their rapid growth, no matter where you move to in Ireland, it’s likely that you’ll find an outlet close by.

Energy prices remain high

Something you may not consider are bank charges. Since the financial crisis, banks have discovered their ability to charge again, and you can now expect to pay monthly or quarterly fees on most current accounts. Additional charges also apply. For example, AIB will charge you €3 (per page!) to print out a statement.
But whether or not you find Ireland expensive probably depends on where you move from. Liam O’Connell, who moved home from the US in 2014 and writes the The Ireland Move Club blog (irelandmoveclub.com/), says that in comparison with Californian prices, a lot of food items are much cheaper in Ireland.

“Basic needs such as milk, cheese, bread can be as much as 25-50 per cent less than what I was used to paying. This makes a substantial difference to weekly savings as they are things you would buy all the time,” he says, adding that the general cost of running a household is also cheaper.

“Understandably incomes are generally higher in California than in Ireland, but in my opinion not by enough to adjust for the cost of living difference.”

But if you’re moving from the US, you may be dismayed at the cost of imported goods, such as electronics, cars and clothes all of which may have even gotten more expensive of late due to the strength of the dollar.

“Electronics, cars and even clothes are all far more expensive here than in America in general,” says O’Connell.

Water charges might also catch you out. Applied on a flat rate basis in 2015, the maximum charge for one adult, with or without children, is €160 a year, rising to €260 a year for a two-adult household.

However, if you have been used to paying for them overseas you might be pleasantly surprised. O’Connell for example pays €64.10 per quarter.

“In California, I would pay approximately $150 (€134) every two months,” he says.
'Returning to Ireland has been a whirlwind of emotion'

After three Ikea trips and a multitude of forms, I’m settling back into life in Dublin

Ceire Sadlier

Today was the first time I was tempted to re-emigrate when I realised I had my dress tucked into my knickers for about two hours at work.

I have been back from Africa for two months now, and I am getting into the swing of things. The first few weeks were a whirlwind of phone calls and viewings and letters and signatures, interspersed with visits to Ikea.

I’ve been through the emotional stages of Ikea three times in two months. First, pseudo-preparedness. Then screaming panic on the motorway, swinging wildly into the right lane when I spot the giant yellow and blue shed. Followed by the wonder of seemingly affordable convenience, mindlessly grabbing items under the impression they are virtually free.

Energy levels fall midway through, in the market hall. People are getting annoying and I am losing interest. Then the warehouse - I forgot I had to pick everything up myself. When I realise one of my items is not on the shelf, I really have to talk myself out of abandoning the whole process.

At the till, I’ve reached crankiness - I have had to heft these massive boxes around myself, I’m going to have to put it together myself, and suddenly it doesn’t seem worth it.
After zig-zagging all over the car-park I fire the stuff into the boot, not caring if it smashes into bits. At home, I open the instructions to see the angry/confused comic-man crossed out and beside him a happy Ikea figure, hammer in hand. Up yours Ikea man.

But actually, when it is all put together, it does look good, and it really is great value.

My Ikea experience is very much a microcosm of my return to Ireland. Excitement, wonder, confusion, exhaustion, apathy, anger and then proud satisfaction.

For a place where departing and returning emigrants flux daily in their thousands, Ireland makes it surprisingly difficult to slot out of the bureaucracy of life. Car insurance, home insurance, car tax, income tax, the electricity, the bins, the oil, the telly, the internet, the water and all the other things I handed bank details over for, that I signed, that I clicked. I could have done with an expert hand on it all.

Maybe it is because they have come all at once, and because of the freshness of my signature on all those documents, but somehow I feel like a spider living in a web that doesn’t belong to me, like it could all be snatched from under me if I make a mistake.

Two great western authors in Zambia have written about their awkward feelings when returning to the Northern Hemisphere after years on end in Zambia. Vic Guhrs and Alexandra Fuller describe the tedium of Western convenience, and the rigid culture of regulation in Europe. I thought they were mad, but now I think I get it. Even though there were no fewer bills in Africa, perhaps it was a difference in approach that made it feel less circumscribed.

Despite all that, I am happy about the Truman Show routine every morning when I walk to the Dart. I’ll probably see the man with the slicked back hair with his clicky shoes at the corner. My feet have two stomps for each of his clicks and I envy his long strides and wish I did not scuttle like I do.

I am never on slick-back-hair-man’s carriage, but seem to be surrounded by happy students with engorged salivary glands, or people with revolting colds who cannot hear their dog-like breathing over their blasting earphones. I almost don’t mind being near the phone conversationalists, loudly discussing their chiropodist appointments.

It is all a bit infirmary-like until the Dart bursts past the Merrion gates, and the concrete cracks open to the wide black sea and matching sky with just the Poolbeg towers to keep the world tied to the city.

It is especially soothing when the tide is in and full, and it looks like the train is gliding through water.

The most poignant part of the day is when I get off the Dart in the evening, just before six, the time when I most feel I am home. I join the parade of people drudging up the hill, impatiently waiting on the pedestrian bridge while some wally struggles to close their umbrella.
We spill out from the station and I join my brethren turning left. We march like a line of ants, pouring into the veins of Killester, splitting at every corner until I turn into my street, silently saluting slick-back, silently wishing a good night to my neighbour who I worry will think I am a weirdo if I actually wish her a good night.

We all creep into our brick boxes and I am one of them and they are one of me. And it’s great to be home. Oh it’s great to be home.

This article was first published in November 2014
Childcare and education

The cost of childcare is very high, and competition for school places in many areas is fierce

Childcare

With little subsidisation (one free pre-school year is all that's on offer, to be extended to two in September 2016) and no tax reliefs available, the cost of childcare in Ireland is high. A study from Early Childhood Ireland in 2014 for example, put the average cost per month in a creche at €780, while in Dublin, you could expect to pay more than €1,200 a month.

If you're moving home from Toronto in Canada, you probably won't balk at the high costs of childcare in Ireland however, as average costs there are about $1,676 a month. On the other hand if you have been living in Quebec, where costs are capped at $7.30 a day, you will likely find the costs in Ireland excessively high.

Options to keep childcare costs in check can be to look for a more reasonable childminder, or to hire an au pair. You can expect to pay about €80 to €120 a week for a live in au pair who will offer childcare of about 20 hours a week. Additional childcare can be agreed for a further fee.

The free pre-school year, known as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, applies for children aged 3-4, and offers a certain number of hours of childcare in approved centres each week during term time. If a child is in full-time care, the grant is deducted from the overall fee. This will be extended to two years in September 2016.

Schools

Returning to Ireland: The Generation Emigration guide
National schools are still typically under the control of the Catholic Church, which means that you may need to show proof of a baptismal cert to enrol your child, but slowly but surely other options are emerging. Educate Together for example, now operates 74 non-denominational primary schools around the country.

Waiting lists for primary and secondary level can be very long, especially for non-denominational schools, so you will need to contact them as early as possible to inquire about places when considering a move back to Ireland.

While primary schools are ostensibly free, you can expect to have to pay a “voluntary contribution” which typically ranges from €50-€150 per child to close the gap in the cost of running the school and funding from the Department of Education. If the school to which your child is attending doesn’t operate a book rental scheme, you will also have to pay out a significant sum each year for books, as well as school uniforms.

Wrap-around care is still unusual in Ireland, which means that if both parents work, you may still need the services of the aforementioned au pair, or a creche or childminder to fill the gap between the end of school and the completion of your working day.

Irish is obligatory, but if your child has been educated outside of Ireland up to the age of 11, they will be exempt.

Private schools are also an option, but you can expect to pay significant sums, and competition for places at secondary level, particularly in certain parts of Dublin, can be tough. Fees for Mount Anville junior school in Stillorgan for example are €5,500 a year, falling to €5,250 for secondary school.

Third level

But the biggest problem for returning emigrants can be at third level. Under Irish rules, to qualify for the free fees initiative, students must hold EU/EEA or Swiss nationality in their own right, and they must have been an ordinary resident of one of these countries for at least three of the five years before they start college. Whether one or both of their parents is Irish or not is irrelevant as it is the student’s own nationality that counts.

In effect this means that the student must have been living at home or in the EU/EEA/Switzerland for at least three of their teenage years. Remember if this applies to your children that “free fees” does include a contribution fee, and a rate of €3,000 a year will apply in 2015-2016.

For families living in typical emigrant destinations such as the US, Canada, New Zealand or Australia, the current rules mean that they will have to pay full fees of between €8-20,000 a year.

While former Minister for Education Ruairi Quinn declared on St Patrick's Day 2014 that Irish emigrants who spent at least five years in a school in Ireland, or somewhere else in the EU, could avoid having to pay international student fees, this was never introduced. This
means you could have to pay upwards of €10,000 per year for your child to attend third level if you’ve been living abroad for more than five years.

But even at the aforementioned prices, college in Ireland could still be competitive when compared with those in the US, where college fees are particularly high. For example, fees at the State University of New York in Albany, range from $6,170 (€5,387) for state residents for tuition only, to $15,829 for those from outside the state. At the University of Southern California, annual tuition is close to $50,000. Non-EU fees at the University of Limerick on the other hand, started at €11,423 for the 2015/2016 academic year, so could be competitive – or not - depending on what your choices are.
‘Ireland’s religious schools are putting us off coming home’

We want to give our kids an Irish childhood surrounded by the people and places that matter most to us. But at what cost?

Kevin O’Donnell

Leaving Ireland is easy. It’s going home that’s hard. The decision to leave is usually propelled by a yearning for new horizons or an urgent need to find a job. Sometimes both. The Irish brand of hard-working adaptability makes it easy to settle anywhere in the world. But the emotional pull of Ireland is hard-wired into an emigrant’s soul. This complicates the decision to return: a list of pros and cons doesn’t capture the intangible head-v-heart debate.

I left Ireland in the last-gasp days of the Celtic Tiger, in 2007, swapping rainy Dublin for rainy Seattle. Having just married, my wife and I found the Pacific northwest the ideal place for new adventures. We intended to stay just a year or two, but life became busy. We had our first daughter, then, two years later, our second. In a blur, eight wonderfully hectic years passed by. Catching our breath, we started asking ourselves, “Is it time to go home?” We were missing family, friends and the unmistakable sense of home.

So it became a quality-of-life question. We want to give our kids an Irish childhood surrounded by the people and places that matter most to us. We thought it would be as simple as that until we stumbled on a moral dilemma.

Having parted ways with Catholicism some time ago, my wife and I are raising our daughters free of religious instruction. Although Americans wear their religion on their sleeve, it’s not an issue in their public schools: religion is a personal matter, not something for the state to sanction. The classroom is neutral territory where all children are taught equally. Families
that want religious education attend classes in their place of worship on Saturday or Sunday; those that don’t don’t. It’s a straightforward separation that neither offends nor excludes anyone.

It’s hard to imagine enrolling our daughters in anything other than a secular school. When we learned of the growing Educate Together movement in Ireland we got excited: the ethos and approach are clearly child-centred and forward-looking. Unfortunately, all Educate Together schools in Dublin have lengthy waiting lists.

Our most likely option is a school with religious patronage. Many are excellent, but their faith-based approach conflicts with our values – and, unbelievably, their admissions policies favour children who are baptised. Stories abound of families hastily arranging baptisms to help their children get into a school. Is this State-blessed hypocrisy – surely the worst example of an Irish solution to an Irish problem – the entrance fee for a decent Irish education? Families that don’t baptise are relegated to the pool of leftover places, blatantly treated as less equal.

The Department of Education and Department of Equality gave me glib non-answers. Disappointingly, I sense no mainstream political motivation to change the status quo, despite repeated UN calls for Ireland to stop its religious discrimination in education.

As the Irish economy recovers, the Government will need to work hard to encourage ambitious emigrants to come home. There is talk of tax incentives to lure back professionals. That’s just window dressing. For most emigrants returning home is about quality of life. The Government can make a big difference if it uses some imagination. A good start would be to throw off the last vestige of a conjoined church and state.

Our dilemma remains unresolved. Our enthusiasm for moving home has been dampened by the realisation that returning carries the price of an education mired in religious influence. For a country that recently gave the world a lesson in equality, by passing the marriage-equality referendum, it jars that education remains rooted in an outdated, unequal idea of Irish society.

*This article was first published in July 2015*
Visas for children and partners

Non-Irish family members may need to apply for a visa or residency to live here

Irish people who are returning to live in Ireland with a non-Irish family member, such as a child, spouse, civil partner or de facto partner, should be aware that the person might need a visa before entering Ireland. Even if they are the child of an Irish citizen, or are married to an Irish citizen, people from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) are not automatically entitled to live here and must apply for residency.

Residency can be granted based on marriage, civil partnership or a de facto relationship if certain conditions are fulfilled.

You must be in Ireland to apply. After registering with the Garda National Immigration Bureau, you can submit your application for residency based on your relationship. This must be done in person to the GNIB if you are the spouse or civil partner of an Irish citizen.

Crosscare Migrant Project has published a detailed information leaflet on residency for non-EEA family members and partners of Irish citizens who would like to live here, with information on how to apply to enter the country, register with the Garda National Immigration Bureau, and apply for residency based on a relationship with an Irish citizen.

To download the booklet, go to bit.ly/1fgjatC
‘Expat life in Singapore was great but it’s even better being home’

After 12 years in Asia we wanted a slower pace of life, so we moved home with our young kids

Rachel Everett

Our family had a great lifestyle in Singapore, but we always knew we would move home. So last year we did, after 12 years in Asia. I will always love the excitement and buzz of exotic Asian cities, but it was time for us to go.

Like so many of our expat friends, we felt in a constant state of limbo in Singapore, never fully settled. And juggling demanding Asian working hours with twin toddlers was a struggle. After eight years there we wanted a slower pace of life.

As previous teachers, education played a major part in our decision to leave. We didn’t want the twins to go to a local school; despite the high scores they achieve, we didn’t want the strict Chinese schooling philosophy for our little ones, or for the local “Singlish” dialect to creep in.

International schools are extremely expensive, and the standards at some of them are questionable. We also knew once the twins started school, it would be harder to relocate them; they were only three years old but already had a big gang of friends.

I’m a believer in the Chinese saying, “No pain, no gain” and having to change, or challenge yourself throughout life. We saw an opportunity to go home and we went for it, and were
Returning to Ireland: The Generation Emigration guide

back in Ireland just two months later. It was stressful to say the least. Some days, looking out at the bleak winter weather, we wondered what we had done.

Working abroad, you learn to be dynamic and a self-starter. You have to be, otherwise you end up without a network, which is particularly important. But moving home to Ireland felt like going back to basics. We had to set everything up from scratch again; find a house, organise a car, arrange tax numbers, register with doctors, and all the other administrative tasks that take ages after living away for so long.

It hasn’t been a smooth ride, but we made the decision we felt was right and we always knew there would be obstacles. Also, it would have been much harder to do this with older children.

We survived our first Irish winter last year, so I think we are over the worst part. At first our children wouldn’t leave the house and had no clue what was going on. They had been used to playing outside for hours every day, going swimming and to the beach. They have settled now and love spending time with their relatives, and playing in their new home and garden.

Family pop by all the time for a cuppa. Spring and summer has been spent attending weddings and going on trips to rediscover Ireland again, and taking holidays with Nana and Papa.

We’re getting into gardening and aiming for a mint forest; funnily everyone seems to have an opinion on growing mint. The sense of community in Ireland is strong and we love that.

Many of our expat friends in Singapore also want to move home to where they are from. And these people live amazing lives as expats in Asia, with condos, pools, home help, champagne brunches and regular trips to Bali or Bondi.

Some worry about getting work of the same level, having a different outlook to people who have never left, or not being able to fit in again, but nearly all of them have a plan to do it at some stage in the not too distant future.

We look out onto the beauty of the naturally green Irish landscape now and feel refreshed, not worn out. It’s easy to understand why others would want the same.

We’ve no regrets so far. It hasn’t been easy, but no pain, no gain. Ireland is more beautiful than I remembered, and for our family, this is the time to be here.

This article was first published in September 2015
Healthcare

The two-tier private and public system in Ireland could be a bonus or a drawback, depending where you’re moving back from.

Depending on where you’re returning from, it may take time to readjust to the Irish two-tier healthcare system.

Unless you enjoyed robust – and expensive – cover in the US, you’re likely to find the Irish system compares favourably, but if you’ve been used to cheap prescriptions and doctor visits on the continent, or Canada’s comprehensive free system, you may find that the Ireland you’re returning to is lacking, with its two tier private and public system.

The public health system is open to all who are “ordinarily resident” in Ireland. To prove this, you may need to show evidence of paying rent or a mortgage or a statement from an employer. This means that you can attend the A&E unit of your local hospital (for a fee of about €100) and can be admitted for treatment to a public hospital (but a nightly fee of €75 applies). GP fees start at around €50 and free maternity care is available for all.

If you’re entitled to a medical card (see citizensinformation.ie), you can get free GP services, prescriptions, public hospital and dental services.

And, one positive change to the health system is the introduction, in July 2015, of free GP care for the under 6s and over 70s – provided that enough GPs sign up to the contract.

Secondly, you can opt to pay for private health insurance, and given the length of waiting lists it may be an option you would prefer.
However, it’s likely that you’ll have to incur waiting periods when joining a private health insurer if your cover has lapsed for more than 13 weeks. There are now four operators in the Irish market: Vhi, Laya, Glohealth and Aviva, and while it makes sense to shop around for the best policy, it also makes sense to shop around for an insurer that may waive the waiting periods for you.

From May 1st 2015, you have to wait six months to get cover once you take out an insurance policy, which is not too long to wait. The problem arises however if you need cover for pre-existing conditions (those which you had in the period six months prior to starting insurance), as you’ll have to wait for five years. A waiting period of 52 weeks is imposed on maternity related claims.

“This is why a lot of Irish people with dependents abroad keep them on an Irish policy while away,” says health insurance expert Dermot Goode of Totalhealthcover.ie.

However, there may be a way around it. Taking out a Vhi International policy when traveling for example is one way of keeping your Irish health insurance.

According to a spokeswoman for Vhi, with such a policy when you return home, there will not be a break in cover, so you can avoid these waiting periods.

And there are other options. According to health insurance expert Dermot Goode of Totalhealthcover.ie, if you have another international policy such as that offered by Allianz Worldwide Care or Bupa, or even a good quality local product, your insurer may agree to waive the waiting periods.

“I’ve had quite good success with that, but it is predicated on someone having good cover in place right up to their return to Ireland,” he advises. “Insurers are under no obligation to accept them back, and strictly speaking waiting periods apply but they tend to look at it on case by case basis. You’ll have to prove to one of insurance companies here that you’ve had very good cover while abroad and are still in good health.”

According to Goode, insurers impose the waiting periods in fear that someone will take out a policy, get an operation that costs €50,000 and then cancel it after a year. Having proof that someone has had alternative cover while away can mitigate against such a scenario.

However, if you’re over 45 with no cover abroad, “your chances of getting it waived are very remote”, he says, adding that a recent client’s request to get the waiting periods waived was turned down, because they had an underlying medical condition.

If you are hoping to get these waiting periods waived, Goode’s advice is to avoid people answering phones at the insurance company’s call centre and instead seek out a claims manager or go through an intermediary.

You may also be tempted to take out an Irish policy now, if you can afford it and if you have plans to move home in the near future. However, you should be aware that such policies should only be taken out by permanent Irish residents.
Something else to be aware of if you've been living abroad is the introduction, on May 1st 2015, of a new regime known as Lifetime Community Rating. This means that the older you are, the more you will pay for health insurance, as anyone aged over 35 who does not have insurance already will have to pay a loading on the cost of their policy.

So, if you’re 35 and taking out a policy after May 1st that costs €1,000 (net of tax relief at 20 per cent), the actual cost to you will be €1,020, based on a loading of 2 per cent. If you’re 40, the policy will cost €1,120 (loading of 12 per cent), and €1,320 if you’re 50 (loading of 32 per cent). The maximum loading that can apply is 70 per cent for someone aged 69 or over and you will have to pay the loadings for as long as you have the policy.

But there is a way around this too. If you're living abroad, you'll have nine months upon your return to Ireland to take out private health cover and avoid the aforementioned loadings.

“A lot of people aren't aware of this,” says Goode, noting that many people living abroad took out health insurance ahead of the May 1st deadline in order to avoid the loadings.

“But they didn't have to,” he says.

This environment means that it can be difficult for people hoping to retire to Ireland to get private health cover – which they can avail of immediately.

As a result, people coming from the UK for example, can find themselves keeping their old cover in place and returning to the UK to get essential treatment, or taking out an international policy, which can be expensive.

If you're looking for an Irish private health insurance policy, the best place to start is hia.ie, which has a comparison tool which can help you work through the huge number of options out there and find the best product at the best price for you and your family.
Driving licences and insurance

Returning emigrants may be asked to pay a hefty premium for car insurance, but there can be ways around it.

If you have a foreign driving licence you may need to exchange it for an Irish one when you return home.

Typically, you will need to get an Irish licence if you have been living here for 12 months or more, or it may be prudent to get one earlier if it makes it easier to shop around for car insurance.

Depending on where you lived, you may find it a straight forward experience. If, for example, you lived in an EEA country, Australia, Switzerland or South Africa (for a full list see citizensinformation.ie), you can exchange your licence for €55. The Irish Government has recently done deals with some regions in Canada also.

If however, you lived in a country which does not have an approved exchange process with Ireland, you will have to go through the application process in Ireland, starting with a driver’s theory test.

Insurance

Another problem you may face when you come home is getting a competitive price on car insurance. While the introduction of the Gender Directive in 2012 has pushed the cost of insurance for men down (and women up), if you’ve been away for more than two years, your no-claims bonus will likely have expired.
According to Michael Horan of Insurance Ireland, while there is no explicit standard practice, no claim discounts (NCDs) are generally valid for two years after expiry of a policy.

This means that if you've been away for longer than two years, you will likely be stuck paying a hefty premium for your car insurance. However, there may be a way around it.

According to Horan, if you can produce confirmation that you have been continuously insured in your own name and were claims free while away, this may be taken into consideration by the insurer.

“A letter from the overseas insurer to the policyholder confirming that he/she has been continuously insured in their own name and claims free while away would generally be required,” he says.

If you didn't have insurance while away or can't access such a letter, you will likely face exorbitant prices.

For example, as the table below from Chill.ie shows, a 30-year old woman with five years no claims bonus can get insurance for €551.05 in Dublin. However, if she has no such bonus, the cost of insurance soars by almost 250 per cent to €1,923.87.

How much will car insurance cost me?

*Female driver with a VW 1.6 Golf, licence for four years with zero penalty points, aged 30, working as an accountant:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Five years no-claims bonus (€)</th>
<th>No no-claims bonus (€)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>551.05</td>
<td>1923.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>601.05</td>
<td>1923.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A female driving a 1.4 Ford Focus with a licence for four years, zero penalty points, aged 28, working full time as an accountant:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Five years no-claims bonus (€)</th>
<th>No no-claims bonus (€)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1843.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>533.97</td>
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‘I think it’s time to follow my friends home to Ireland’

I had planned to settle permanently in Sydney. But then my Irish friends started moving home

Margaret Burgess

When I left Ireland five years ago, for a year’s working holiday in Australia, there were no tears or sad farewells at the departure gates. I galloped towards the plane, and once we took off I couldn’t wait for it to land.

I loved Sydney, immersing myself initially in the stereotypically Irish scene around Bondi Junction, drinking at the Cock ’N Bull pub at least once a week, and regularly finding myself on Scruffy Murphy’s dance floor at 6.30am. But after a year of partying I started to seriously consider living in Australia for the future rather than just for a holiday.

I was lucky to have a strong network of friends from home with me. My childhood best friend lived a 10-minute walk from my front door. My closest university friend arrived as I was settling in for the long haul, and slept on my floor until she too got a place down the road.

With them I thrived in Sydney. We explored the city and all it had to offer, dining on dumplings in Chinatown on a Friday, lunching in our favourite Lebanese restaurant on a Saturday, and spending lazy Sundays on the beach. I made some good Australian friends, too.
Occasionally I got homesick, but not often or for long. I sometimes talked about moving back, especially after a visit to Ireland at Christmas, but most of the time I was happy to think I’d be staying in Sydney indefinitely.

Around this time last year, though, whispers of change started to go around my social circle. Talk of “going home” became more real, more tangible.

When my college friend Patsy discovered the perfect job had come up for her at home I knew she would leave. I avoided meeting her for a week, because I didn’t want to hear the news. Watching her depart through the gates of Sydney Airport was incredibly tough.

My other best friend, Marie, quit her job and left shortly afterwards. She had been talking about it for a long time, but when she finally did it, it was a shock.

I hadn’t realised how lonely for home my friends were. Homesickness put them both on planes back to Ireland, even though one was a permanent resident and the other an Australian citizen. I now understand how they were feeling.

Unless you have lived at the other side of the world without a strong family network you cannot understand how hard it is to say goodbye to a close friend from home like that. They are your family: the ones around your table at significant holidays and events, your next of kin in an emergency, your financial safety net. Just as you are theirs.

So now I find myself in Sydney without my small Irish hub, and I am lonely. The shine of a city that was once so bright for me has tarnished. I realise now that it was my strong network over here that had kept my own homesickness at bay.

I thought that I had made a new life for myself on the other side of the world, but without my close friends I feel increasingly like a stranger in this city.

In the past five years I’ve become an Australian citizen and made some lifelong Australian mates. But they will never replace my childhood friends. I think the time has come for me to follow them home.

This article was first published in July 2015.
‘Single, jobless and 30, I returned to Ireland after a decade in the US’

‘I feel a sense of peace that I struggled to find during my time in California’

Maura McElhone

Just before leaving San Francisco last year, Maura McElhone wrote for Generation Emigration about her decision to move back to Ireland after almost a decade away. Here, she reflects on the ups and downs of her first 12 months at home.

It’s the morning of February 14th, 2014. As the plane touches down at Belfast International, I picture my family waiting for me in the arrivals area, ready with bear hugs and the mandatory, “how was the flight?” Further up the road, Mammy would be busy in the kitchen, filling the kettle and setting the table for the greatly anticipated fry.

It was a routine we’d gone through many times over the years I’d been away. This time, though, would be different. This time, there’d be no return journey to dread, no imminent partings casting a shadow over my precious time at home.

Single, jobless, and set to move back in with my parents at 30 years of age, I’d taken, at best, a huge risk in saying goodbye to my life in California. At worst, I’d made a huge mistake.

I’d spent six years living in the US. Most recently, I’d been in Northern California, living in the city of Novato, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge and about 30 minutes outside San Francisco. I worked for a magazine publishing company and lived in a beautiful apartment nestled into the Marin County hillside.
I’d made a life for myself in America, but it never felt permanent.

Try as I might, there was a part of me that would not accept America as “home”. Even after six years there, I felt somewhat detached from the place, an outsider looking in.

I waited for that to change. There was a lot hinging on my ability to envision a future in California—not least, the relationship I was in at the time. Eventually, the lack of settledness and daily uncertainty about my future came to a head. With me not willing to commit to “forever” in the US, and him unwilling to give Ireland a shot, the relationship ended.

I turned 30 not long after that. It’s a milestone age for many women, which causes you to pause and take stock. I spent that birthday weekend with friends in San Diego, one of them a Galway man living in the US for the better part of 20 years. We played music, we sang, and we drank. Inevitably, the conversation turned to Ireland, and the enormity of a possible move back home.

Yes, there was plenty I would be giving up, and I was under no illusion as to how hard it might be to get back on my feet in a country with an unemployment rate still above 12 per cent.

But what I stood to gain outweighed all of that. I would no longer be a visitor in the lives of my family and friends. I would rekindle those relationships that, I had realised, were integral to my sense of belonging— the very thing I’d been missing in California all those years.

Two months later, I boarded my Belfast-bound flight, filled with a fierce resolve to make my “unemigration” a positive move.

I started working for a tech startup in Dublin six weeks later. In my role as writer with Clinch, I’ve begun to find my feet within the city’s buzzing and ever-growing tech scene.

These days, I divide my time between Dublin, my Co Derry hometown of Portstewart, and Kildare, where my boyfriend is from—he was an unexpected and wonderful addition in my new chapter.

But it hasn’t been all plain sailing. In August, our family dog, a childhood pet that had been a part of our lives for 18 years, died. Suddenly, the newfound equilibrium I’d been enjoying for the past six months had shifted. Since then, cancer and Motor Neurone Disease has landed in our extended family. Each hurdle, each trial, is a reminder that no matter where you are, life comes at you, and sometimes it comes hard.

Being home for all of those things, however, has made the world of difference. Now that I’m back in the thick of it again, among family and friends, I have more strength to shoulder the burdens of loss, illness and uncertainty.

Free from the weight of homesickness and those feelings of impermanence and detachment, there’s a calmness in my life now. Whether I’m running on Portstewart Strand, making the short commute from Rathgar into town, or stretching out a Sunday morning in
Maynooth over coffee and the papers, I feel a sense of peace that I struggled to find during my time in the US.

I’m enjoying being among people who talk like me, understand my colloquialisms, and have the same sense of humour as I do. I’m enjoying feeling part of this place and it of me. And I am grateful for the opportunity Ireland has given me to start over.

I’ve come to realise that for me, being “home” is something that transcends the physical. It’s more than just familiarity with a place, too. It’s a settledness, a feeling of belonging.

It’s been one year since I made the decision to “unemigrate.” Some might argue that in doing so, I had failed.

But I don’t see my coming home as a failure. Nor do I have any regrets. For close to a decade, I gave America everything and embraced what it gave me. We were good to each other, America and I, but as it turned out, we just weren’t meant to be.

*This article was first published in February 2015*
‘I’ve left my husband behind in Boston to “emigrate home” from the US’

It was a wrench to leave my American life. At least my smallest nieces and nephews, unlike their older siblings, won’t think that I ‘live in the computer’

Gráinne McEvoy

At the beginning of the summer, after living in Boston for eight years, I flew back to Ireland on a one-way ticket. I have emigrated, just for a while, from the second real home I’ve ever known to the first.

The contradiction in “emigrating home” conveys my ambivalence towards a move that requires me to split my life, emotionally and practically, between two places.

I have returned to Ireland for about two years, with the possibility that I will move back to the US after that. In many ways I’m delighted. I’m living near my parents, my siblings and their families, and some of my oldest friends.

Yet I am also very rooted in the US, and it was very hard to leave. I moved to Boston in 2007 to undertake graduate studies and have since built a life there. I’ve had to take a leave of absence from very dear friends, colleagues and, with the biggest wrench, a new husband.

Our wedding was in August; now my husband and I will be compelled to split our marriage across an ocean for the greater part of its first year. This is at the heart of my reluctance to consider my move to Ireland as a move at all and the reason for the biggest knot in my
stomach. But transnational couples and families are not uncommon, and we’ll muddle through the next year like the best of them.

I have had a fraught relationship with the concept of “emigration” since I left Ireland. As a historian of migration I’m aware of the baggage that those permanent, frequently alienating emigrations of the past have placed on the term, especially in Irish history. Personally, I have never fit that historical mould or its more recent iterations.

When I left I stubbornly objected to suggestions that I was “emigrating”. I wasn’t going very far away, and my emotional centre of gravity remained in Ireland. But as time passed my feelings changed. I found it irritating when people described my life in Boston as a great experience, as if I was an overgrown exchange student. Then, when I met my husband-to-be and realised my future may not be in Ireland, the term “emigrant” began to feel more applicable.

Above all I’ve remained ambivalent about the concepts of emigration and immigration because I’ve come to realise that your legal, official status in a country can be completely at odds with your lived experience.

I’ve been in Boston on a J-1 exchange visitor student visa for eight years. For at least seven of those years I’ve felt aware of the impermanence of my legal status only on isolated occasions: my visits to the US consulate in Belfast to extend my visa; the few minutes once or twice a year when I’ve shown my passport and papers to a US immigration officer at Dublin Airport; and the two times I desperately wanted to vote for Obama but wasn’t allowed to.

It is impossible to spend the better part of a decade somewhere and still think of yourself as a “non-immigrant exchange visitor”. I have a Massachusetts driving licence, I’m a taxpayer, and I know Interstate 90 between Boston and Ohio like the back of my hand. Nothing about my daily life felt impermanent, and I certainly didn’t feel like a visitor.

But I fully intend to make the most of the next few years in Ireland, my first home. My smallest nieces and nephews, unlike their older siblings and cousins a few years ago, don’t think I “live in the computer”. Like the rest of my family, I’m able to pop in to see my parents on a Sunday or a random weeknight, and I can catch up with old friends over lunch rather than just “liking” their photo on Facebook.

My conclusion is that leaving Boston does feel like emigrating. This move will transform my day-to-day life for the next few years. But I hope it will feel natural to emotionally transcend the jurisdictional boundaries and keep a foot in two homes.

This article was first published in October 2015