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More than Shamrocks and Leprechauns

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More than Shamrocks and Leprechauns

My study abroad experience at the University of Galway on the west coast of Ireland has been a whirlwind of new experiences, new people, and a new culture to familiarize myself in. As part of that familiarization, I talked to my roommate about his experience growing up and living in Ireland.

When choosing where to study abroad, my priority was to pick a country where English was one of the primary languages spoken. While I love learning new languages, I knew that I would perform best in an environment where English is spoken as many people's first language. What I didn't anticipate about Ireland was that Irish is also an official national language, which means that road signs, buildings, food, and other facets of Irish culture would be labeled in Irish. While challenging to navigate at first, this quickly grew to be one of my favorite things about Ireland, especially as I learned about attempts to completely eradicate the Irish language through the courses I was taking. While Ireland utilizes English, there are different slang words and phrases, and items are called different things. For example, my roommate will frequently start up a conversation with "what's the craic?", the Irish slang equivalent to "what's up?".

Ireland also has way better infrastructure when it comes to public transportation than that of the US. At least, from my perspective. It is super easy to take the bus within Galway City, and

buses frequently run to other major cities like Dublin, Belfast, Limerick, and Cork. There's also train lines that connect these cities. When talking to my roommate, however, he complained about the fact that Ireland's public transit is less accessible than other countries, especially when it comes to traveling to rural areas like where he's from. He also mentioned that rail lines have started being shut down or proposals to build new rail lines are getting denied.

As I mentioned in my last paragraph, my roommate is from a rural area near the Ox Mountains in County Mayo, the county directly above County Galway. I am also from a rural area (albeit in Oregon and not Ireland), so we found commonalities between our experiences attending school growing up. I went to a small school in my town for a few years, where frequently two grades would be combined into one classroom, an experience shared by my roommate and his school experience. I also asked him the classic question about school uniforms. Unlike American schools, schools in Ireland require students to wear school uniforms. When I asked his opinion on the topic, he stated that he was fairly indifferent about wearing them but did enjoy not having to think about what to wear each day. The university application process also looks different from that of the US. Students in Ireland submit one application to all of the Irish universities ranking each of them, and must apply for a specific program when completing the application. Acceptance to university is determined by your secondary school leaving certificate (exams taken at the end of your secondary school career) scores, with each university having different ranges of scores for admission into certain programs. For my roommate, his program of choice was physics, and the University of Galway was his second choice. In the US, certain schools require you to apply for specific programs, while others (like Linfield) allow you to come in undecided. Additionally, because the US doesn't have leaving

certs, a greater emphasis is placed on extracurricular involvement and personal statements than it is in Ireland.

Ultimately, talking with my roommate and living in Ireland for 4 months made me reflect on how Ireland is represented and stereotyped in the media. In American media, Ireland as a country is typically stereotyped as being beautiful, with rolling green hills, an abundance of shamrocks, and being rustic or “historic” in nature. Irish people get stereotyped as being red headed/leprechaun-ish, hot-tempered, or constantly drunk. Ireland has a lot of natural beauty, but it’s not this romanticized, “rustic” tourist destination. Irish people aren’t naturally hot tempered, and are some of the most welcoming people I’ve met on my adventures abroad. There is more to Ireland than shamrocks and leprechauns. Ireland has such a complex history of how it exists as a nation today, and Irish people, like my roommate, exist as normal people in the present day, not as some artifact of the past or a stereotype in the media.