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# The Dubliners

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Published: September 20, 2008

PHOTOS: GLOBAL VILLAGE Opposite: Dublin's north side. Once one of Europe's poorest cities, the Irish capital has recently become a business mecca. Above: the old-school pub Bernard Shaw attracts the cool crowd. (pg.MM128 and 129); SIDEWALK STORIES From far left, an art piece courtesy of Maser, Dublin's most famous graffiti artist; buskers performing on Eustace Street in the Temple Bar area; a haute Irish dish at Mint, one of the city's top restaurants. (pg.MM130 and 131) (PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARETH MCCONNELL)

You do not need to be in Dublin long to know that Maser is in love with you. Spend a few hours roaming around the tangle of neighborhoods that extend south of the River Liffey, as I did on my first night in town, and you start noticing a curious sight: the same three words, "Maser Loves U," jumping out at you from unlikely places. Scribbled in bright yellow on a rusty gate. Stenciled in white lettering on a storefront awning. Printed on the tiny stickers plastered to every other lamppost.

I had lost track of such encounters by the time I reached South William Street, a narrow strip of bars and boutiques where I stopped to admire a building's service entrance that had been spray-painted in the comic-book style of [Roy Lichtenstein](#): a distraught woman with bright blond hair wiping a tear from her eye, the speech bubble above her reading, "Oh Roy . . . Maser Loves You!!" I was trying to find a pub called the Bernard Shaw, which, it turned out, was impossible to miss. Crawling up its outer wall was a massive mural, a giddy swirl of blacks, whites and hot pinks, with Maser's love for me prominently featured in big drippy letters.

"What's the deal with Maser?" I asked the young bartender inside.

"Oh, Maser's awesome."

"But what's Maser?"

“You mean who.”

Maser, I learned, is the name adopted by the city’s best-known graffiti artist, and the more time I spent here, the more I came to see his work — youthful, exuberant, carefree, optimistic — as an extension of Dublin’s most defining sensibilities. Which, historically speaking, is something of a recent development. To visit this city even 15 years ago was still in many ways to visit the “dear dirty Dublin” of Joyce’s “Dubliners”: a glum and provincial town populated by Western Europe’s highest concentration of justified insecurity complexes, a place notorious for its endemic poverty and stagnation, the capital of a country that, like its Communist (and later post-Communist) sisters to the east, had long been known for turning its younger residents into aspiring émigrés. As a tourist destination, Dublin’s appeal had been limited mainly to literary obsessives and American lineage seekers who upon arrival were often surprised, not pleasantly, to discover that in tempo and temper the city felt far removed from its neighbors in Western Europe: the desolate streets, the vacant storefronts, the dilapidated buildings, the chronic alcoholism, suddenly all too understandable.

But then came the roar of the so-called Celtic Tiger, as Ireland’s feral economic boom of the past decade is known. Beginning in the mid-’90s, tech companies started moving into Dublin at a staggering pace, lured to the city by a seductive combination of generous tax breaks and a ready-made work force of overeducated, underemployed English speakers. I.B.M., Compaq, Microsoft and Dell were among the early settlers; Yahoo, PayPal and Google followed closely behind, establishing their European headquarters in Dublin. Soon the city’s once-dreary streets were peppered with outposts of conspicuous consumption: conceptual fashion boutiques, stylish lounges, experimental cuisine. If a generation ago — half a generation, really — someone with Maser’s proclivities had been inclined to see the sides of buildings as potential forums of frustration, today he has every reason to use them to shower the city in affection. Not long ago, for instance, Maser was hired by Google to paint one of his signature murals for the company’s “creative suite.”

Reading about Dublin’s metamorphosis, I arrived expecting to encounter a city dominated by its nascent corporate culture — all business and BlackBerrys and sidewalks teeming with angry-seeming men in Armani suits. There were signs of this, sure, like the bar of the recently opened Dylan Hotel, which fills up nightly with

slicked-hair finance types eager to show off their high credit limits to pretty young things. But even here the mood was more earnest than pretentious. Similarly, a booming housing market has introduced the region to its share of chilly glass condos, though these are far outnumbered by refurbished Georgian and Victorian town houses that infuse the city with what I imagined to be the homey elegance envisioned centuries ago.

No matter how large its economy, Dublin remains a city still very much defined by its actual size: to even call it a city, in fact, is something of a misnomer. A million people live inside Dublin's official borders, which are such that you can literally walk anywhere in about half an hour. After only a few days, the faces of strangers had become familiar, and more often than not the faces I passed were young. Ireland is among the youngest nations in the world, with roughly 36 percent of its population under the age of 25, giving Dublin the unique charm of a corporate mecca set up in a college town.

"Yeah, it's really more like a village with a big city's economy," I was told by Una Mullally, a 25-year-old pop culture journalist. "That's kind of what makes it great."

Mullally, who grew up a few miles south in "very boring" Deansgrange and moved to Dublin three years ago, is as much a product of the boom as any banker or software engineer. She lives in one of the new buildings in the financial district and noted that gigs like hers are easy to come by, thanks to a number of start-up publications backed by corporate investors hungry for some street cred. We were having a beer at the South William, a newly opened cocktail lounge next door to Spy, a club where Mullally holds a weekly party. She had chosen the South William because it, too, was symbol of the city's modern evolution. "You used to just have pubs," she explained, describing the kind of grandfatherly setting long associated with copious alcohol consumption. But today the pubs are being replaced by what she called "bars," which were not, as I had ignorantly assumed, the same thing, but places filled with music and dancing and young people.

As it happened, the Bernard Shaw, where I was given my Maser tutorial, turned out to be an ideal place to experience Dublin past and present: a pub and a bar, a century-old watering hole where I may have been the only drinker born before 1980. Two years ago the space was taken over by a local music promotions company called Bodytonic, which converted it into a nebulous bar/music hall/art gallery. Inside I

met up with Andrea Horan and Matt Matheson, two sardonic 20-somethings who run a fashion blog called Dublin Streets and work together at a PR firm specializing in viral marketing — opportunities, they were both aware, that didn't exist in a preboom Dublin. "If I was 10 years older, I would have probably moved out of Dublin ages ago," Horan explained. "That's basically what you had to do, well, unless being depressed and unemployed is your thing. I'd probably be living in London or New York or even" — she flashed a smile — "Canada."

Which was funny because Matheson is from Canada.

"Halifax," he noted, offering a version of a common story in Dublin, which, once a city of emigration, has become a city of immigration,

with a steady stream of Eastern Europeans, Africans and others arriving to take advantage of the job market. (Ireland's recent rejection of the [European Union's](#) Lisbon Treaty was based in part on fears of enormous immigration from Eastern Europe.) "I've been here for two years," he explained. "It wasn't really planned or anything. I was just traveling after school; I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and didn't want to leave once I got here."

Money, of course, is known to do strange things to people. "Lonely and Horny?" read a headline in The Irish Independent the following morning. The article that followed asserted that Ireland's new wealth had turned the nation into an island of isolated and sex-crazed souls. The facts were indisputable: according to Google, the two most-searched words in Ireland are "lonely" and "horny." "And now what exactly does that say about the excess of the past 10 years?" the article wondered in an endearingly grave tone that served as an inadvertent reminder that a decade of flush times can only do so much to snuff out centuries of feeling inferior. "The Irish interest in these two words on the popular search engine would seem to belie the claim that money brings happiness," the piece continued, ending ultimately with a dark implication that the nation's Google habits may be a harbinger of doom to come: "Are we destined to forever be a country of lonely saints and sinners, about to be left behind again, as everyone marches on happily without us?"

From what I could tell, such fears seemed to be confined to newsprint, much like those about a topic that has been a fixture in the American news cycle but was just beginning to brew in Dublin: "Economy in Meltdown," read a headline a few pages later, atop an article describing how the housing market was cooling, the

construction boom slowing, the layoffs beginning. Yet the Dubliners I met seemed to think of a potential recession more as a gloomy abstraction than an actual concern. “Maybe this recession business is true,” mused my young cab driver one night, “but so far as I can tell it’s damn near impossible not to get a job in this town.”

We were driving south through the misty rainfall that seems to make a cameo at least once a day in Dublin, heading to a new restaurant called Mint, where the 125-euro tasting menu and the packed room struck me as a quiet counter to any arguments about a financial crisis. Run by a 31-year-old chef named Dylan McGrath, the dishes at Mint — poached wild salmon with an orange and avocado mousse, roasted scallops with caramelized chicory, halibut served with an apricot lemongrass soup — are a testament to Dublin’s cuisine having come a long way from the days of artery-abusing bangers and mash. Earlier this year, McGrath introduced Ireland to the concept of celebrity chefs, becoming the country’s answer to [Gordon Ramsay](#) when Irish television showed a documentary about his (successful) quest to receive a Michelin star. “To be honest, I just came here hoping to see McGrath storm out of the kitchen screaming,” confessed the diner next to me, a software developer who, seated with his stunning wife, seemed far from a portrait of loneliness.

Being the sort of person who feels guilty after a decadent meal, I decided to spend a few hours wandering around the city’s north side, where I was told I could get a feel for what Dublin was like before the Celtic Tiger. Indeed, the streets became less welcoming, and the faces of those I passed — the wrinkle lines, the bloodshot eyes — were a reminder that not everyone in Ireland has it easy. Then again, there was a cathedral that had been converted into a trendy restaurant called the Church, and, anytime I looked up, there were the countless cranes that dominate the skyline, rising like stalagmites and promising a future of more luxury condominiums and corporate glass spires. The most talked-about project currently in development is a shimmering condo-office-retail hybrid designed by Norman Foster that, at roughly 430 feet, is set to be Ireland’s first legitimate skyscraper. As it happens, the project is being financed, in part, by the city’s most famous natives, the members of [U2](#), who plan to use the “egg shaped pod” at the penthouse as their recording studio — though it seems, somewhat ironically, that they’re among the first to feel the effects of the slowing economy. Construction is currently delayed indefinitely.

On my last night in town I decided to pay a visit to Krystle, supposedly the city's most exclusive nightclub, its reputation as the premier establishment for ostentatious debauchery cemented back in December, when the Irish model Katy French celebrated her 24th birthday here, only to die of a suspected cocaine overdose a week later. From the outside it seemed like New Dublin's closest facsimile to New York — the velvet rope, the impenetrable guest list, the intimidating doormen. Once inside, though, I felt as if I had stepped into, say, a Croatian discotheque from the mid-'80s: the mirrored walls, the glossy Bakelite tables, the sort of thumping techno music that I thought had been relegated to the international bar mitzvah circuit. I had a drink and then called Mullally to see what she was up to.

"Krystle is kind of silly, right?" she told me. "Come meet me at Spy. It's much better."

Indeed it was. Occupying three narrow floors, Spy caters to a crowd that is casually hip rather than straining to be cool. Last call comes early in Dublin — around 2 in the morning — though it's not hard to find places to keep the party going. I was invited back to a nearby apartment, where a turntable was set up and where I found myself dancing with a group of strangers — a magazine editor, a theater producer, an actress — who soon felt like close friends. The city's inner village, it seemed, felt the need to assert itself one last time. When I finally got around to saying good night, I walked outside to discover that it had been morning for some time.

## Essentials Dublin

**HOTELS** The Clarence Class and location, and you might run into its co-owners — U2's [Bono](#) and the Edge — in the lounge. 6-8 Wellington Quay; 011-353-1-407-0800; theclarence.ie; doubles from about \$277. The Dylan Dublin's most self-conscious boutique hotel, ideal if you like to feel you're sleeping in the city's hottest party. Eastmoreland Place; 011-353-1-660-3000; dylan.ie; doubles from \$322. The Merrion Heavy on Carrara marble and florals, a study in upscale charm. Upper Merrion Street; 011-353-1-603-0600; merrion.ie; doubles from \$696. Number 31 Rooms in a converted coach house and a Georgian town house, with a great gourmet breakfast. 31 Leesen Close; 011-353-1-676-5011; doubles from \$263. **RESTAURANTS** Chapter One Among the city's few Michelin-starred restaurants, a classic Dublin experience. 18-19 Parnell Square; 011-353-1-873-2266; entrees \$47 to \$61. The Mermaid Café Casual spot for dishes like slow roasted pork belly and rhubarb crème brûlée. 69/70 Dame Street; 011-353-67-08236; entrees \$26 to \$48. Mint The city's newest haute-

cuisine establishment. 47 Ranelagh Village; 011-353-1-497-8655; entrees \$67 to \$70.  
BARS The Bernard Shaw Drinks, music and art in an Old World setting. 11-12 South  
Richmond Street; 011-353-0-857-128-342. Grogan's Castle Lounge Charming pub  
that gives a taste of preboom Dublin. 15 South William Street; 011-353-672-5946.  
The South William Casual cocktails. 52 South William Street; 011-353-1-677-0014.  
Spy Cool kids central. Powerscourt Townhouse Court, South William Street; 011-353-  
1-677-0014.