

IRELAND

Postcard from Dublin: ‘It seems like we’re collectively exhaling’

After a long, hard lockdown, pubs are back open — though drinkers are taking it easy



Drinkers are all smiles outside the Auld Dubliner pub in Temple Bar
PAUL FAITHIAFF

Yvonne Gordon | Wednesday June 09 2021, 5.00pm, The Times

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On a hot, sunny evening in Dublin city, customers are enjoying drinks outside the Swan Bar on Aungier Street. Drinkers sit at evenly spaced barrels and tables and a waiter carries a tray of pints — Guinness, of course. The air is filled with the sounds of chat and laughter. It all seems like a normal scene for a bank holiday Monday in summer – things might well get more convivial later in the week — but in fact this Monday, June 7, was the first time in months that the Swan and other Dublin pubs had been allowed to open. As signs of normality start to return after a long lockdown, it seems like we’re collectively exhaling.

Around the country, pubs and restaurants with outdoor spaces can finally reopen, so at last we have proper dining and drinks – with tables, real plates and glasses, rather than the picnic blankets and takeaways we’ve been making do with lately. It seems like a huge step towards normal life. “The pub is part of Irish culture,” says the Swan’s owner, Ronan Lynch. “It celebrates all that’s good in Irish life.”

“People are very emotional to be back,” he says. “They are delighted to be drinking with their friends again with a sense of normality. We did a lot of planning and we have a huge amount of happy customers.”



Many pubs have remained closed since the first lockdown
PAUL FAITHIAFF

Those punters seem a little more dressed up than usual; there are flowery summer dresses, heels, shirts with shorts. The same goes for the pubs too – windows are spotless, brass door handles are polished. I see a golden retriever lapping up water from a thoughtfully placed bowl. According to the rules, tables are spaced a metre apart and screened off from the street. Some pubs have parasols up — there’s no other shelter, with service only at tables. People are sticking to their bubbles so there’s no mingling either — but everyone is clearly thrilled to be out.

Ireland is emerging from one of the EU’s strictest lockdowns. It was only a few weeks ago that households were allowed to meet outdoors in a social setting (before that you could only meet for exercise). Pubs could sell takeaway pints as long as they were drunk more than 100 metres from the premises. But beer came in plastic glasses, and the absence of toilet facilities (and seats) meant that outings were usually brief and close to home.



While some pubs opened for brief spells last year (heavy restrictions included time limits and mandatory food orders), many have remained closed since the first lockdown. Now, as well as pubs, cinemas, gyms and funfairs, outdoor dining has resumed, with some city streets newly pedestrianised to facilitate the use of pavement spaces. Travel within Ireland has been allowed since May 10, and hotels and B&Bs reopened on June 2, so people can finally take a domestic holiday — international travel won’t open up before July 19.

Last year, during the first lockdown, Dublin became like a ghost town. With everything closed, the city seemed to be nothing but creaking shop signs, seagulls and empty buses. Everyone was out at the coast, walking and swimming. Shops reopened on May 17 and this week’s reopening is an amazing injection of life back into the city centre. People are once more out for the evening and there are taxis with their lights on to take them home afterwards.



Ha'penny bridge, Dublin
GETTY IMAGES

There is a visible Garda (police) presence in the city after [some disturbances over the weekend](#) — tensions rose after the closure of areas where young people had gathered, despite the government’s promises of an “outdoor summer” — but the pub opening seems to have eased the situation.

Dublin is nevertheless a different city. Just steps away from the famous Molly Malone statue are two tents belonging to homeless people, a sad sign that this crisis has not been resolved. On Aungier Street, shutters are still down on many shopfronts. Litter wardens are collecting rubbish but the city streets are dirtier.

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Pub favourites such as the Long Hall and O'Neill’s have no outdoor space so must wait until July 5 to reopen, when full indoor service for pubs and restaurants resumes. Many people are still wary of venturing out of their homes and there are a lot of food-delivery cyclists zipping around. Ireland’s current rate of Covid cases is 120 per 100,000 (in the UK it’s 46) and there are concerns about the Delta variant. But the vaccine programme is finally picking up pace – 55 per cent of the population have had one dose.

The lack of international visitors makes for a quieter city, too. On July 19, vaccinated visitors and those with an EU digital certificate can travel here, but the proposed reopening of the Common Travel Area between the United Kingdom and Ireland has been delayed (Delta, again). Currently arrivals from Britain must have a pre-arrival negative PCR test then quarantine at a specified address for 14 days, potentially ending this after five days with a second negative test. Visitors from some other countries are subject to mandatory hotel quarantine for 14 days.

The word for cheers in Irish is “slainte” — “health”. Now that after many months friends can greet each other properly at a pub, it’s a toast that seems more appropriate than ever.


Yvonne Gordon is a writer who lives in Dublin

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Neal Issuggam

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Nice for Dubs to be able to revisit places like Temple Bar without the rampaging stag and hen dos courtesy of Ryanair.

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M

Marten Pine

9 JUNE, 2021

“The pub is part of Irish culture,” says the Swan’s owner, Ronan Lynch. “It celebrates all that’s good in Irish life”.

I’m not averse to a good pint and a bit of craic but if self-entertainment at ludicrous expense really did the best things about Ireland I’d be off to Oz asap!

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T

Tony Mulqueen

13 JUNE, 2021

The beer is pretty pricey in Oz too, as is everything else.

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robert Hagan

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A tee-total Oz?

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