

Ireland

Contributed by Offshore-World
 Monday, 21 April 2008
 Last Updated Sunday, 31 August 2008

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Ireland is the third largest island in Europe, and the twentieth-largest island in the world. It lies to the north-west of continental Europe and is surrounded by hundreds of islands and islets. To the east of Ireland, separated by the Irish Sea, is the island of Great Britain. Politically, the state Ireland (described as the Republic of Ireland in cases of ambiguity) covers five-sixths of the island, with Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, covering the remainder in the north-east. The population of the island is slightly over 6 million (2007), with 4.4 million in the Republic of Ireland (1.7 million in Greater Dublin) and an estimated 1.75 million in Northern Ireland (800,000 in Greater Belfast). A ring of coastal mountains surrounds low central plains. The highest peak is Carrauntoohil in County Kerry, which is 1,038 m (3,406 ft). The River Shannon, at 386 km (240 miles) is the longest river in Ireland. The island's lush vegetation, a product of its mild climate and frequent but soft rainfall, earns it the sobriquet "Emerald Isle". The island's area is 84,412 km² (32,591 square miles). Overall, Ireland has a mild, but changeable, Oceanic climate with few extremes. The climate is typically insular, and as a result of the moderating moist winds which ordinarily prevail from the South-Western Atlantic, it is temperate, avoiding the extremes of temperature of many other areas in the world at similar latitudes. Ireland has for centuries been a place of emigration, particularly to England, Scotland, the United States, Canada, and Australia, see Irish Diaspora. With growing prosperity, Ireland has become a place of immigration instead. Since joining the EU in 2004, Polish people have been the largest source of immigrants (over 150,000) from Central Europe, followed by other immigrants from Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Latvia. Ireland's high standard of living, high wage economy and EU membership attract many migrants from the newest of the European Union countries. Ireland is multilingual but predominantly English-speaking, with Irish, the first official language of the Republic, the second most commonly spoken language. Ireland is a small, modern, trade-dependent economy with growth averaging 6% in 1995-2007. Agriculture, once the most important sector, is now dwarfed by industry and services. Although the exports sector, dominated by foreign multinationals, remains a key component of Ireland's economy, construction has most recently fueled economic growth along with strong consumer spending and business investment. Though there are no restrictions for foreigners purchasing real property in Ireland and the investment climate is favorable for foreign businesses, property prices have risen more rapidly in Ireland in the decade up to 2006 than in any other developed world economy. In 2005, Ireland was ranked the best place to live in the world, according to a "quality of life" assessment by Economist magazine. The country's combination of increasing wealth and traditional values gives it the conditions most likely to make its people happy, the survey found. These conditions include health, freedom, unemployment, family life, climate, political stability and security, gender equality and family and community life.