

# 'It's not great here, but it's better than where you are'

Caitriona Palmer reports on the new wave of emigration to America

**A**merica may still be in the throes of the Great Recession but that hasn't stopped thousands of Irish fortune seekers from beating a path to the land of opportunity in hopes of economic salvation.

Figures released by the American government this week show that legal Irish emigration to the US is on the rise again, up by 12pc from last year.

As the battered Irish economy continues to falter, the Department of Homeland Security said that 1,637 Irish people were granted coveted green cards in 2009, most of which were through marriage.

This rise in emigration is of no surprise to veteran economist Peter Morici, who says that while the US economy is still slow to recover, the situation remains a lot better than in Ireland.

"I'm not surprised, given circumstances in Ireland and in Europe," he told the *Weekend Review*. "[During recessions] there tends to be a flow of younger people who are still able to adapt and go to where growth prospects are better. And I guess right now that's us."

"It's not great here but it's better than where you are," he said.

Although the US government figures track only those Irish who entered the country legally, immigration centres say there has been a sharp increase in the numbers of people arriving from Ireland on temporary visas, particularly recent graduates who can work in the US on a one-year J-visa.

"Anecdotally, we're seeing the numbers increase," said Siobhan Dennehy, executive director of the Emerald Isle Immigration Centre in Woodside, New York. "But the job market here is sluggish at best."

There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of dual Irish-American citizens who had fled back to Ireland during the height of the recession but were now returning to the US to take advantage of job openings, Dennehy sa.

"People are coming back, having been here before," she said. "They're looking to reconnect with some of the neighbourhoods they lived in, still trying to get back into that network. Our immigration group is getting a significant number of calls from people looking for advice."

The US economy is nowhere near

the good old days of the booming Noughties, but slowly and surely "Help Wanted" signs are beginning to appear in shop and restaurant windows in some of the larger cities.

There has also been some respectable job growth in the hi-tech and finance sectors but with 15 million currently unemployed in the US, Irish job seekers should expect to face stiff competition. "The job market is robust where you would expect it to be — in

places where there is a lot of technological activity, financial activity, and things related to intellectual property like the arts, movies, theatres," said Morici, an economics professor at the University of Maryland.

"Manufacturing is improving but it's not hiring a lot.

"If you're coming from Ireland and you're a physician, then you're made," he said. "But if you're not a physician... I would concentrate on jobs in the

technology system, particularly the technical ends of the entertainment business."

For Irish hopefuls who want to strike gold in the US, finding a job may be the easy part. Persuading the formidable US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services to hand over a visa is another matter entirely.

Visas are contingent on job offers and an employer willing to sponsor immigrants through the arduous —

and expensive — green-card process. With a wait of several years and a price tag of more than \$4,000, few people have the time, resources or patience.

"For the vast majority of work-related visas for green cards, you have to get a job offer and then wait for the immigrant visa for a very long time — around seven to eight years, even for professionals. It's very hard to do from abroad," said Amy Novick, a top immigration lawyer in Washington, DC.

Many Irish immigrants have chosen to overstay their 90-day tourist visas, swelling the ranks of the Irish undocumented to more than 50,000, analysts say. And in some states, like Arizona, illegal immigrants face a backlash with draconian new laws that allow police to arrest anybody they suspect of being there illegally.

But for those who make it to America, the country still holds some of the magical allure that inspired so many Irish people over the decades to make the pilgrimage across the Atlantic.

"The jobs are not here. They're really not," said Ronan Connolly a 29-year-old from Monaghan town who moved to Washington 14 months ago, just before Obama was elected.

**B**ut the lacklustre job scene does not bother the former school teacher, who now works in a Washington bookshop. He was lured to the US by the promise of change and by the infectious "can-do" American optimism.

"I actually felt a great deal of excitement coming here with the change in administration," he said. "I took that as a really exciting time to be in America, as part of the new change."

For anybody wishing to start afresh in America, experts warn you must be technically savvy and have a flexible approach and mind.

"Flexibility is the big word in America and has been for the last 20 years and will continue to be," said Morici.

But immigration experts advise that the best way to go about securing a future in the US is to take an all-American approach and plan assiduously. "Look at all your options. Do your research," said Dennehy. "Get a really good sense of what the market is here. You really have to do your leg work first so that you know exactly where you can go."

## 'COMING TO A CRUMBLING ECONOMY TESTED ME AS A PERSON'

Handbag designer Geraldine Fox, from Kells, Co Meath, quit Ireland for the States two years ago to further her fashion career. Now living in New Jersey with boyfriend Karl, the 27-year-old stylist reckons the American Dream is alive and well — despite the recession.

"After I graduated from GMIT, I got a job with a Dublin-based handbag company as a designer. I loved it, but knew if I wanted to take my career to the next level I would have to leave Ireland.

"I moved to New Jersey after my boyfriend Karl got a job with an Irish engineering company there. It was a daunting experience at first.

"I quickly had to learn to 'talk the talk' American-style — we may speak the same language, but learning to read their personalities was a huge challenge.

"The recession has also been a stumbling block. Coming from the Celtic Tiger to the crumbling US economy has tested me as a person and a designer.

"That said, America has been very kind to both myself and my partner. A US designer's salary is significantly higher than their Irish counterparts and the cost of living is considerably cheaper. Being Irish has definitely been an advantage too. Irish and British designers are sought after because they're seen to be hard-working, flexible and have a European education — I just got a

new job last month.

"The weather plays a huge part in our reason for staying here — being able to plan ahead without worrying about dreaded rain! We have a healthier lifestyle here; in warm weather we socialise outdoors, while in winter we take weekend trips to the ski slopes an hour away.

"The hardest part of living on another continent is being away from your family and friends. It takes a long time to build a firm friendship with an American.

"But we'll definitely be staying here for the foreseeable future. Eventually, though, the heart may tug for home."

**Deirdre Reynolds**



**Kids in America: Bag-designer Geraldine Fox lives in New Jersey with her boyfriend Karl**

Hollywood is where it's at for anyone with high hopes in the film business, so it felt natural for 33-year-old actress Rachel Rath from Gorey, Co Wexford, to end up there.



"It still blows my mind heading into the 101 Coffee Shop for a late night snack — and there's Ben Stiller," she says. Rachel, who has starred in *Anton* and newly released *Swansong*, is also a founder of the Dublin actors' co-op the Attic Studio. She has been in Tinseltown since 2008.

She went over on an entertainment visa — this type of visa is given to people with proven talent and Rachel, with a string of Irish acting credits, was given the green light.

Since then she's booked the lead role in a comedy TV pilot, which will hopefully 'go to series', and has been also voicing animations. Like everywhere else in the world, there is an 'Irish mafia' to help with networking.

"There are Kim Carroll (composer), Kevin Marron (actor) and Caroline Morahan, who lives two blocks away," she says.

Australians are Hollywood's flavour of the month — but there is a definite soft spot still for the Irish.

There was a "culture shock" in making the move initially, but a wedding, TV show and Christmas provided excuses to go home last year.

Lyons Tea is available in her local shop, for whenever she feels homesick. "I also bake my own scones and soda bread — but I do miss the chat that goes with them," she says.

**Bill Tyson**