

# Ireland hopeful

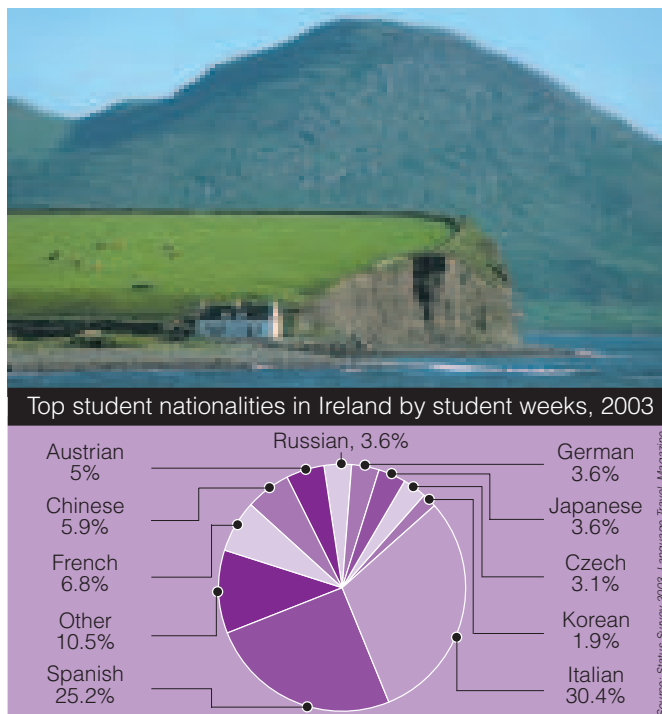
In common with most other English-speaking language travel destinations, Ireland experienced a relatively tough business year in 2003, although student numbers have been quick to recover this year, as GILLIAN EVANS discovers.

According to MEI-Relsa, 2003 was a relatively good year for its members, although growth was considerably lower than it had been in previous years. Paul Mullins at the American College Dublin confirms this. "There were three strong years [of growth] in Ireland, and 2003 and 2004 have not matched these."

In 2003, the usual suspects – Iraq war, Sars and the strengthening of the euro, all contributed to varying degrees to a slowing of the market. Joelle Coade at the Cork Language Centre reports that they experienced a five per cent drop in student numbers in 2003, which they attribute to the war in Iraq and Sars. Stan Ryan at Dunlaoire Language Centre in Dublin says they also noticed the effect of Sars on enrolments, although numbers recovered quickly. "We got a lot of late bookings," he recounts, saying 2003 year-end figures were up by a healthy 34 per cent.

Concerns over personal safety did have a negative effect on some provider markets for Ireland. "Agents indicated that students, especially Italian students, were fearful of flying," reports George Hogan of Bluefeather-Tandem. However, compared with other language travel destinations, any decreases in numbers were minimal. "Clearly, [the Iraq war] has had an effect although, in some respects, it has helped as Ireland is looked upon as a 'safer' destination," states Gary Neale, Principal of Aspect Dublin.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been another very significant market growth decelerator: visa issuance. Neale says that 2003 was a poor year at Aspect, mainly owing to lower enrolments for long-term courses. This was "due to visa issues in the best long-term markets", he says.



Even those schools whose 2003 numbers remained at 2002 levels claim that visa issuance held back growth, and a number of sources report that it is almost impossible for some nationalities to obtain a visa. "It is perceived that certain nationalities don't get visas once they are at university age as there is a fear that they will disappear [once in Ireland]," says Mullins.

China and Russia are two notable countries for which it is difficult to gain entry to Ireland, as well as some South American countries, Turkey, Thailand and, according to Feargal Courtney at Killarney School of English, Bangladesh. "No students who applied [to our school] from Bangladesh received a visa," he recounts. Courtney adds that visa renewals for students already in Ireland take a long time, and it is "absolutely impossible to contact anyone in the visa section".

Neale explains, "There have been some procedural changes within the Irish Immigration sys-

tem that have complicated the process and visas have generally become more difficult to obtain as Clearance Officers have become stricter in applying their criteria."

Because many of Ireland's potential long-haul markets remain difficult to access, most English language schools continue to rely heavily on Western European students, although Ireland is now attracting more students from Central and Eastern Europe (see right).

For 2004, schools are banking on results being better than last year. "We had a very good start to the year due to the fact that clients who send us groups – schools and corporate – sent us more groups than in previous years," says Hogan. Courtney also reports that their group numbers and August enrolments are up. Similarly, Neale relates, "Summer numbers have outperformed 2003 and we [had] strong forward bookings [by August]." Such results bode well for Ireland's year-end results.

## Nationality trends

According to Language Travel Magazine's annual statistical round-up of the global English language teaching market, the total number of students in Ireland reached 159,600 in 2003, with Ireland having a 7.4 per cent share of the English language teaching market by student weeks (see Language Travel Magazine, October 2004, page 23).

Western Europeans continue to dominate the market in Ireland, with Spanish, Italian and French students making up over 60 per cent of total numbers. Spain and Italy remain the main two provider countries, although Paul Mullins of the American College Dublin notes that numbers from Spain could wane, as he has seen some evidence of an increasing English language level among Spanish students who require only accommodation and work opportunities in Ireland.

Feargal Courtney from the Killarney School of English, whose biggest student nationality is Spanish, says that their Spanish numbers were negatively affected in the first half of 2004. "The terrorist bomb in Madrid probably affected us more [than the Iraq war last year] with individual bookings from Spain [down] in the March to June period," he relates.

For 2004, school sources note an increase in students from the European Union accession countries, attracted to Ireland by its good value courses, while Chinese numbers have been slipping. This trend is borne out by the results of our latest Student Feedback survey of students studying English in Ireland (see Language Travel Magazine, August 2004, pages 16-17). Students from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic featured in the top seven nationalities, with Central and Eastern Europeans making up 19 per cent of all respondents. The proportion of Chinese students taking part in our survey, however, was down from 20 per cent in the previous year to nine per cent this year.

At Aspect Dublin, Gary Neale notes that although Western Europe countries continue to provide the lion's share of their students, "Saudi student numbers have increased this year".