

Michael Harding's column is now published on Tuesdays



Planning that big day from far away

CIARA KENNY

Irish couples living abroad are coming home to get married and are using services such as Skype to view hotels and get in touch with wedding planners. But organising the big day on home soil is still a complex operation



CRICKETS ARE heralding the night outside. In Sydney, Cora Mason and John Keane settle down on the sofa with a cup of tea after a long day at work. The familiar blips and bleeps of Skype ring out from the computer, and up pops Carly Kennedy on screen, the woman who is helping the couple to organise a very Irish wedding from the other side of the world.

Kennedy works as a wedding coordinator for the Limerick Strand Hotel, and the first time the couple "met" her on Skype, she used a web-cam to give the couple an interactive tour, which was decorated for another wedding. She answered their queries as she walked through the lobby and reception rooms, demonstrated different lighting schemes, and showed them around the honeymoon suite where they would spend their first night as husband and wife.

Mason wanted to marry in her hometown of Foynes in Co Limerick, but as she hasn't lived there for seven years, deciding on a hotel was a challenge. "We had to narrow them down by looking through their websites, but it was very difficult as pictures can be deceiving," she says. "Seeing it on screen and being able to talk things through was fantastic and gave us reassurance that email and phone contact could never have."

Keane, a 29-year-old carpenter, left Gorey in Co Wexford in February last year in search of work, and Mason, 28, took a career break for a year from her teaching job to join him in August. Although they are enjoying their time in Australia, Ireland is where they see their future, and they couldn't imagine getting married anywhere else.

Approximately 5 per cent of respondents to last week's Ipsos MRBI/*Irish Times* survey of Irish people who have emigrated in the past four years have married since they left Ireland, and anecdotes suggest that many are coming home to tie the knot. Hotels, wedding planners and suppliers are responding to the emigration trend by offering innovative and interactive services to help emigrants to organise their ideal Irish weddings from afar.

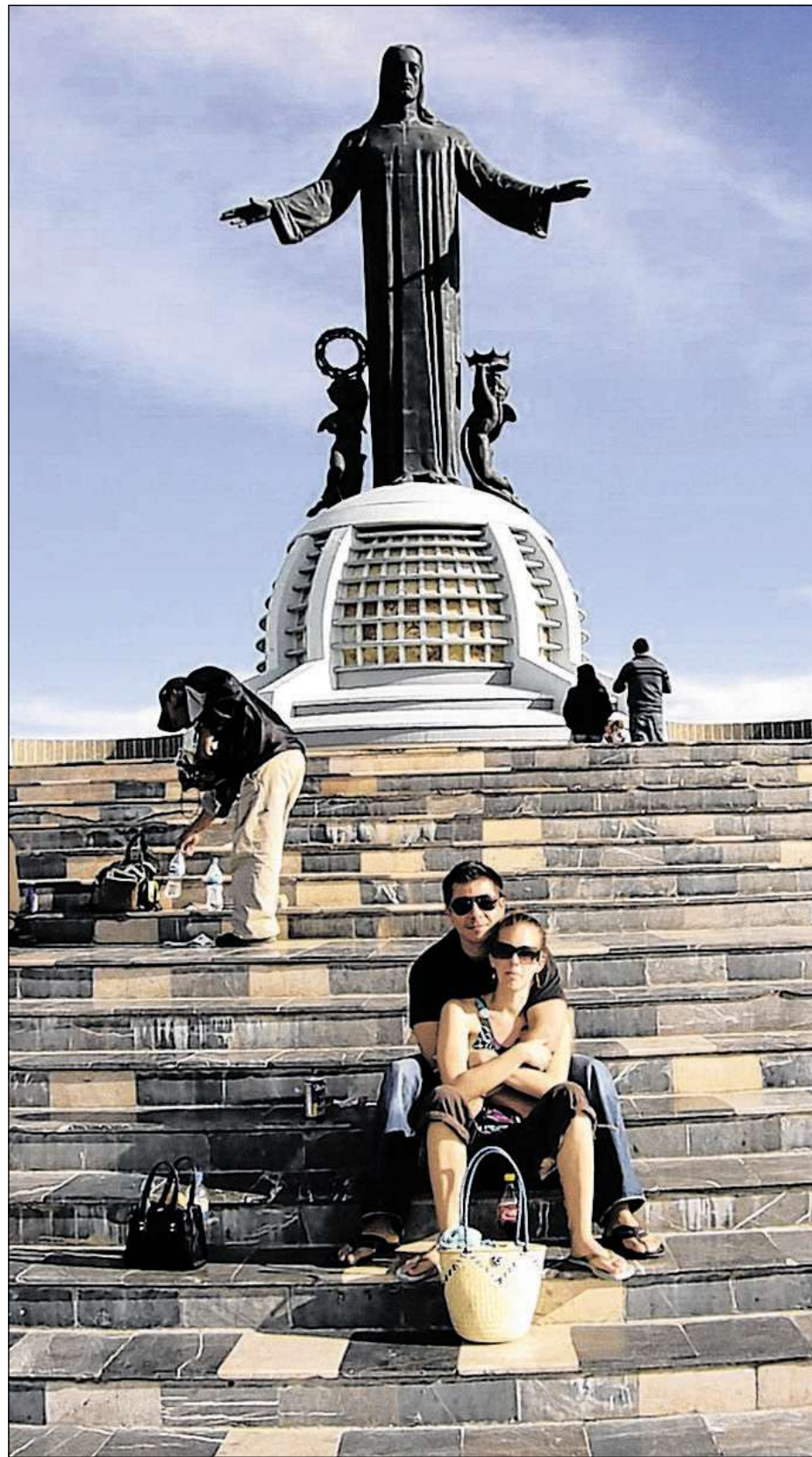
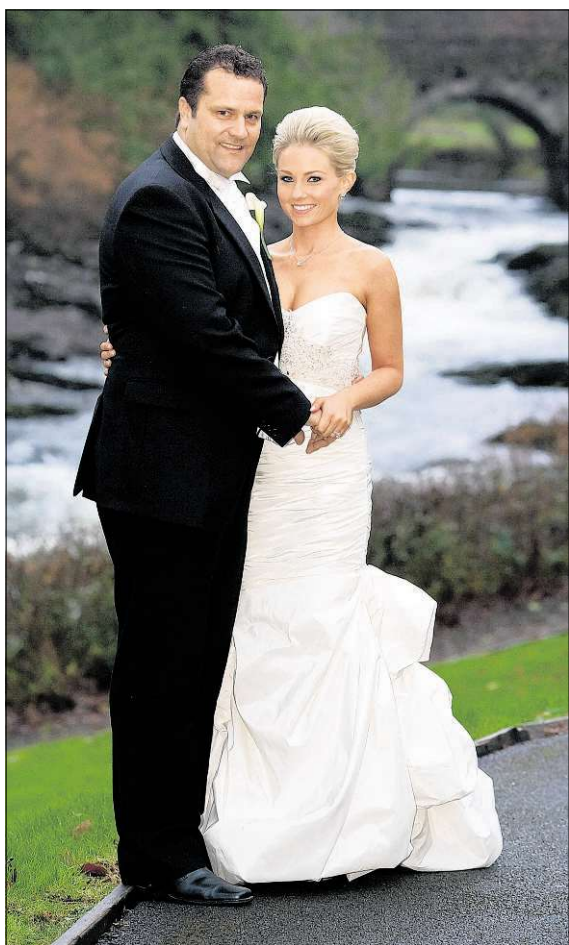
Emigrant couples such as Mason and Keane make up almost a quarter of the total weddings booked for the Strand Hotel this year, a significant increase on previous years, according to the general manager Seán Lally. "Skype enables us to communicate with the couples on a more personal level, and allows them to build a rapport with their coordinator prior to their big day," he says. Demand for the service so far has been high, and Lally believes it is a service that all hotels will introduce in time.

Thys Vogels of WeddingsinKerry.ie, an online wedding directory, says enquiries from Irish couples who have recently moved overseas have increased by 15 per cent in the past two years. The group expect the figure to double in the next 18 to 24 months as the cohort of young people who are currently adjusting to their new lives abroad take the next life step.

According to Karen Birney, editor of WeddingsOnline.ie, family, friends and famili-



Right, Sarah Hilliard and Hugo Vera Ugalde in Mexico. Above, Cora Mason and John Keane in Sydney. Left, Susie Donnelly and Paudie Hanley on their wedding day in Kenmare, Co Kerry. Photograph: Roger Overall



It is important for me to know that there is someone on the other side taking care of our wedding

Mexico: Sarah Hilliard and Hugo Vera Ugalde

SARAH HILLIARD AND Hugo Vera Ugalde have lived together in Querétaro in Mexico for three years, where she works as an English language coordinator in a private bilingual school, and he runs a transport business. Hilliard was visiting her family in Killarney for Christmas when Ugalde flew over to surprise her.

"I got such a shock when he walked in. We went for a walk near Muckross Lake on New Year's Day and he went down on one knee in the mud and proposed. I said yes and then things got a bit crazy," she says.

In the three days they had left in Ireland before returning to Mexico, the couple managed to organise the church service, book a photographer, choose a hotel for the reception, and buy Hilliard's wedding dress. Since then they have finalised the invitations and arranged the cake.

"We decided to have a small wedding as there won't be a big crowd from Mexico and we want to try to have equal numbers on both sides," Hilliard says. "We will have to have a civil wedding in Mexico as well so those who can't make the trip will still get to celebrate with us."

The couple are confident that everything will be well organised in advance of their Irish wedding in July, but arrangements for the Mexican civil ceremony in two weeks' time are much more last-minute.

"We had to pay an official court translator to translate my birth certificate, and we'll also have to do blood tests in order to get permission to marry," she says. "The earliest we can submit all the papers is two weeks before the date of the wedding, which cuts things very fine if anything goes wrong. Nothing is straightforward here."

arity are the main factors luring emigrants back for this important day in their lives. "A lot of people who have to leave the country still see their home in Ireland and will hopefully still want to return when the country gets back on its feet," she says. "If they see themselves returning to bring up kids or to settle down, they may want to be married here too before they get a chance to do that."

Organising a wedding from another country is going to be stressful, but according to Birney, couples who give themselves plenty of time, do their research, ask around for recommendations, and trust others at home to help them out, can organise a very successful celebration without having to make the trip back to Ireland before the big day.

Skype, email and interactive websites have made it easier than ever to make arrangements and to envisage what places and services are like without experiencing them in person in advance.

Back in Sydney, Mason and Keane have spoken to Kennedy several times since their first hotel tour, chosen the colour scheme for

the reception room based on what they saw on screen, and booked a videographer and a band.

Next time they speak to her, they will discuss the menu and a timetable for the big day. "It is important for me to know that there is someone on the other side taking care of our wedding who I can trust to give us the best day," says Mason.

Share your views and experiences with **Generation Emigration**, The Irish Times forum by and for Irish citizens abroad, curated by Ciara Kenny

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New York: Susie and Paudie Hanley

Susie Donnelly and Paudie Hanley both grew up in Kenmare, but it wasn't until Donnelly moved to New York three years ago that she met Paudie, who had been living there for 18 years, for the first time. They fell in love, and after getting engaged while on holiday on the Virgin Islands in 2010, the first big decision they had to make as a couple was where to hold the wedding.

"I love New York and I did consider getting married over here, but Paudie was definite that he wanted to go back to Ireland," says Donnelly. "Our families really wanted us to have the wedding in Kenmare, and because we are both from the same town, it was easy to pick the location."

Donnelly flew over and back to Ireland four times in the 12 months before the wedding last December to make arrangements. "I was very lucky to be in a position where I was able to do that," she says. "It would be very difficult to try to arrange everything over email or the phone from the other

side of the world." The pair married in the church where they had both gone to Mass growing up, and the reception was held with 250 guests in the Kenmare Bay Hotel, where several of Donnelly's friends had hosted their weddings.

"Some of our friends from New York don't have their papers, so they couldn't travel, which was a shame," she says. "If we had had it in the US, we would have had all our New York friends there, but many of our Irish friends and family wouldn't have been able to come, given the circumstances with the economy."

Those who couldn't make it to Ireland sent messages by email and text throughout the day, and the newlyweds spoke to some over Face Time, an internet video link similar to Skype. "They were able to see me with my dress on," she says. "It was great they could share in the excitement of the day."

Roger Rabbit meets Roddy Doyle on BBC

JOE GRIFFIN

'Roy', a cartoon schoolboy trying to make it in the real-life world, is the latest international success for Irish animators

EVERYBODY LOVES an underdog. Roy represents two for the price of one: first, there's the title character, the animated schoolboy trying to fit in with a non-animated world; second, we have the small animation company, Dublin-based Jam media, punching above its weight and creating an internationally sold, award-winning series.

Irish animation has blossomed in recent years, with Oscar-nominations for *Brown Bag* (creators of *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* and *Granny O'Grinn*), international

distribution deals and Disney collaborations for Boulder Media (for *Randy Cunningham: Ninth Grade Ninja*), and now the continued success of Jam Media's *Roy*. Shot and set in Dublin, it's co-produced by BBC and RTE.

John Rice, chief executive for the company, and executive producer of *Roy*, describes the pitching process as "a happy accident".

"We created a film in 2008 called *Badly Drawn Roy*," he says. "That was a 22-minute short about the only animated character in the world, and his problems getting work in animation. It was a unique format – a pseudo-documentary through the eyes of an animated character. That did the rounds with the film festivals. We had material previously commissioned by BBC, and we showed *Roy* to them and they loved it, even though it was for an adult audience."

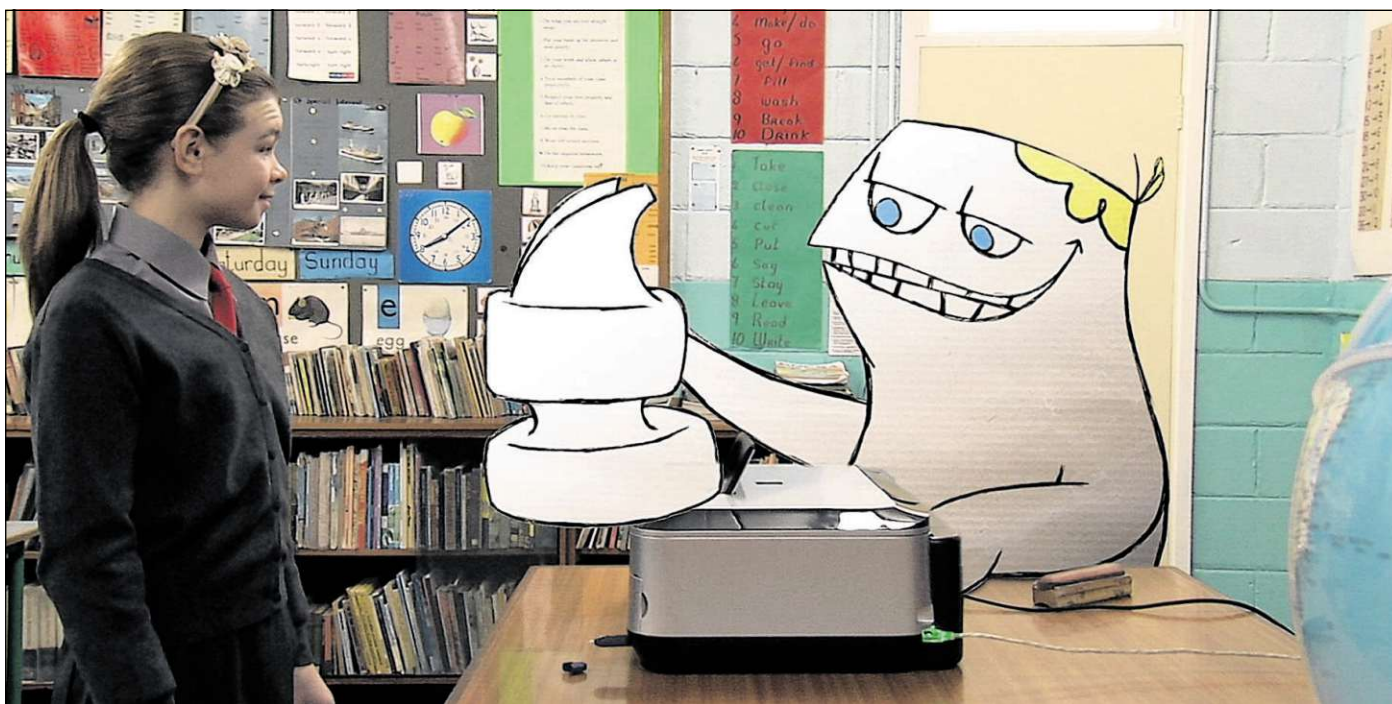
"[The BBC] thought this fish-out-of-water concept would be relatable to a young audience, and

that it's essentially about being different. We developed it as a kids' show called *Roy*. Then we got the first series commissioned in 2009 and it won best children's programme in the Royal Television Awards and was nominated for two Baftas.

"It's sold to Australia and Scandinavia now [18 international territories in total], so it's selling well. I think it's because there's nothing you can directly compare it to in the TV landscape. It's a different show."

As well as the premise, the setting is quite individual; although the animated boy in a live-action world is fantastical, everything else in Roy's environment is commonplace and relatable. He lives in Ballyfermot, with his mum, resentful teenage sister and taxi-driving dad (played by Simon Delaney), and the show is shot in a low-key, mockumentary style.

The humour is both slapstick (tweeting birds appear when Roy hits his head) and earthy, with believable supporting characters,



A screenshot from the second series of *Roy*

from supportive teachers to bullying classmates. Is it fair to describe it as *Roger Rabbit* meets Roddy Doyle? "I suppose in terms of how it's made it's not unlike *Roger Rabbit*," admits Rice.

"We use an orange on a stick [in place of Roy when shooting], as well as computer-generated effects. It also has a working-class Dublin sensibility. When pitching

it to a station in the States I was comparing it to *Alf*."

"We're big fans of classic Disney, but we would've also looked at *The Office*, in terms of pseudo-documentary style. When making *Roy*, it's labour-intensive. We'd use a 12-week live action shoot, and 12-month animation compositing. We would have looked at *The Office* and how long

David Brent is on screen, to tell us how long Roy has to be onscreen to become a central character. Brent is onscreen roughly 11 minutes per show, like Roy. For animation, we'd look at classics like Disney and *Roger Rabbit*."

The show is currently in the top-five-rated children's shows on UK TV, and a third series has already been commissioned. This must be

Watch online

Watch a promo for the second series of *Roy* at iti.ms/GFQBd

reassuring for the BBC. "I think certainly on series two they were less worried," says Rice. "First time around they were worried as we hadn't done it before. They'd look over scripts, but largely their input was very helpful, and not intrusive. They know their audience better than anyone; when you're producing for them it's good to have that information."

Ultimately, the show works not despite Roy's differences, but because of them. "Someone said it's a celebration of being different," says Rice. "The drama is: does he suppress his 'cartoonness' to fit in? Or should he just run wild? That's where the comedy and the drama happen."

The second series of *Roy* is on RTE 2 on April 6th at 5pm, and will be broadcast each Friday for eight weeks until May 25th. There will then be a bumper week of *Roy* with the final five episodes running from May 28th-June 1st