

Let it bnb

The Airbnb system has worked in more than 190 countries on one million listings, including 4,000 castles, 9,000 boats and 2,800 tree houses, writes **Tanya Sweeney**, who meets some Irish people who let their homes on the travel website

As would befit a digital company expanding at a rate of knots, Airbnb's European HQ office on Dublin's Silicon Docks is truly a thing to behold.

Enter the reception of the imposing premises and it becomes clear from the outset that the company – which allows people to list their rooms or property for short-term rental – is into hospitality in a big way. An affable receptionist beckons visitors in from behind a reception styled as an Irish bar. Beyond that the office – designed by architects Heneghan Peng – is eye-popping, to say the least.

A common-or-garden Irish workplace it ain't: amid the bilingual staff, you'll find a life-sized model giraffe, an Irish telephone box, meeting rooms styled on actual Airbnb listings, an "Irish hill" of bean bags used for meetings and walls of snacks. An executive chef has recently been hired for Airbnb's cafeteria.

It's not so much a workplace as a Disneyland for digital nerds.

The public are rarely interested in the grinding gears behind many digital companies, but then Airbnb is one of the very few that has a knock-on effect in real life.

Airbnb operates thus: ordinary folk, with a spare room or vacant property, upload a listing to the Airbnb site and offer their space for a nightly or weekly fee. Both visitor and host are verified through a number of checks: mobile number, Facebook profile and, in some cases, passport.

A photographer from Airbnb takes pictures of the property, giving it the feel of a glossy interiors magazine (presumably, to create a cohesive aesthetic on the website itself). Once the visitors arrive and are satisfied with the property, the payment is wired to the property owner's account 24 hours after arrival.

Thus far, the system has worked in over 190 countries on one million listings, including 80,000 villas, 4,000 castles, 9,000 boats and 2,800 tree houses.

"Outbound travel, inbound travel and



Deborah and Ultan Herr pictured in the house they let out through Airbnb.
PHOTOGRAPH: AIDAN CRAWLEY

listing numbers in Ireland are all roughly around the 200 per cent year-on-year growth mark," says James McClure, general manager for Airbnb UK & Ireland.

"We are seeing an astonishing growth in the number of Airbnb hosts and listings all around the world. Over 30 million guests have stayed with Airbnb since our founding in 2008, with 20 million taking place in 2014."

Airbnb was born in San Francisco when two of its founders, Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, created an ad hoc B&B in their loft during a design conference. Short on funds, the pair accommodated three guests on air mattresses and provided homemade breakfast. With actor Ashton Kutcher on board as a notable investor, Airbnb was launched in March 2009 – and with it, an entirely new way of travelling.

Perhaps it's not surprising to find that a number of Irish property owners would habitually use the site as hosts; it is, after all, a rather neat way not just to earn extra money, but to meet people from different coun-

tries, too. It could be argued, too, that there's something congenital in the Irish that enjoys talking the country up to tourists and showing their knowledge of the country off.

"People start hosting on Airbnb for a number of reasons," observes McClure. "One obvious appeal for homeowners is the financial gain. According to our Economic Impact Study in nine cities around the world, 47 per cent of hosts say that hosting makes them make ends meet, and 82 per cent of hosts share only the home in which they live. Hosts enjoy meeting people from all around the world and have

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life-changing experiences every day.”

Tanya O'Halloran, a secondary school art teacher based in Citywest, has been renting out her spare room via Airbnb for the past two years.

"I put my listing up on Friday morning and within two hours I got my first booking," she recalls. "Opening your place up to stranger is nerve-racking but then two Danish girl arrived who wanted to go to a gig that night, and they were great. I teach art history, so I get to enjoy telling people who stay with me about Irish culture, and what museums to go to."

During the summer holidays, she opens her home to corporate workers during the week and tourists on the weekend.

"This year, I'm becoming more confident in my hosting," says O'Halloran. "It's nice to have a bit of company, too. Over St Patrick's weekend there were so many people coming and going that was great fun. It never feels like a chore . . . you do get some people who want to sit and chat constantly, but I've never had any hosting disasters. The chatting to strangers can zap your energy a bit, so you really do have to be up for it."

Ultan and Debbie Herr rent out their formidable Portobello property to the tune of €280 a day, and they split their time between Dublin and Blackrock, Louth. Their pricing system means that most of their guests are in their 40s or 50s.

"We put our heart and soul into the design of the house, but we never got the use of it," says Herr, referring to the property in Portobello. "Deb was dead set against Airbnb but once we looked into it, we saw it was a perfect fit."

Recently, the Herrs have been conferred with "superhost" status by Airbnb, meaning that they have garnered consistently stellar reviews on the property from visitors. The superhost system is ostensibly a way for Airbnb to ensure that the experience for visitors is less about a bloodless transaction of money and more of a warm, interactive hospitality experience.



Airbnb hosts Tanya O'Halloran, left, pictured in her apartment in City West, Dublin; and below, Wayne Gilsean pictured on his street in Dublin 8. PHOTOGRAPHS: AIDAN CRAWLEY

"We have a warm fire and open space," explains Herr. "I leave them espresso, bread, milk, fruit, a bottle of wine and some maps and guides to Dublin. These days people expect a personal touch. We haven't had a bad experience yet, touch wood. In fact, some of our guests have invited us to stay in their own holiday homes for free."

It is easy to see what a guest might get out of an Airbnb experience. A growing number of tourists, not least Airbnb's early adopters, are sidestepping the typical open-top bus experience, preferring instead to mainline into authentic quotidian life in their destination of choice.

With an Airbnb on hand to answer questions and provide recommendations, it's all too easy to live like a local.

"I use Airbnb in cities like London and New York," explains Herr. "Rather than stay in a midtown Marriott, I can live in a Soho loft apartment with my whole family for less money."

Fraternalising with visitors notwithstanding, there is the not-inconsiderable task of keeping a property to the standards expected. With every Airbnb listing expected to be in turnkey condition as a matter of course, this often means rounds of cleaning and stocktaking for hosts – not unlike running a traditional B&B, in fact.

"Luckily, Deb and I are houseproud," notes Herr. "We expect the house to be clean as if going to someone else's houses. Sure, we have to clean toilets and change bedclothes, but given the compensation we get (financially), it's no problem. Sometimes we hire a cleaner for €90, or we bring a friend along to help us with the cleaning."

So far, so fantastic. Little wonder, then,



that some Irish people are considering it as an actual career. On his Lovin Dublin blog, entrepreneur Harbison extolled the virtues of using Airbnb as a way to "pay off your mortgage in half the time".

Until recently, Louth-based Wayne Gilsean worked in the restaurant business. Yet with two properties in Dublin 8 under his belt, it wasn't long before he saw the potential in Airbnbing and quit his day job. His Portobello property is already booked solid throughout the summer.

"I'm going to try and make it a thing," he reveals. "It's definitely worthwhile to do the drive up and down [from Louth]."

Much like the Herrs, Gilsean goes above and beyond the call of duty for his short-term tenants, going so far as to leave breakfast, toiletries and flowers in his prop-

erty. "I try to be more than someone just handing them a key to my place," he says. "I had some guys from Belgium stay recently and I got on so well with them I ended up going out for pints with them. I also leave Guinness, pasta, shampoo, phone chargers – things that someone might run out of."

Thus far, and much like Herr, Gilsean has been blessedly impervious to disaster: "One guest broke a key rack by accident, but they left a tenner for it, which was ridiculous, as it was only a few quid," he laughs. "One woman came with her children so I bought a few puzzles and DVDs for the kids, and she complained that there were only a couple of DVDs."

"But that's the type of person who is better off staying in a hotel, really."

Quite how a global operation as sizeable as Airbnb has managed to run on such a smooth wave of mutual politesse, trust and respect is anyone's guess. The site is set up in such a way as to protect both hosts and visitors from instances of theft, vandalism or wrongdoing in general. The property owner doesn't get paid until 24 hours after the visitor's arrival, and both parties get to "review" each other on the site. So far, the system has largely worked, creating an element of goodwill between both sides.

Instances of burglary or violence are few and far between: the review system on the Airbnb website means that everyone is incentivised to keep their proverbial noses clean. Each listing is protected by the company's Host Guarantee which – a handful of caveats aside – will reimburse hosts for up to €700,00 in damage to an eligible property.

"Like any other hospitality or hotel company, nothing is perfect, but bad experiences are extremely rare," McClure says. "Over 30 million total guests have stayed travelled with Airbnb and we wouldn't be growing at such a rate if people weren't having such great experiences."

While Airbnb has doubtless changed the entire hospitality landscape irrevocably, one question looms large. Has it hurt the hotel sector or, for that matter, the availability of long-term rental properties in Ireland? Seemingly not: the Hilton Group recorded record profits in the first quarter of 2014.

Threshold, too, notes that whole the country is in the middle of a crisis due to lack of supply of properties, although it has no tangible data on Irish landlords reverting to the Airbnb model of rental.

For now, Airbnb continues to expand not only its Irish workforce, but the capabilities of the site itself. Predictably, McClure is circumspect on any and all developments. It's rather telling that a cluster of imitators have cropped up: Misterbnb (misterbnb.com) is a gay-friendly site offering the same service. It was probably only a matter of time, too before Can I Stay With You While I Rent My Place on Airbnb (canistaywithyouwhileirentmyplaceonairbnb.com) materialised.

In the meantime, Gilsean offers some advice for those curious about making a foray into hosting. "Don't take a booking without verifications, but most importantly of all make sure you have the time to do it properly," he says. "Do it for the right reasons too; mistakes are made when you get greedy and just accept the money. The more work you put in, the more rewarding it will be. At the very least, it will help pay for your own holiday."

For more information see airbnb.com