

The Gauls at Home in Erin

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

DUBLIN — This snug Irish capital might seem an unlikely destination for young French men and women. The weather would jar anyone from the Côte d'Azur. And the food is basically what the Michelin restaurant guide might consider a form of boiled stew.

Yet thousands of people — many just out of university — are deserting France to live and work here, in a European city that sparkles with economic vibrancy despite a more general sense of stagnation in much of the Continent.

Like many others moving across Europe, they are migrating for jobs, which are far more plentiful in Ireland than in France, where the economy is flabbier, work for young people is scarcer and taxes are higher.

For Europeans, who used to cling to a homebound culture where many people often lived and died within shouting distance of their birthplace, that is a cultural revolution.

Like the United States, Europe is wrestling with immigration problems. But European countries have to deal not only with immigration from places like Africa and Southeast Asia, which they strictly limit, but also from their neighbors in the European Union, who are legally entitled, with some restrictions, to work and live anywhere within Europe's single market.

In Ireland, so many French migrants have arrived that the person who folds back comforters for hotel guests or serves Guinness with dinner seems as likely to come from Lyon these days as from Limerick. By last year, an estimated 20,000 French migrants were working in Ireland, according to French officials, and the number continues to rise.

The only larger modern French "colony" is in Britain, where an estimated 86,000 have found work. In London restaurants these days, the waiters are very often French.

For some countries, like Belgium, migration has become a part of the culture. An estimated 600,000 Belgians, or 8 percent of the population, live and work outside Belgium, and many of them will never return.

But despite language barriers, even countries like France, where migration was once very rare, are changing. In Germany and Italy, growing numbers of young people employed in the banking or financial services are going abroad, often to London or New York.

The migration also lays bare class differences in a Europe that has opened in recent years to Central European countries like Poland and Hungary. While the educated French work in financial services and computers, more menial tasks, like bricklaying or plumbing, are often done by Poles, Lithuanians or Latvians.

Cases of workplace discrimination against migrant workers from Eastern Europe have caused the Irish government some concern, while little or none is aimed at Western Europeans like the French, the Germans or the Italians.

When Moore McDowell, an economist at University College Dublin, was strolling recently near St. Stephen's Green, in central Dublin, he saw scaffolding on a construction site, with a sign, in English and Polish, that read, "No more Poles needed on this building site."

But as for the French, "if they have good English, and a good baccalaureate, there's a demand for them," he said.

"We are close to fully employed, so the Irish economy is sucking in employees across Europe."

Ireland has been one of the great economic success stories of Europe, with real growth, adjusted for inflation, that has been averaging 5 percent to 6 percent annually for many years. Employees for the financial services

and computer industries are in great demand. In the building trades, though, the boom is cooling and demand is weaker.

Indeed, the different speeds at which European economies grow, or fail to, has created splits across Europe, yet they do not always explain migration. In Central Europe, for instance, growth rates are far greater than those of the much richer countries of the west, yet higher wages still lure Central Europeans to countries like Germany, France, Britain and Ireland.

So great is the Western migration from the East that Western businessmen doing business in Eastern European countries like Poland complain of an inability to find laborers like carpenters, masons or plumbers.

Across Europe, the process has created a hierarchy, with Western Europeans like the French or Germans at the top, Eastern Europeans in the middle, working mainly in construction, and Africans and Asians at the bottom of the labor heap, working in restaurant kitchens, or in garbage removal.

Speeding the procession from France are John Murat, 29, of Lyon, and Laurent Girard-Claudon, a 29-year-old Parisian who founded Approach People, an employment firm specializing in finding jobs for French people in Ireland. In 2002, their first year in business together, they placed 10 people; this year, they expect to place 350.

From four or five employees at the start, the company has grown to 21. Every day, about 500 French men and women visit its Web site, approachpeople.com.

"It's a developing game," Mr. Girard-Claudon said.

Much of the company's growth, he said, is because of the presence in Ireland of big American corporations. American clients of Approach People include Dell, Symantec, I.B.M., Microsoft, Oracle and Apple.

Both Mr. Murat and Mr. Girard-Claudon became devotees of Ireland after deserting France in the mid-1990's in search of employment. To figure out why Ireland was producing jobs on an assembly line while France stagnated, they looked around at different businesses in Dublin.

By contrast, in France an employee must pay tax, pension, unemployment and social security charges of more than 40 percent; the similar charges in Ireland are no more than 16 percent, they discovered.

They also learned about the differences in vacation policy: the French usually receive six or seven weeks of vacation a year; the Irish get four to five weeks.

Moreover, Irish employers have much more flexibility to hire and fire.

"You can still have a success story in Ireland," Mr. Murat said.

At the Approach People offices in Blackrock, a southern suburb of Dublin, Frederic Nerot, 29, a native of Orleans in the Loire Valley of France, said he had come not so much to flee French unemployment as to gain real work experience and improve his English.

"I'm not running away from France, but looking for experience," he said.

Earlier he had spent six months traveling through Asia, before deciding to come to Ireland. He recently arrived in Dublin, dropping his bag at a youth hostel before seeking out the Approach People office.

He was in Thailand last fall, he said, when an article in The Bangkok Post described the riots in France protesting the liberalization of employment laws. "To have a viewpoint is easy, to have a solution is harder," he said. "The French are great protestors."

Over a Guinness in a Dublin pub, Paul-Henry Walter agreed. Mr. Walter, 27, a Parisian who finished a degree in business at Lille and then held some odd jobs before coming to Ireland, said he was angered by the demonstrations.

"We have to be flexible," he said, "whether we're working in Marseille or Dublin."

The French are struck by the easy collegiality of the Irish, noting that work-related problems are often resolved not in the office but over a pint after work.

"In France on Friday afternoon, you say to your colleagues, 'Have a good weekend,' and 'I'll see you on Monday,' " Mr. Girard-Claudon said. "Here, it's 'Where are we going to drink one tonight?' "

They are also struck by the ease and speed with which business decisions are made in Ireland. "It went very quickly," said Mr. Walter, who has been working in Ireland for six months, describing his hiring. "I applied. I got a call, 'You start in two weeks.' "

He said he was working full time with an open-ended contract. "I'm basically in sales, computer solutions, selling to customers in France," he said. "All the administrative work is in English."

Mr. Walter shares a house with a fellow Frenchman, a man from New Zealand and a Slovenian woman.

Would he ever go back to France? "If I found something," he said, "I would prefer to stay in Paris."

But he hasn't. And some people from French are starting to settle down here. Mr. Murat, who goes by the name John rather than his native Jean-Christophe, married an Irish woman, and his daughter, with her blue eyes and blond hair, is more Irish than French, he says.

So, is the migration a brain drain, or simply postgraduate training for young Europeans who will one day return to their native countries? Probably both, Mr. Girard-Claudon said.

"There are those who want one to two years to gain experience and improve their English to find a better job in France," he said. "And then there are people here for four to five years, to develop a career here, maybe go back, maybe not."

Robert Hancké, a Belgian economist at the London School of Economics, said France was among the European economies that had benefited most from globalization, opening markets to French products and investment. Yet globalization, and the flexibility and migration of people that accompany it, remains a bugaboo.

"They call it this big horrible thing around the corner," he said.

But while many native French are worried about the impact of open markets on their local traditions, François Peschaire, 25 and an employee of Approach People, is among those who just want to get ahead.

"I can do without French cheese, French bread, other things," he said. "I'm happy to find it, but it's not a difficulty to do without it."