



# ASIA UNPLUGGED for IRELAND

**David Young** reports on the Asian Pacific Irish Business Forum and the exciting business opportunities it offers for Ireland and the Irish.



WE IRISH HAVE SOME GREAT SUCCESS STORIES ACROSS THE REGION THAT SEEM TO HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT RATHER THAN DESIGN AND ARE DEPENDENT ON THE ENTREPRENEURIAL FLAIR OF THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED.

College of Surgeons, now Chief Executive of the National Sports Campus Development Authority - on how to harness the merits of such a gathering of talented and ambitious people.

As all the best ones are, the idea they shaped was a simple one: to use the stage provided by the annual Games to connect the vast GAA network with the numerous Irish business groups in the region, so they could boost each other's profiles. Ryan, currently deployed in New York as Deputy Consul General, and O'Brien could see how doing so would start a ball rolling that would in time inspire a real and very practical cooperation across many different nations. And thereby sell Ireland.

The idea soon grew legs. Thanks to that Eureka moment, a small group of Singapore-based Irish men tweaked and developed the initiative further. Acutely aware of the growing momentum the Asian GAA finals were gathering – year on year, drawing greater numbers of people from all over the globe – they set about adding another dimension to the phenomenon.

“We felt that there would be a real benefit from connecting those playing and attending the games with senior Irish diaspora in Asia,” explains Paraic McGrath, Chairman of the Asian County Board. “We spotted that the finals were the largest gathering of Irish people in the region, outside of St Patrick’s Day parades. And we thought we couldn’t let the occasion pass by.”

And so, almost casually, the GAA became an integral binding link - connecting clubs and businesses. According to McGrath, it’s important to note that this all involves both Irish and non-Irish members throughout Asia and the Gulf. Amazingly, the APIBF is run today by a team of volunteers in a multitude of Asian locations in concert with an Ireland-based group. And every year, on the eve of the Asian Gaelic Games, this tireless assembly makes the forum happen. Why? Because from their efforts, business grows and new opportunities are generated.

According to Paul Scales, a Bangkok-based Dubliner, working in overseas property investment, the current focus is very much on Asia when it comes to seizing opportunities for commercial growth. Extremely experienced in this part of the world, Scales identifies with the keenness of the APIBF to create a conduit for Irish companies looking to expand as the key to success: “The demographics and potential are mind-boggling and we ignore it at our peril.”

And why is it necessary to convene those with similar interests? Would sheer tenacity on an individual basis not secure the same returns? “We Irish have some great success stories across the region that seem to happen by accident rather than design and are dependent on the entrepreneurial flair of the individuals involved,” Scales cautions.

Therefore, we would be stronger if we traded in unison, rather than on solo

The Asian Pacific Ireland Business Forum (APIBF) has made a stunning entrance to the commercial event scene, becoming ‘the’ annual get-together for Irish professionals interested in developing trade relations in the Asian and Gulf regions. And incredibly, it’s only four years old.

From the very outset, the APIBF has enjoyed phenomenal support, both at home and abroad, with the likes of Dick Spring, former Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, as one its patrons. And he has more than asserted the forum’s significance and innate potential:

“The APIBF is now the most important gathering of Irish business people in Asia, positioned to play a close and supporting role to the Irish Government’s Asia strategy. Convening professionals doing business in

Asia, its members play a vital role in expanding Irish trade with Asia.” (The Irish Examiner, June 2011.)

For any enterprise contemplating an overseas dimension, the APIBF is an absolute must on their radar as it simply offers too much to be ignored. It brings Irish business in contact with experts on Asian culture and senior professionals working in that part of the world, who in turn proffer invaluable insights into the commercial mechanics of getting established in unfamiliar markets.

#### OPPORTUNE BEGINNINGS

There’s certainly something about Mary. In 2002, President McAleese visited the hugely successful Asian Gaelic Games, which were held in Thailand. Her presence prompted a conversation between Peter Ryan, Department of Foreign Affairs, and Barry O’Brien, at the time a Senior Executive with the Royal

The Asian Gaelic Games continues to grow in popularity.



their new surroundings,” he says. “Gaelic games and regular tournaments offer ex-pats fantastic opportunities to connect with their peers. They’re invaluable to their personal development and their business connectivity.”

“In the next three to five years,” McGrath adds, “I can see more than 500 people attending our annual forum.” There’s an undeniable drive and energy to a growing business initiative that has cleverly combined its savviness and personality. “We are out here - ready to contact, connect and create opportunities for Irish companies and individuals.” says McGrath. And he has a final proviso: “Oh, and bring your boots if you’re coming!”

#### A UNIQUE PLATFORM

And so, the APIBF and GAA collaboration offers a privileged vantage point for Irish enterprise to continue to view ‘new Asian realities’. Through joint conferences and subsequent connections, Irish business will go on to meet the specialists who will steer them with the kind of advice that is essential when it comes to navigating key sectors, such as new technologies; financial services; pharmaceutical and life sciences; education services; and food and tourism.

Quick on the uptake, the APIBF has produced a directory of business groups and key contacts, which is supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: a must-have item for any business pondering a venture into new territory. Apart from being an unrivalled reservoir of practical knowledge across Asia for its members, the APIBF astutely opens doors and introduces people. Making things happen, you could say.

As Barry O’Brien points out: “There’s no substitute for being excellent at what you do. You can have all the entrées in the world but unless you’re excellent, you’ll gain no traction. And someone else will beat you to it. The Irish though have a capacity for rising to a challenge when it comes along. I said that at the inaugural APIBF conference, and I still stand over it.”

“And for those companies contemplating a move into this market, I’d advise getting your contacts sorted first. Have a very good friend in Singapore or Hong Kong. They’ll be integral to everything you do,” he adds, with a smile. “And with the economic growth in evidence in Asia - 8 to 15% a year - it’s hugely attractive. You’ve just got to go where the growth is.”

After that, you could say - it’s a case of just going for it. **TM**

missions. It would, without doubt, give Ireland a stronger footing when it comes to competing on an international stage with our larger European neighbours. And he adds: “There is potential for Irish firms to replicate in Asia the strategic relationships they enjoy in Ireland with US and European firms.”

#### WHAT DOES IT DO FOR YOU?

Simply put, the APIBF is a link. It connects Irish business groups throughout the Asia-Pacific and Gulf regions, and facilitates the exchange of ideas and resources to further the interests of its members. This pooling of expertise, ability and ambition is progressing at such a rate that the focus this year has extended to greater engagement with Ireland itself.

The immediate aim is to illustrate to an Irish audience just how to engage with a growing overseas network built on Irish acumen. That is, in essence, to tap into a diaspora’s willingness to foster Ireland-based commercial fortunes by supporting their investment efforts abroad. Without these established contacts, the task of forging paths into distant markets would be considerably more daunting.

“The challenges faced by all within the APIBF lie within finding and retaining talent; understanding the markets in which we deal and work,” says Paraic McGrath, “and getting connected to the key decision makers in each country.” Hence, the APIBF offers its members different passage into a commercial arena that is ripe for engagement. And so the obstacles faced are altogether more familiar and surmountable.

Already this year, the APIBF hosted its first forum in Ireland. Courtesy of the GAA, Croke Park provided the ideal venue to illustrate, against a sporting backdrop, just



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how businesses can connect enterprise in Ireland to the numerous overseas locations in the ever-expanding APIBF network. For Irish businesses interested in exploring the limitless opportunities available through the APIBF, and beyond, one step is simple and straightforward. Through the portal of [www.apibf.com](http://www.apibf.com), there is a list of contacts and connections, ready to be made.

And the GAA dimension? Well, in McGrath’s opinion it’s one of Ireland’s strongest suits - our sense of national identity, and the way in which we express ourselves. “Irish people leave home for a variety of reasons. And when they come over to Asia, they find a sense of ‘parish’ ... in most cities, which is crucial to getting integrated into

