

The picture has stuck. Brit still there when last orders are called. Irishman with another pint in his hand. Weekend planned around getting drunk. BBC crews have been pointing cameras at the same Saturday-night streets for years, and the rest of Europe has taken the footage as evidence. Of course the British Isles drink hardest.

They don't. Not by volume. Recorded sales in 2023 put Germany at 10.6 litres of pure alcohol per adult, France at 10.4, Ireland at 9.4, Britain at 9.3, Sweden at 7.4. Portugal and Latvia were higher than any of them. The peculiar thing about the islands is what a litre does once it has been poured, and how quickly.

In France and Sweden the glass tends to sit on the table with the food. More wine, less beer and spirits, fewer spikes. Germany is a beer country, and a less gentle one than the postcard. More than two in five German men binge at least once a month. A heavy night in Munich, though, is not what the high street is built on.

On the islands it is. People go out to get drunk. About half the alcohol-related violence in England and Wales happens inside pubs and clubs or just outside the door. Westminster sold longer opening hours in 2003 as a dose of continental café life. The night got longer. The café did not arrive.

Sweden has been drifting towards that calmer pattern for years, mostly because the state shop and the duty have made a proper binge both expensive and a faff to organise. French drinkers still put away more than the British. They make less of a production of it.

The annual total is the wrong number to watch. Watch the clock. The ONS logged 10,473 alcohol-specific deaths in the United Kingdom in 2023, 15.9 for every 100,000 people, the highest count on the books and 38 per cent up on 2019. Scotland and Northern Ireland were worst. 2024 came in a little lower and still sat at a level nobody had seen for decades. Liver deaths in Britain have increased fivefold since the 1950s. France and Italy halved theirs after 1980. Germany's burden is large and shrinking. Britain's has been rising while almost every other way of dying has receded.

Ireland used to fit the joke. Consumption there has fallen by more than a third since 2001. Mid-table EU, if you look at the spreadsheet. The joke survived the spreadsheet.

Alcohol causes several cancers. Most drinkers do not know that. In England 12.9 per cent will say so without being nudged; 47 per cent get there once the question has done the work for them. The liver, everyone knows. Swedes are no wiser. Forty-three per cent will accept that heavy drinking raises the cancer risk. Fourteen per cent will say the same of a modest habit. Irish and French respondents do better. If you cannot see the risk, a higher price looks like a

lecture. Systembolaget has produced a cautious customer. Cautious is not the same as briefed.

You can see policy in the death rates when anyone bothers to use it. Scotland put a floor under the unit price in 2018, 50 pence then 65. Deaths caused wholly by alcohol fell 13.4 per cent, and the fall was steepest in the poorest postcodes, about 150 a year. Ireland legislated a price floor, advertising limits and drink taken off the open shop floor. It also put the first mandatory cancer warning in the world on the label, due in 2026, shoved to 2028 after the producers had been in. The rest of the Act still landed next to a drop in drinking.

Scrap the Swedish monopoly and the models have consumption up by about a fifth, with another 800 to 1,400 deaths a year. France did most of the work without a price war. A generation got bored of the daily glass of wine. The *Loi Évin* helped at the edges. Germany has not lifted beer duty since 1993 and does not tax wine. A pint there is cheaper than in almost any other large European market. Drinking is easing off. The hospitals have not had the same luck.

The films had the evening right and the league table wrong. Britain and Ireland are not the heaviest drinkers in Europe. A litre goes further there, and they are the only two in this set whose liver deaths have been heading the wrong way for fifty years.

A state shop and a stiff tax will sit on both the volume and the injuries. The French simply aged out of a habit. Leave the price frozen for thirty years and you do get a decline. You get it late, and you pay for the wait. The Scottish floor does what it says. The Irish law does, until the trade wins another year. England still looks like the tape: a pub trade that needs people drunk, almost no grip on the cancer link, a liver line that will not follow the one across the Channel.

Never the amount. The night.

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