

Islanders across the world take a look at coronavirus and its impact

Report compiled by Katie Macleod in New York

March 29th, 2020: As I write this, I've been "social distancing" inside the flat for 18 days. From our living room window, I can see the skyscrapers of Manhattan in all their glory. If I were to walk to the end of our street, I'd be able to see the Javits Center, the conference centre where I interviewed the team from Essence of Harris just a few weeks ago at America's largest wholesale trade show. It's now a makeshift field hospital, with emergency beds lined up in rows by the National Guard, created to cope with New York's 53,000 COVID-19 cases.

My husband and I live on the border between New York and New Jersey, so the actions of both states affect us. Our neighbourhood has a police-enforced curfew between 10pm and 5am, and the local park has been locked to prevent people from gathering. All schools and non-essential businesses are closed, and the restaurants that are surviving are only allowed to offer takeaway and delivery. Although I'm working from home – I usually spend my work week on the 22nd floor of an office building on Broadway – my husband still has to physically be at work in Queens, which is currently the worst-hit borough of New York City, with almost 10,000 cases.

It's all very surreal and being away from home in times like these makes the experience even stranger. What has it been like for other islanders abroad? I spoke with some of them, and those with island connections, to find out what the situation is like both across the USA and around the world. Here's what they had to say.



Above and below...views from Katie's windows in New York/New Jersey



Empty streets in Maine



Hopeful messages in Maine

Eleanor Barca, from Lower Bayble, lives in Maine, USA.

In Maine, it's starting to affect all of the 16 counties, with the county I live in being the worst affected. Sadly, we just had our first death reported and have more than 160 positive cases. As a result, all non-essential businesses are closed, and a couple of cities have issued stay-in orders for residents. All of the state's parks and most of the beaches have also been closed to stop people from gathering in large groups. All the small business stores in our town have closed, and it now looks so empty as a result.

The experience has been very surreal. It's an anxious time for everyone and each new situation it brings presents new challenges for the local government, health officials, and us as individuals. I'm staying home as my husband is high-risk. Right now, I'm using my vacation time to still get paid, but soon my leave will be unpaid, as it was my choice to stay home. The hubby is working from home, so we keep each other company but you start to soon lose track of which day of the week it is, so keeping a routine or structure has been helping me, along with going for walks. Everyone here is really good about keeping their distance even outside.

I took two pictures when walking today, the one of the street is usually filled with parked cars and many cars at the lights with customers and workers of the local businesses in town. The second is a local restaurant window where they've put messages of hope from local kids. I can see them from my apartment and it's really nice to see.

Lynsey MacRitchie-Mackenzie, from Steinish, lives in Calgary, Alberta.

We are not in official lockdown here in Calgary but it feels like it. Everyone is taking social distancing very seriously so nobody I know is being social in any way and almost everyone is working from home. The roads are quiet and to my knowledge, nothing but the supermarkets are open. We can still go to the provincial parks (which is amazing) but the National Parks have been closed which brings lots of mixed emotions. On one hand it's sad to not be able to spend this time outdoors in the beauty of the National Parks, but I

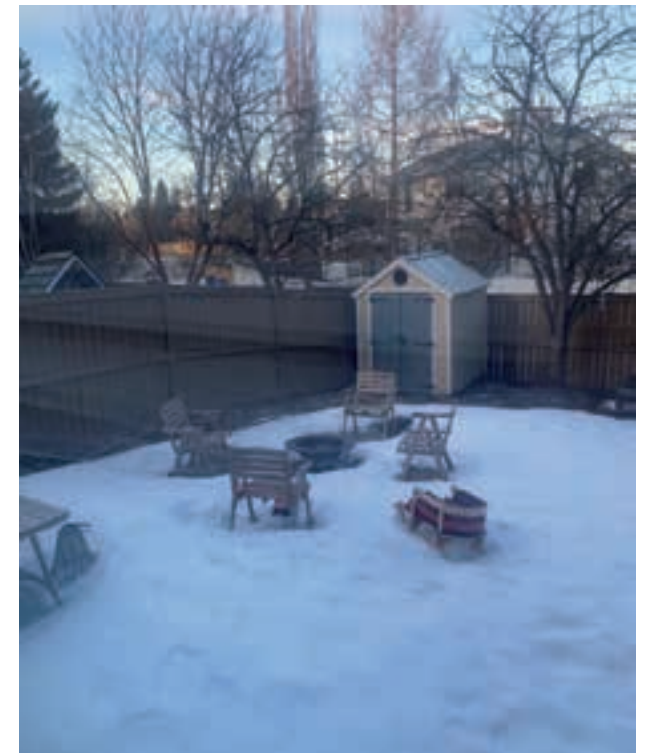
also completely respect their closures. The smaller towns within the parks don't have the infrastructure to deal with big outbreaks. Like I said, we still have provincial parks so we are very lucky. There is so much wide open space here it's easy to escape the claustrophobic feelings even if you just head out for a drive.

I think this has been the strangest experience that anyone of our generation (or others!) has lived through, but living so far from home has definitely added an element of stress/worry/fear (I'm not quite sure what the feeling is) that I don't think some people can understand. On one hand I want to jump on a plane right now but on the other, I'm so aware of the risks that brings not only for our wee family, but for everyone we encounter on our travels and for the entire island upon our arrival there.

It really is a time full of mixed emotions and feelings. Feeling happy to have time in our home together versus feeling scared that we are so far from everyone we love. Worrying about money versus realizing money really isn't important. Being sad we can't get out to national parks versus the awareness that people are losing loved ones because of this, that children in abusive homes can't escape to school because of this, that people are hungry and homeless and can't access help because of this. Our problems feel so small and insignificant and really, the most important thing this whole situation has done is make us grateful and more compassionate.



A empty street view in Calgary



A view from Lynsey's Calgary window

Trudy MacIver Marr, from Carloway, lives in Warrnambool, Australia.

At the time of writing (28th March) in Australia we have just under 3,500 cases... but we are seeing a consistent rise each day. I live in a city on the coast, Warrnambool, and we have five confirmed cases here. Across the country we have a shutdown of non-essential services and social distancing in place. But each state has its own rules and measures. Here in Victoria, schools closed about a week early for Easter holidays, but the government are talking about opening as usual after holidays at this stage. NSW and VIC are the hardest hit so we are anticipating further lockdowns in the next day or two. But the general rule is, stay home unless you have to go out. Parks and beaches and restaurants are closed, but shops are still open (other than those who have chosen to close). Take away is still available from most restaurants.

You can be in groups of no more than 10 people gathered outdoors and you can have people in your home as long as you have room for one person per four square metres. Most people are going a step further and just not inviting people round though which is great to see. I work in a hospital and I still go to work each day so I am still around people in a socially distant type of way. There is a travel ban in place for all Aussies and most of the borders between states are now closed.

It's a bit surreal and probably hasn't completely hit me yet. Because I am still at work, I don't think I feel it as much as those who are home all the time. We have put some things in place at home to make sure we are all doing well, including using technology to keep in touch with friends and family. My daughter, who is almost four, really gets it. She has been really good at understanding hand hygiene and why we can't see her friends or go to her dance class etc.

We try to fill in time with activities and she loves using things like FaceTime and Marco Polo anyway because we use it all the time to keep in touch with family in Scotland. We made the decision this week that the kids can't see their grandparents, which was hard for both sides but it was the right decision to make. We are seeing what's happening around the world, and it feels like I'm watching it escalate here in slow motion. I'm praying that the measure we have in place now will truly "flatten the curve" for us, but only time will tell. Little things make it a bit harder, like my sister and her husband were supposed to come to visit in June but that's now on hold.



The view from Muriel's window

Muriel Macleod, from Eagleton, is currently in Hong Kong visiting family.

Hong Kong has been through all this since the end of January, and many feel the West didn't realise what was happening. Now they do! People here wear masks and sanitise all the time. Our temperature is taken when we have to go out, arrivals on last flights in are quarantined. Life goes on, but there is an acute awareness of sanitising, door handles, toilets, cashpoints are all regularly cleansed.

I feel, like most over here, very intent on doing what has to be done for us all. Sure, I'm missing my visits to Hong Kong's marvellous art scene, and socialising in its wonderful bars and restaurants, but I can settle down into this, because we must. Wish everyone back home a peaceful time during this, in many ways it's brought us a certain sense of a more compassionate reality.

The picture is from my apartment window. I rather like it because this is the building of a new marina, to remind me each day of the one in progress at Goat Island. My flights have all been cancelled so I'm on this side of the world till we get back on track. Perhaps both marinas will be completed by then and people can get back to enjoying this wonderful world.

Bobby MacGillivray, from Benbecula, lives in Orlando, Florida

Each state and county follows different guidelines, which is strange. Our county was 'locked down' from March 27th to April 9th, while friends in other counties have been locked down much longer. Folk are still allowed to walk their pets, exercise, and go to the grocery store.

From a business perspective we have been closed down since March 23rd until April 13th. No youth or adult soccer is happening at the moment. Thankfully we have maintained payroll and not laid anyone off, although many companies are doing so. For example, a competitor just laid off around 75 per cent of their staff nationwide which is terrible to hear.

Around the area we are actually seeing MORE people out than usual. People out walking, cycling, running. Folk out as families. Which is nice to see, but strange timing. Personally we are coping just fine. I am working remote and checking in with our staff twice a day. As Head Coach I am using the time to fine-tune our curriculums and I am interacting with our students on a daily basis, setting them daily challenges and homework which they are responding to greatly. It's really nice to see the parents working closely with their children too. My girlfriend is a nurse at the Cardio Vascular Intensive Care at a local hospital, and they are experiencing relatively low numbers of COVID-19 Patients, but it seems to be increasing rapidly. They are seven to eight days away from tough times.

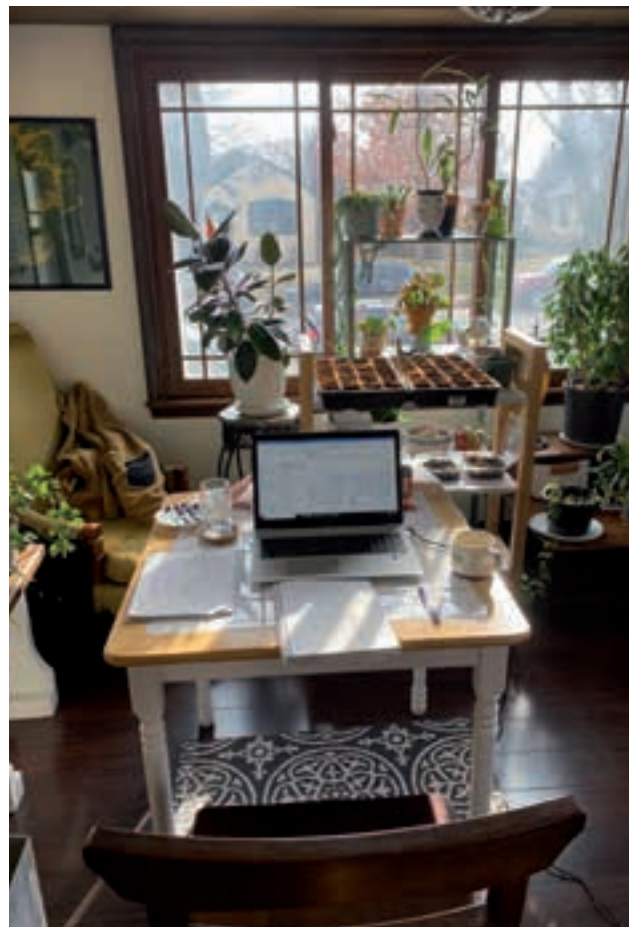
I was actually due to fly to Spain today where I was meeting my entire family for my mother's 50th celebration, so we are sad that couldn't happen but completely understand.

Eric Wojchik, from Minnesota, USA, lived in Lewis for six years.

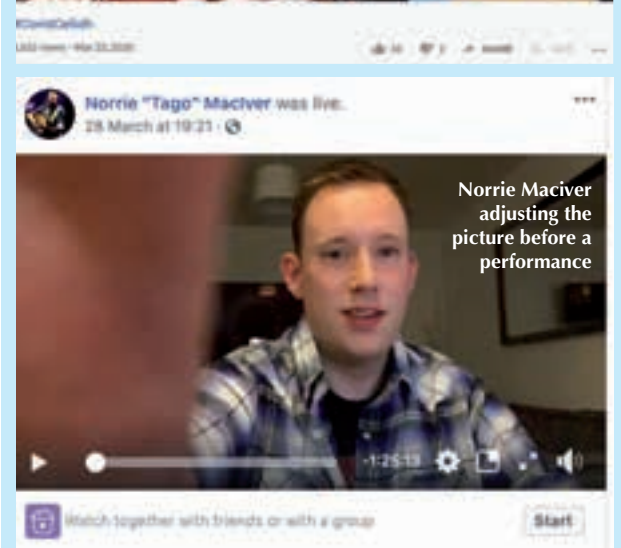
The State of Minnesota entered our 'shelter in place' order this Friday (March 27th), at midnight. At the time of writing, our State has 398 cases of COVID-19, but testing has been slow to ramp up, so the true number is likely much higher. For context, the State of Minnesota has roughly the same population as Scotland. Our governor has announced that Minnesota will reach our peak in June, most likely, so we have a little bit of time to enhance hospital capacity and obtain more necessary equipment for healthcare workers.

I work for the regional government, and we run the transit system and wastewater services, so I've been fortunate enough to be able to work from home during this time. All the schools have transitioned to online learning, so working from home has been a challenge for some of my colleagues.

My wife, Katie Anne, from Tolsta, works as a nurse, so we make sure to travel with necessary paperwork during the 'shelter in place' order when I take her to work. While the whole experience has been an adjustment, I think that our State is dealing with this well, with science-based decision-making and clear guidance to our residents. There are many challenges ahead, so we will have to innovate as we go. We've taken the opportunity to focus on growing vegetables and flowers for the summer months.



Eric's home office space in their plant room.



Online solutions to lockdown blues

By Annie Delin

With face-to-face life dwindling daily, islanders have been quick to turn technology to social advantage.

Live-streaming, Skype and other applications became the marketplace for concerts, classes and social interaction within just a few days as impacts from Coronavirus began to make themselves felt.

Leading the change to tech was Gaelic singer Kathleen MacInnes of South Uist, who reacted to the increasing number of cancellations in her summer diary by suggesting online singing lessons.

Her example was followed by Carloway's Norrie Tago Maciver, lead singer of the popular band Skipinnish, who is now delivering four online Gaelic classes a week and also performing live online, taking requests via his Facebook page.

He's not the only singer to stream live to music-deprived fans – Lewis boys Willie Campbell and Charlie Clark, also known as the band Astrid, were on air for a living room performance which netted £1,055 in online donations for Eilean Siar Foodbank.

Meanwhile Lewis musician Paul Martin was not only offering piano and guitar lessons online, but making the technology work for a #CovidCeilidh on YouTube, where friends Jane Hepburn Macmillan and Stephen Drummond were among those to join him for a tune. They may have been in their own homes, but the music is in perfect harmony.

Some of the first casualties as the cancellation of activities started to mount were exercise classes, but once again those who conduct them were quick to re-group and find a new way to keep in touch with their customers.

Hebrides Dance and Wellbeing's Kirstie Anderson has taken her classes online, and despite being unfamiliar with the technology she's now running a full week of sessions, from gentle yoga to full-on Zumba, some live and some pre-recorded.

Kirstie said: "Live ones are great for getting some much-needed human interaction, pre-recorded means you can set your own schedule. I know some of you are keen to try something new during this time, so I've included bits for beginners that will help you learn and manage the full classes. And I'll hopefully team up with some others to bring you some different faces and keep it fresh!"

