

# Stories My Suitcase Could Tell: A Letter from Afar



I'm a Rubhach who grew up with a view of Bayble Island, but—a bit like the man in charge of the country I now live in—I've got family connections to the other side of Broad Bay: my paternal grandmother, Jean (*Sine*) Macleod (only daughter of *Coinneach an Sine* and *Annie Bheag na Drochaid*), was from 1 Broadbay View, Vatisker.

For the last five-and-a-half years, though, I've lived in the USA, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. By day I work in book publishing at Penguin Random House, in a 24-storey office near Central Park, and by night I work as a journalist and run my travel blog, *Stories My Suitcase Could Tell*.

But this year of living abroad has been a bit different to all the rest, thanks to the coronavirus pandemic. My husband, Spencer, and I live on the border between New York and New Jersey, so our lockdown lives are affected by the actions of both states.

The 24-storey building I usually work in has been closed for many weeks, and everyone is working from home. In our neighbourhood, a curfew has been in place since the middle of March, banning movement between the hours of 10pm and 5am, but other than that we are free to go about as we please, with the recommendation that everyone stays 6ft apart and wears a mask.

Shops and restaurants

are closed except for takeaway and 'curb side pick-up', and home-delivery slots are impossible to come by. Like most people, we're staying at home, only going out for essentials and our daily walk. In a built-up urban area, though, social distancing is easier said than done—especially when the greater New York City area, which includes our neighbourhood, has over 20 million residents.

I wasn't even meant to be in New York this spring, but, unsurprisingly, my long-awaited visit home to Lewis had to be cancelled. Spring is one of my favourite seasons at home, and I'm sad to have missed watching the lambs play in the crofts, admiring the gorse by the side of the road, and enjoying the lighter, longer nights. It's my favourite season here, too, a brief respite between the freezing cold of winter and the humid heat of summer. I didn't leave the flat for a few weeks when lockdown was first announced, but when I did finally venture outside—armed with a cloth face mask and hand sanitizer—I was lucky to catch the cherry blossom trees in full bloom, and spot the birds hopping and chirping in the trees.

Aside from finding a new lockdown hobby in birdwatching, for us lockdown has mostly revolved around food: the effort of buying it in a climate of panic buying and social distancing; cleaning the packaging down with disinfectant wipes when the food comes into the flat; and finally, looking forward to eating it—the highlight of the day when everything else is so vague and uncertain!

Food is one thing (aside from family and friends, of course) that I miss the most living away from home, food like black pudding, fish and chips, and sausage rolls. Even my dreams during lockdown revolve around food, and more than once they've featured incredibly life-like visions of going shopping in the Stornoway Tesco for a plain Stag loaf. (I woke up very disappointed!)

I've even attempted some lockdown baking over the past few weeks, to make up for the fact I didn't make it to Delights in Stornoway for my coffee and cake last month as planned. While I have enough self-awareness to know I don't have the baking skills to replicate their Victoria sponge cake, I did attempt to recreate one of their tray bakes with American ingredients. The finished result calmed my sweet cravings, but the tray bake didn't quite live up to Delights' standards.

Lockdown is now slowly being eased across most of the USA, but we still don't know when things will go back to 'normal' here, or when we'll get back to Scotland. The last day I was at home was almost a year ago now, and I spent it walking on Garry Beach—it was the only day of sunshine we had all week, so we had to make the most of it! And I'm hoping it won't be too long until we can do that together again.

You can follow Katie's travel exploits (when things get back to normal!) on her award-winning travel blog *Stories My Suitcase Could Tell* at [storiesmysuitcasecouldtell.com](https://storiesmysuitcasecouldtell.com) and keep up to date with her on Twitter (@KatieMacL) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/storiesmysuitcasecouldtell>).

