

# How one man overcame travel restrictions to leave the US for Portugal amid the pandemic

*Recently, I put out a call because I'm writing a piece on international remote workers who have chosen to relocate during the pandemic, like myself. And a man got in touch with me whose story I'd like to share in the [Lockdown Diaries](#) series. Coincidentally, we had both lived in Madrid and we now both live in Portugal, yet how we got here is very different. Although I'll keep his name anonymous, he has given me permission to share his story with you.*

This is the story of a man who discreetly left the United States for greener pastures in Europe during the pandemic. He didn't feel like he could be his truest self in America—being gay and Black, especially in the South where he's from. Nor did the work culture appeal to him. As he had lived abroad before in Madrid, and gained a taste of freedom and acceptance there, reintegrating back into the US afterward weighed heavily on him.

Back in January, he had a sense of dread that something terrible would happen in the US, so he began plotting his exit strategy. And as a singer and a teacher who gives classes online, he knew he could work from anywhere with internet access. .

Despite border closures between the US and Europe in July, he

took action and flew a convoluted route from his city in the southern US to Belgrade, as Serbia is one of the only locations that is currently accepting travelers from the US. He missed his initial bus to Paris and spent a few more days in Belgrade than intended.

He was the only person of color on the 25-hour journey from Belgrade to Paris; several passengers asked him where he was from and made small talk. Three older Serbian men warmly extended their hands in friendship in the form of a cigarette that escalated into drinking together during the intermissions at rest stops where they would also generously share their food. This random act of kindness validated his commitment to the mission of leaving home; in his region of the US, this sort of inclusive camaraderie would not have occurred.

His passport was glanced at by customs agents in Serbia, Austria, and Germany. At one point, he was waiting in a security line alongside a French traveler and they made small talk as they waited. His intuition led him to stall and choose the gentler seeming guard at this checkpoint. The French traveler had the misfortune of being checked by a stricter guard and was not allowed through.

He presented his expired student visa from his previous chapter spent living abroad and when asked, claimed that he was currently living in Europe and that his final destination was the country that issued this expired visa. This story was accepted during these checks.

He recalls that when stoically facing law enforcement in Austria that, to put him at ease, they told him:

**“This is not the United States, we are not going to hurt you.”**

After arriving in Paris, he was no longer asked to present his passport at any checkpoints. From there, he took a 10-hour bus to San Sebastian in northern Spain where he immediately caught another 10-hour bus to the Portuguese countryside where he now lives off of the grid in a mobile van owned by a British family situated on their property.



There are several mobile vans on this plot of land and they've formed a small community. As a remote worker who teaches English online, he is location-independent and can thrive in Portugal where the cost of living is low and the quality of life is high. He plans to purchase a van of his own and use it to travel all over the countryside after learning how to

manage a stick-shift vehicle. He intends to learn Portuguese and eventually gain residence in Portugal.

He implores his fellow Americans to follow their hearts and break free from what he calls the artificial matrix of a life devoted purely to work, productivity, and profit.

*\*This is one man's personal story, it is not to say that Europe is perfect.*

*If you have a unique story from this chapter of world history that you'd like to share, get in touch with me at: [catalandaniel01@gmail.com](mailto:catalandaniel01@gmail.com)*

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## **Lockdown diaries: James, co-founder of Devour Tours, on leadership and innovation in the food & tourism industry**

*There's nothing quite like being boxed into a corner to force yourself to become creative*

James was launching food tours in cities across Europe just before the lockdown hit, so he and his team have had to

drastically change course. Now they're innovating ways to keep sharing their passion for food and local culture with the world, and working together to get through this.

James Blick is the co-founder of [Devour Tours](#) and creator of hit Youtube channel [Spain Revealed](#), where he shares authentic culinary and cultural insights. In the days prior to the lockdown measures taking effect, I myself had the pleasure of taking the San Sebastian Pintxos and Wine tour led by Devour and visited Petritegi, James' go-to sidrería. It was truly a unique experience and provided an enriching window into the culinary offerings of the Basque Country.

As we wait for the tourism sector to bounce back, the team at Devour has been creating [online experiences](#) such as [live cooking classes](#) (yesterday James taught us how to cook a *tortilla* out of his own kitchen) and a digital cookbook: "[Recipes from the Devours Tours Kitchen](#)" with 52 recipes from cities across Europe, straight from local guides and chefs. Here's James' lockdown diary.

## **What was your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?**

In Devour, we were in full swing expanding our business by launching new tours in Paris, Rome, Lisbon, and London, and hiring new team members to help us to grow in these new destinations.

In my personal life, my wife and I had just bought an apartment in Madrid, and we were starting renovations. A week

before we went into lockdown we were picking tiles and toilets. So, like for everyone, this virus caught us right in the middle of making plans for the future.

## **How has the lockdown impacted your industry?**

Massively. Tourism and hospitality were the first to feel this crisis. About 6 weeks ago we started to realise that this was a serious situation. But every day we made a plan (cut costs 20%, for example), those plans were out of date and not drastic enough by the same time the next day. The majority of our guests are Americans and when Trump announced the travel ban we decided to suspend tours until 1 May (and clearly we'll have to suspend them longer).

At the time it felt like a forward-thinking decision, but within 48 hours of making the call, we'd gone into lockdown. It's been incredible how fast this thing has moved. Sadly, we've had to lay off most of our team. Ideally, this is a temporary measure, but with zero tours and massive amounts of refunds being processed, the company would have gone under in a few months if we hadn't taken drastic steps. For those on our team who didn't have access to unemployment benefits, they're working part-time during the lockdown so they can pay their rent and get by – and together we're working to create a foundation for the future.

As I mentioned, this week we've launched our [Recipes from the Devour Tours Kitchen](#) digital cookbook that the entire team worked on together. It's been a true team effort and labour of love – and it's packed with 50+ incredible local recipes from

across our cities in Europe. All the recipes are from staff members, guides and vendors, including lots of dishes we try on our tours. Perfect for lockdown cooking! Sales of it will really help Devour have a better shot at getting through. If anyone is curious or would like to buy it, you can [check it out here](#).



**What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

I wish I had a better answer for that. A simple walk with my wife alongside Madrid's river would be lovely.

## Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?

There is a videographer team we work with who creates YouTube videos for Devour. In the early days of lockdown, they sent us an unsolicited video they'd made that compiled footage of previous shoots with messages about all the things that we love and that bind us as a company. It was an inspiring video and something perfect to share on social media with our guests (who we call Devourers).

More importantly, it was a striking act of generosity from them. They had work dry up so used the extra time to create something for free for their clients. It reminded me that this is an important time to slow down and think of the people around you who might need help and to reach out to them.

## How are you coping?

I would love to have a day or two of the infamous Coronavirus lockdown boredom! I'm coping by getting on, but also there is no other choice given I work in tourism. Each day is filled with work to chart Devour's course through this and also I'm trying to pivot my [YouTube channel](#) (where I usually feature videos of me eating in bars) to more 'at home' content. I think a key lesson for me is that those who take advantage of this time to experiment and try new things will find those experiments pay off on the other side of this – there's nothing quite like being boxed into a corner to force yourself to become creative.



Probably the most important coping mechanism for me is an hour of yoga every morning. I use an app called [Yoga Studio](#), which costs about €2 a month, and there are a variety of classes I do. Also, I'm conscious not to eat crap or drink too much (or too early) – apparently beer sales in Spain are up over 70%!

## **What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?**

Work-wise, my key goal is to navigate Devour through this. I'm sure the products and ideas that we create during this time will outlast the virus and the lockdown. We've just come out with a digital recipe book this week featuring recipes from all the team, and also kicking off a series of daily live online workshops and cook-a-longs on our [Facebook page](#) – everything from how to prepare a Madrid aperitif, to everything you needed to know about coffee, to me cooking a *tortilla de patatas* live.



Once we're giving tours again, I think there will be [online experiences](#) that we continue to sell. Also, I'm loving cooking (isn't everyone?) – I've been making cooking videos for my YouTube channel, and I'm also looking forward to getting out the paella kit on the terrace once the weather warms up and figuring out how to make a damn good paella once and for all!

**Do you have any tips for how we can help those in need?**

If your industry isn't financially impacted, or if it's financially benefiting from this, then certainly supporting small businesses who need help by buying their online products. When a business is struggling and needs cash, anything helps and all sales uplift spirits. Help doesn't need to be financial. In our building, people are offering to do

shopping for elderly residents who don't want to risk going out.

## **Who are you in quarantine with? Any advice for people in a similar situation?**

With my wife, Yoly. We get on really well, so I don't feel like I have much advice to give. I guess keep a structure. If you used to have a date night once a week, find time to do that. It's easy to get lazy and wind up just eating dinner in front of Netflix each night. Set the table, eat a meal, talk to each other. And also, just because you're locked in together, doesn't mean you have to do everything together at all times. Don't feel guilty about needing "me time" – a good way to do this is to listen to a podcast and cook something, while your partner is in the lounge.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

Provide some specific relief for tourism companies – debt relief or more flexible options for protecting your employees while also protecting cash flow. The measures introduced so far seem designed under the presumption that once the lockdown ends, all businesses will be able to open their doors at 100%. I'm sure they know that's not the case, so I just wish they would give support that reflects that reality. But international tourism is going to take 9-18 months to recover, or longer.

# What's going on in your hometown and would you like to send them a message?

Auckland (New Zealand) has COVID-19 cases but a lot fewer, and its physical distance will help it control the virus more I would think. NZ's physical isolation was part of the reason I left, but it also has many benefits. I have no message to send – I just hope that people treat this seriously, and take precautions early, rather than only really taking notice when the death rates began shooting up (as happened to us here in Spain).

- Follow James on IG: [@jamesblickspain](#) and his YouTube channel [Spain Revealed](#)
- Also follow [Devour Tours](#) on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) to stay up to date on their [online experiences](#) and upcoming tour dates
- Check out the [Recipes from the Devour Tours Kitchen](#) digital cookbook

## Check out all [Madrid lockdown stories](#)

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# Lockdown diaries: Amy, unethically evicted by her landlord during quarantine

*Be gracious with others. People are very anxious for numerous reasons right now... what we are living through is clearly not normal.*

Amy's landlord made the decision to terminate their rental agreement at the end of February, giving Amy a month to find a new abode. When the state of emergency was declared and attending apartment viewings was rendered unfeasible, Amy's landlord aggressively insisted that these unprecedented circumstances changed nothing and that she had to leave by April 1. Luckily Amy's co-worker, who's staying with friends, has offered Amy her flat to live in during quarantine, for as long as she needs.

Amy is a California native who has been living in Madrid for 3.5 years as a teaching assistant and also sings in a Gospel Choir in her spare time. Here's her lockdown diary.

## What was your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?

I was running through life "a cien" as they say. Apart from work, private classes, and some other activities I'm involved in, my landlady had just given me 30 days notice that my

rental contract was ending on April 1, so I was looking online and visiting rooms all over Madrid. My anxiety level was really high but I don't think I even realized how elevated it was. Today, after 2 weeks of being forced to stay at home, sit still and live less hectic of a life, I'm so grateful because I couldn't have continued at that rate much longer.

## **Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?**

Once the state of alarm was declared in Spain, it became nearly impossible to go out and look for flats. In spite of this, my landlady became increasingly insistent that my stay there would not be extended, which meant staying in my flat was turning into an emotionally exhausting and anxious experience. When sharing this with friends and family both here in Madrid and other parts of the world, I was flooded with words of support, anger on my behalf, offers to solicit legal advice, advice on how to act going forward, and plenty of sympathies.

However, the greatest act of kindness I've received during this time of need has been a co-worker of mine who, as she is staying with friends during the quarantine and in recognizing that it was essential that I get out of my flat, offered me her house to stay in as long as I need, a much needed and invaluable respite.

## **How are you coping?**

I've been talking with friends and family both locally and

abroad who I wouldn't normally have time to in my "pre-lockdown" life. In particular, a friend of mine created a group on the video chat app Marco Polo which helps me to fill the time and feel connected with people who are on the other side of the world.

Apart from that, I've been doing virtual dance and workout classes, limiting the amount of TV I watch and stretching to pass the time. Another thing that has been so critical in coping has been taking time to say or list the things I am grateful for – a grateful heart is a satisfied one.

## **What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?**

Now that I've successfully moved out of my previous flat and am in more of a mentally safe space, I'd like to take time to process this whole experience – think about it, cry about it, be angry about it, accept it, or whatever.

I'm lucky because I haven't lost my job and am in a safe place to pass the quarantine so I want to take advantage of this time to care for myself and my mental health. I'm also wanting to get back to studying C1 level Spanish and who knows, perhaps even be able to do the splits!

## **How has the lockdown impacted your industry?**

This pandemic has come in a moment when few schools are ready and properly equipped to teach online. Many aren't which means some language assistants churning out videos, online resources, games, projects, and activities for their students while there are others like me whose schools are still fighting an uphill battle in figuring out this whole online learning thing, much less communicating on how to incorporate their eager language assistants into it. Then, of course, there are people who have gone home and unexpectedly lost their jobs here.

**This is an unprecedented time in education and we are on just as steep of a learning curve as our students.**

**What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

That day still seems somewhat far off. I'll probably go for a walk or maybe even a run in the park, hopefully with friends! Just before the lockdown, I was getting really into running as a way to manage anxiety but when this finishes, the thing that I might be most yearning for is to see people in the flesh. Maybe we'll skip the run and just have a good-old picnic to catch up and enjoy being in each other's physical presence.

**Do you have any tips for how we can help those in need?**

Be gracious with others. People are very anxious for numerous reasons right now – they don't know how they'll make ends



meet. Or they or someone they love is in a high-risk group. We don't know the lives and hearts of the people we interact with at the pharmacy, grocery store, or even those we share a house with; but, we can be gracious and willing to retract justifiable blame, anger or frustration under normal circumstances given that what we are living through is clearly not normal.

## **Who are you in quarantine with? Any advice for people in a similar situation?**

I was in quarantine with my landlady's daughter and her boyfriend (who I was never really consulted on about him joining us during confinement). They stuck to a pretty set teleworking and work-out schedule. My roommate's boyfriend was silent on all of what was going on regarding my pending eviction but my roommate was notably concerned that I wasn't looking (or rather, couldn't look) for places and would be unable to move out by April 1.

Now, however, I'm alone in my friend's apartment. It is the first time in my life that I've lived alone so I'm interested to see how it goes.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

I would probably thank them for not cutting my job and those of the many language assistants who chose to stay in a foreign country amidst a global pandemic because their prospects here

are better than what would have been if they went home. In that vein, I'd tell them to consider the lives of people whose studies and practicums have been interrupted through all of this and make reasonable and doable provisions for them to be able to complete what they need to.

I'd ask the government to be creative, to listen to what educators and students need when making decisions about how to proceed, and be open to new and formerly unconventional ways of getting things done.

## **What's going on in your hometown? Would you like to send them a message?**

From what I've heard and seen, my hometown is about a week behind Madrid in terms of ordering people to shelter in place and mandating that businesses shut down. My message to them would be to stick with it. Now is not the time to bury your head in the sand or invent conspiracy theories as excuses for not complying.

- If you or someone you know is being evicted in Madrid right now, you can contact the [Sindicato de Inquilinos](#) (Madrid tenants' union)
- Also read this article by Madrid No Frills which explains more: [Madrid's anti-eviction warriors](#)

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## **Lockdown diaries: Ignacio, firefighter on duty & Spanish national lacrosse captain**

*The people in my town are making handmade masks to help doctors, nurses, policemen, and firemen. I got one customized from my neighbor and it made me so happy and has made me feel safer at work.*

Providers of essential public services are working round-the-clock to maintain order during the COVID-19 crisis. Ignacio, a fireman, reported that his team of firefighters is taking extra precautions to protect their health while saving lives.

Ignacio “Nacho” Farjas Gómez is a 26-year-old Madrid-native working as a fireman in Huesca and during peacetime acts as captain of both the Spanish national lacrosse team and Madrid’s local lacrosse team, the former of which has granted him the opportunity to travel for international competitions in locations such as Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Netanya, Israel. While walking his dog in the vacant streets of Huesca, he befriended a stray kitten that followed him home and joined his family. He named it Covid.

## What was your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?



I used to live in Madrid before the lockdown. As a fireman, I work 24-hour shifts and then I have 4 days off, so I was able to live in Madrid and commute to work in Huesca, up in the Pyrenees. I used to workout 4-5 times a week and play lacrosse with my club team (Madrid lacrosse) twice per week. I also had tryout weekends with the national team.

Now everything has changed, I relocated to the countryside with my fiancée to be closer to the fire department where I work because commuting between Madrid and Huesca would be impossible during the lockdown. I adapted a room in our new house into a gym so I can keep fit for my job and for the lacrosse championships. The upcoming European cup was supposed

to be next July but it has been postponed.



## **How has the lockdown impacted your industry?**

I continue to work, as firemen have to be constantly prepared in case of an emergency. The current situation makes our already high-pressure tasks even more complicated. At the fire station, I have to be a safe distance from my colleagues so we don't get infected from each other, so we feel lonely during the shifts. During car accidents, we have to try to save people's lives and at the same time protect ourselves from potential coronavirus infection.

On a particularly rough day, we got a call from social

services saying that a woman, who was diagnosed with the virus, was on the verge of suicide. When we arrived at her building we saw the woman in her window, on the phone with her psychotherapist.

We were told that she wanted to jump off the window because she could no longer cope with isolation and the symptoms she was suffering. We covered ourselves with protective gear and were prepared to quickly scale the facade from the roof to the window in case the psychotherapist was unsuccessful in her attempt to persuade the woman not to jump.

Police got in position inside the building to give us access. The psychotherapist bought us a lot of time but ultimately informed us that she couldn't calm her patient so we had to act. The intervention started with the psychotherapist distracting the patient while we descended from the roof. When we got close to the woman we pushed her inside of the apartment, at the same time the police broke down the door. We left her to continue speaking with her psychotherapist, the police, and other doctors.

Afterward, we disinfected our equipment in the street before returning to the fire station. It was a challenge to coordinate this operation with everyone involved, as everyone's faces were obstructed by masks.

**Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?**

The people in my town are amazing. They are making handmade

masks due to their shortage to help doctors, nurses, policemen, and firemen. So I got one customized from my neighbor. It made me so happy and has made me feel safer at work.

During the lockdown, I was walking my dog and I found a kitten that liked us and followed us back home. My fiancée and I adopted it and we decided to name it "Covid."

## **What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?**

I will keep up with training and studying as I want to get promoted. It is important to remain focused when spending the entire day at home. I like to have a routine and stick to it.

## **What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

My fiancée and I will have pizza at Lisanderella, our favorite Italian restaurant in Madrid. Then I will play lacrosse to burn all the extra calories I have been eating during the lockdown.

## **Do you have any tips for how we can help those in need?**

Try to keep in contact with friends and family via Skype. Help

your eldest neighbors with the groceries. Try to cheer everyone up from your window or balcony with music, dancing or playing bingo.

## **Who are you in quarantine with? Any advice for people in a similar situation?**

I am using this opportunity to have quality time with my fiancée and go deeper into our relationship. We have plenty of time to plan our future wedding. I highly recommend spending this time to plan future trips and events to avoid overthinking.

Check out all [Madrid lockdown stories](#)

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## **Lockdown diaries: Love in the time of Corona can blossom too (anonymous)**

In the week preceding the lockdown, Nancy\* entered a



clandestine relationship with her coworker Ira\* and they embarked on a romantic getaway to a rural house in his home country and were there when the state of emergency was declared. With abundant wine and clean air in a serene location removed from society, they are exploring their feelings for each other away from the prying eyes of their colleagues.

Nancy is a 20-something-year-old who has been living in Madrid for two years. She pivoted away from teaching and became a copywriter at the international firm where she met Ira. Their fondness towards each other has escalated from covert cigarette breaks to safeguarding each other as the world crumbles around them.

\*At the request of the subjects, their names have been changed.

## **What was your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?**

Before the lockdown, my life was pretty average. I had recently broken up with my ex boyfriend/*pareja de hecho* with whom I still technically share a flat in Madrid. I've started getting involved romantically with my colleague Ira after months of playful banter and subtle glances.

Our team has been encouraging us to get together for a while now, but we've been wanting to take it slowly to avoid outside pressure. They make on-the-nose jokes about us as they've speculated that we've hooked up already. They're an intuitive

and nosey bunch. I look forward to finally coming clean and telling them everything. We plan on sending flowers to my manager as she's the one who first introduced us when I joined the team.



Now, I'm quarantined in a serene rural location with Ira, which we fled to after mutually declaring our feelings for each other. Our respective living situations in Madrid are

less than ideal as they're not shared with people we would want to endure a strict quarantine with. We made the split-second decision to flee Madrid to visit his parents at their rural house in his home country.

I wasn't imagining the lockdown would last this long, and I had assumed I could easily get back to Spain if needed, but now it seems like I'm here in this countryside paradise until Semana Santa at least.

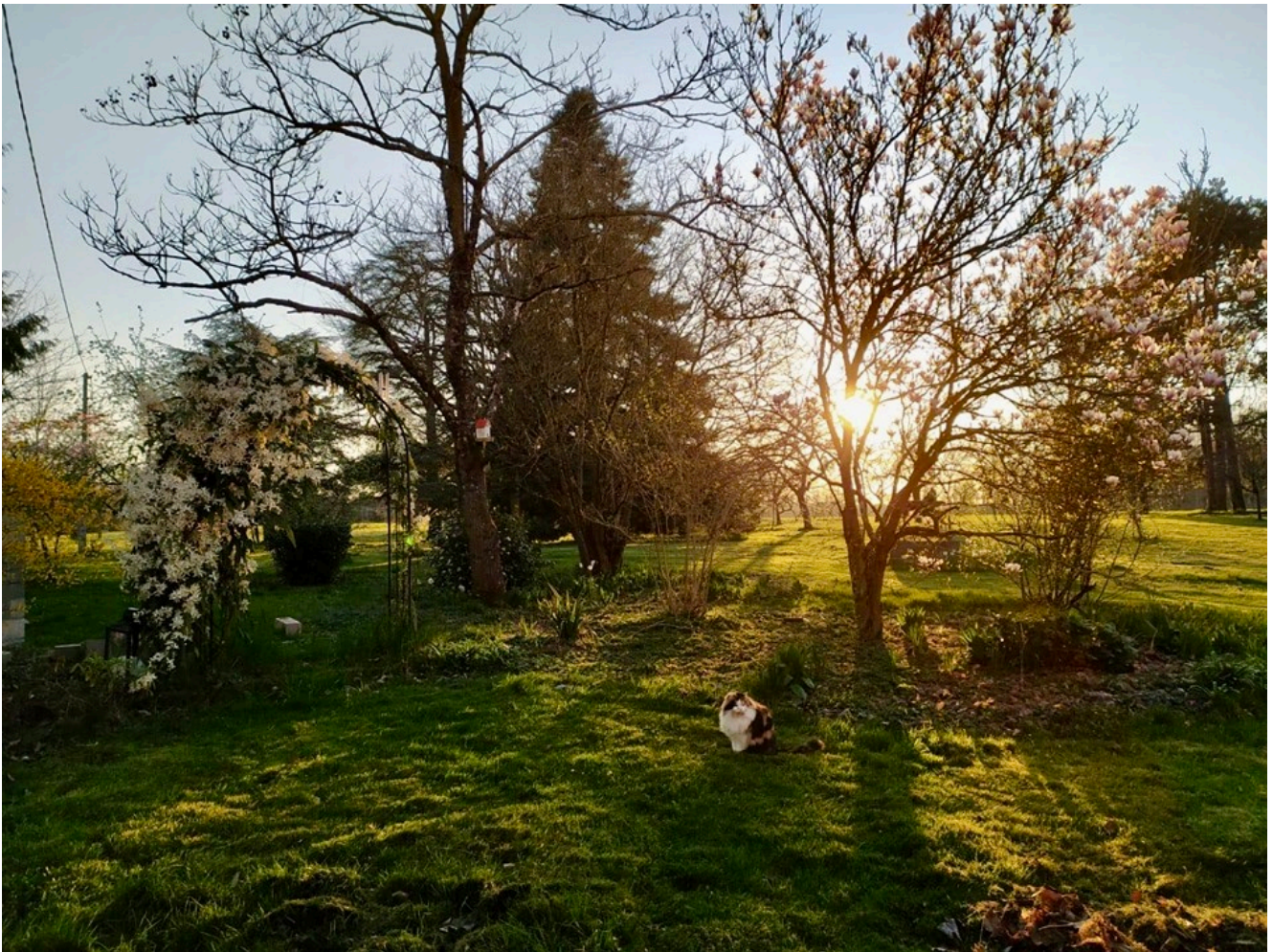
Thankfully, everything is working out. The anxiety I experienced on the flight was insane, I am genuinely happy to be where I am. We have more space and fresh air than in Madrid and are in a place with few cases of the virus and with enough wine stockpiled for the apocalypse. There is little else to do outside of teleworking, siestas, and NSFW activities.

## **Have there been any comical moments in this unprecedented time?**

Right now, I feel like my entire life is one romantic comedy a la "Love in a time of Corona." Since our coworkers remain in the dark, it's funny when they talk to us about each other while we're sitting next to each other.

We set up our teleworking stations in different rooms so that we could conference with our colleagues without blowing our cover, and it's always fun trying to playfully distract the other without anyone finding out.

## How are you coping?



Wine. Lots of wine. Otherwise, talking to my friends back in Madrid and spending quality time with Ira and his parents, practicing their language, and helping out around the country house when I'm not clocked into work. I wouldn't call it "coping" though, as I am enjoying the beautiful countryside with someone whose companionship I savor.

## What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?

Right now all of this feels surreal, but I'm beginning to get

a workout routine, and hopefully, I'll learn more of his language.

Otherwise, I am so excited to see where this quarantine takes my new relationship. So far, it's been amazing and we're learning so much about each other that would have taken months to learn under regular circumstances. I don't doubt this will set the foundation for a relationship that is solid, full of trust, and long-lasting.

## **What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

See my best friend and go out for drinks and spill all of the tea about what can only be described as a 21st-century romcom. We will dabble in 4/20-friendly fun as these resources are beyond our reach at this time.

## **Any advice for people in a similar situation?**

My biggest piece of advice is to communicate with those around you. Ira and I haven't had much time to set relationship boundaries and guidelines and now we're thrown into this situation together where we are learning as we go along. Thankfully we're both strong communicators so that isn't too difficult for us but it's unprecedented for both of us to go from 0 to 100 so quickly with a new partner.

Make sure to take some “you time.” It’s difficult to be outgoing and engaged every second. In the mornings I always take time for myself to get ready for the day, despite not actually needing to go to work or leave the house. I listen to political podcasts that allow me to remain an informed and socially conscious citizen while being so far removed from society.

We’re also lucky because his parents’ property is set up with a separate building for their guests, so “adult time” isn’t restricted and I can go and hide for a few hours if I become overwhelmed by a language I don’t speak and people that I’ve only recently met in an environment that I am still adapting to.

## **Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?**

Recently, at the grocery store, with lines out the door, I saw several people make way for seniors and the elderly to let them inside first. It was cold and raining, and to avoid crowds inside shoppers needed to queue outside and had to wait patiently to be granted access. It was a human moment witnessing people let those more vulnerable to the elements enter first.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

Don’t let economic factors drive your policy. The cost of

human life is far more important. Keep the quarantine going for as long as necessary, because even one infected person can prolong the threat.

My hometown in the USA has no cases, but it's spreading in my home state. To everyone in my hometown, don't be stupid. Even if the mayor doesn't specifically call on people to isolate, do so. We've seen what can happen in a short period of time if people don't take this seriously, don't let your situation get as bad as it is in Europe.

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**Lockdown diaries: Dr. Victor de Benito Vellisca, bravely attending to COVID patients at a hospital in Leganés,**

# Madrid

*There will be many opportunities to serve your communities in the aftermath of this crisis, but for now, stay at home.*

A shortage of medical aprons has forced some of Madrid's doctors to wear garbage bags while attending to patients, says Dr. Victor de Benito Vellisca, a medical professional with 40+ years of experience, currently working directly with COVID-19 patients at a hospital in Leganés. He can't even go near his family without a mask on. And he urges us all to stay home.

While Victor was a surgeon for most of his career, he is now working in a primary care unit, which has granted him insight into how the Spanish healthcare system functions as a whole. He says the medical community is working round-the-clock to bring this crisis to an end. They hear our daily applause at 8 PM as they bravely serve their communities.

\* Victor's son, who shares his name, arranged this interview, translating and transcribing his father's answers.

## **How has your life changed since the lockdown began?**

My life has changed drastically. I can't come closer than one meter to my wife, and when we're near, I have to wear a mask. I can't meet my children at home to avoid infecting each other. My life now consists of working in the morning and



spending the afternoon at home.

## **What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?**

My daily goals are to stay healthy to avoid infecting my wife. It is crucial for me to continue assisting my patients who are depending on me for their treatments. The medical community is working hard to find a solution to this problem and I am going in every day and doing my part.

## **How has the lockdown impacted your industry?**

We are overwhelmed with work. We are all under pressure and I have the feeling that I am not achieving as much as I would hope to. The strain on staff and the lack of supplies are apparent.

## **Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?**

Yes, I have noticed that the population is grateful to healthcare professionals. When we go on call to their homes or they come to see us, they don't stop thanking us for our work. The cheering at 8 PM every day is heard and appreciated by me and my colleagues.



Image from [@lablfoto](#)

**What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

The first thing I'll do will be to kiss and hug my wife. It pains us that we cannot be close while this crisis is happening. I'll also meet my daughter and hug and kiss her. I will greet my friends and people I know in the street by shaking their hands and I will congratulate my colleagues for the accomplishments of their work.

**Do you have any tips for how we can help those in need?**

There will be many opportunities to serve your communities in the aftermath of this crisis, but for now, stay at home.

## **Who are you in quarantine with? Any advice for people in a similar situation?**

I am in quarantine with my wife. I would recommend that people in quarantine with their spouses find ways to keep themselves entertained to release stress, such as reading, watching TV, communicating with friends and chatting over the phone.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

The top priority right now is to control the spread of the virus. I would ask the government to be less lenient towards people who are breaking the lockdown rules in order to avoid an increasing death toll.

## **Do you have a message for your community?**

My message to my neighbors would be to remain patient, stay strong and control the spreading of the virus. We hear you on your balconies at 8 PM, applauding us as we work for a solution to this problem.

My main tip is that people refrain from leaving their house except for when buying food and going to the pharmacy. Being

confined at home is the best way to isolate the virus and avoid it continuing to spread. Let's hope that soon this nightmare will end once and for all.

Check out all [Madrid lockdown stories](#)

*If you'd like to get involved and share a compelling story from this ongoing chapter of history, reach out to Daphne Binioris (daphne@veracontent.com ) and Daniel Catalan (a96039@aup.edu)*

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## **Lockdown Diaries: Travis opens up about being quarantined with his ex**

Not everyone has the good fortune to be in lockdown alone or with friendly faces. Travis Diamandis had a volatile breakup with his husband in the weeks preceding the lockdown, and now they're awkwardly trapped together along with innocent bystanders in the form of their roommate, dog, and cat.

Travis has been living in Madrid for four years and teaches English to young children while trying to see the best in people. He is often weighed down by nihilistic existentialism which he combats by partying, traveling, and forming meaningful connections with others.

## What was your life like before the lockdown vs. today?

My life consisted of walking to school and teaching kids ranging from infants to 12-year-olds. I'm newly single so I was starting to enjoy that by connecting with guys and hanging out with them occasionally. Now all of that has changed.

A month ago, I split up with my Argentinian/Italian husband with whom I currently cohabitate and share the co-parenting duties of our dog and cat. Our breakup was volatile as our relationship had become toxic and our differences irreconcilable. I had intended to move out in April but now that is no longer feasible due to the lockdown. The circumstances are as nightmarish as one would imagine.



## **Can you elaborate on what it's like to be in quarantine with an ex? Any advice for others with comparable circumstances?**

I share this flat with my soon-to-be-ex-husband and another roommate from the UK who has been living with us since August. He is an innocent bystander and mediator. I try not to involve him in the petty conflicts with my ex, but at times it's unavoidable due to the small space and thin walls of the flat. I appreciate that our roommate is with us because it gives me a much-needed confidant and allows me to distance myself from my ex.

My advice for anyone living with an ex is to avoid confrontation and deescalate arguments as they arise in order to maintain peace. It doesn't serve anyone to bicker or add additional tension during this indefinite quarantine. I'd advise others who can relate to my circumstances to breathe, go to another room of the house/apartment and take any measures needed to get through this in one piece.

For an even more tense period, we were five people confined to the apartment as my ex's mother and half-sister were staying in the flat as they were visiting from Argentina. Fortunately, they left yesterday and I'm relieved. The rental contract is in my ex's name so I didn't have a say in whether or not they stayed with us, and I was worried that they would be trapped here. They were incredibly stressed, and understandably so. They were civil and cordial towards me for the most part. However, I was extremely embarrassed when my ex initiated a loud fight with me while they were within earshot. Fortunately, Argentina repatriated all 23,000 Argentinians who were seeking to escape Spain over the course of a three-day

period and now we're three in the apartment once again.

## **Have there been any comical moments in this unprecedented time?**

The thin walls of the apartment cause my ex and I to overhear snippets of each other's video calls with friends, family and our respective romantic interests. Often, I catch him badmouthing me to his friends who we used to share and it's awkward to inadvertently overhear his skewed perspective of events. I take comfort in knowing that this chapter of my life will be a riveting story to tell my future grandkids, and more imminently on first dates after things go back to normal.

## **Do you have any tips for those in need?**

Trying to keep distance within social distancing is not easy. I try to read, I walk my dog to get some fresh air, and I watch educational videos on YouTube so I don't feel worthless for wasting my time.

My tips for others would be to reconnect with family, old friends, coworkers, or romantic interests. Just because we're shut-in doesn't mean we have to be isolated from the world. It's important to safeguard mental health in times like this. In an attempt to lean less heavily on my roommate for emotional labor, I turned to the online community of the [Depression and Anxiety Support Group \(Madrid\)](#) to share my feelings in a safe space.

**Those of us who are healthy but suffer from mental health issues or anxiety need understanding and compassion during these times rather than the go-to “suck it up” advice.**

Do a few pushups, sit-ups, and stretch. Read a good book. Watch a movie that lets you feel what you need to feel. For me, that is *The Wizard of Oz*. It has been my favorite movie since I was young and it never fails to put me at ease.

**What is the first thing you'll do once the lockdown is over?**

I want to keep this PG but I'll definitely see some of the romantic interests I have been corresponding with in these trying times. I'll have a belated birthday party or dinner because I celebrated my birthday alone in quarantine.

**What's going on in your hometown? Would you like to send the people there a message?**

My suburban Texas hometown is just now coming to terms with the gravity of the situation and I hope that they follow the measures that health experts are proposing. I want to beg the people of my predominantly Republican southern town, a place where the open carrying of firearms is prevalent, not to be paranoid and racist towards Asian-Americans and distrustful of health experts. The world is in a precarious state and being careless or vindictive will only exacerbate problems.



**If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

I've seen a lot of older people still out and about like nothing is happening and that infuriates me because we're in quarantine with our lives effectively paused for their well-being. It is such a slap in the face. I'd want the authorities to focus more heavily on restricting their movements as opposed to what they're doing now: entering the personal space of dog walkers and grocery shoppers to gauge how far they are from their registered addresses.

Check out all [Madrid lockdown diaries](#)

If you'd like to get involved and share a compelling story from this ongoing chapter of history, reach out to Daphne Binioris ([daphne@veracontent.com](mailto:daphne@veracontent.com)) and Daniel Catalan ([a96039@aup.edu](mailto:a96039@aup.edu))

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**Lockdown diaries: Margit, founder of Walk and Eat Spain, tells us how the**

# tourism sector has been affected

For anyone working in the tourism sector, the lockdown has been a devastating blow that has inflicted uncertainty for when things will pick up again, says tour guide and hospitality entrepreneur Margit Sperling. A number of tour guests have asked her to postpone their tours rather than canceling outright, which is heartwarming and tremendous financial help.

Margit is the founder of [Walk and Eat Spain](#), a neighborhood food tour company that gives tourists a window into off-the-beaten-path local eateries. Originally from Seattle, she has been living in Spain for 13 years. As a chef and gastronomy expert, she has generously shared some recipes for those of us seeking to emerge from quarantine with elevated competency in the kitchen. She's also recommended some of her favorite local businesses to support right now.

## What your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?

Before the lockdown I was busy doing food tours, researching new local bars, cafés, and markets to feature my tours, calling travel agents to confirm groups, emailing potential guests with tour plans, going on Madrid adventures to create content for my social media accounts, having fun market lunches with friends and generally being active.

I launched my food tour business in April of last year and was on course to have an amazing 2020 with 8 tours booked for March and a bunch of tours on the calendar for April and May and into the summer. Everything has stopped. All my tours for this month and the next to have been canceled or postponed. Who knows what will happen in the late spring and summer, tourism high season. I haven't had any new inquiries in weeks. For my business at least it's just me, and I'm not faced with the awful reality of having to lay people off.

## **What does your street look like?**

The streets in my neighborhood are quiet. I live in Malasaña so it's pretty different as there are normally tons of people out, walking to a from the bars in the area, hanging out on the street and generally doing the noisy business of life in a dense urban area. The quiet is simultaneously calming and ominous.

## **Have you observed any random acts of kindness or uplifting things around you?**

A number of tour guests have asked me to postpone their tours rather than canceling outright which is heartwarming and tremendous financial help. I've been living in my apartment for about 5 years and I didn't know many of my neighbors. The nightly applause for health workers and other service workers has given us this moment to connect. We all say "hi" and check in on each other from our balconies. It's a really beautiful part of every day.

## **How are you coping and what are your tips for others?**

I've been trying to keep myself busy. I made a daily schedule for myself with time slots for different projects and also a bit of at-home exercise (Pop Sugar Fitness has a number of dance class videos that are actually pretty fun). I made a list of items that have been on the bottom of my To-Do list to see what I can get through. When I launched my website, I aspired to have a food and travel blog, but I had only done 2 posts in a year. I put myself on a writing schedule and intend to produce a post daily. Phone and video calls with friends and family help me feel more connected. Mostly, I've been cooking and recording cooking videos. I've also had to remember to slow down and try to enjoy the downtime. I'm trying to respect an 8 PM computer shut down to not just spin my wheels.

## **What is the first thing you'll do once the lockdown is over?**

I'll go have too many glasses of wine at all my favorite bars on Calle Palma in Conde Duque. And check on the roses in the Rose Garden in Parque del Oeste. And have ceviche and *botellines* in Mercado de Mostenses.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

Please make sure that the help for *autónomos* is accessible and

far-reaching. Many of us are really hurting. We're working on a Plan B (and C and D...) but we need help.

## **Do you recommend any small businesses that have remained open for us to support?**

**Panic:** Great bread, call in advance to reserve your favorite loaf. I am partial towards the *Hogaza Integral*, the *Pan de Molde* is unreal and the *Pan Semillas* is a crowd-pleaser. @panic\_madrid

**Quesería Cultivo:** Amazing cheeses, shops in Conde Duque and La Latina

**Mercado de los Mostenses:** This local market continues to serve its community, I implore you to comply with all health recommendations when navigating its stalls.

**La Carbonera:** My favorite neighborhood restaurant, is offering delivery options for their wonderful seasonal cuisine. @LA\_CARBONERA\_MADRID

## **Margit's recipes for aspiring lockdown chefs:**

I've been doing a lot of cooking. Mostly comfort favorites like baked pasta dishes, pureed vegetable soups, roasted

chicken and vegetables. I also love baking. I'm trying not to just make tons of cakes and cookies... but, If you want a fun baking project that uses pantry staples, this apple bread is a good one!



# Apple bread

You can substitute apples for pears, a mix of apple and carrot or zucchini. And a note about measurements: You can take a girl out of America, but you can't take cups and teaspoons out of the American (or something). I use an 8-ounce measuring cup and measuring spoons I brought in my suitcase from home when I moved here in 2007. You can now but all that stuff here. If you want, you can convert measurements to metric or use a "vaso chato" for the one cup measure and a little spoon (level) for the teaspoons.

## Ingredients

- 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup white flour (pastry flour is great here but not necessary)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups grated fruit (use the large holes on a box grater. No need to peel the fruit if it's in good condition, if using older fruit, you can peel off any imperfections. This is a great way to avoid food waste!)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup sunflower oil
- 1 cup white sugar
- 1 egg

## Directions:

- Pre-heat the oven to 350/175.
- Mix the flour, salt, baking soda, and cinnamon and set aside.



- In a large bowl, beat the egg with oil. Add the sugar and mix well. Toss in the grated fruit and stir to combine.
- Add the flour mixture to the fruit mixture and mix until the flour is all incorporated (but don't overmix or the cake will be gummy).
- Pour the mixture into a loaf pan lined with parchment paper or a greased with a little butter/oil.
- Bake for 50 minutes. Test with a toothpick (a few crumbs clinging to the toothpick means it's done).
- Try not to eat it in one sitting.

## **Asparagus and mushroom tortilla for two**



Want to make a tortilla but don't want to fry potatoes? This one is great. Feel free to substitute asparagus for other vegetables like a thinly sliced zucchini.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 bunch green asparagus, trimmed and cut into 1-2 inch chunks
- 6 mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 4 large eggs
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup grated manchego or similar hard cheese (optional)
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Olive oil

## **Directions:**

- In a medium, heavy-bottomed non-stick skillet sauté garlic until fragrant.
- Add mushrooms and cook at medium-high for about 5 minutes, or until starting to brown. Toss in the asparagus chunks and cook for a 3-5 more minutes until bright green and easily pierced with a fork. Salt to taste. You can add black pepper if you like.
- While the veggies are cooking beat the eggs in a large bowl with the cheese (if using) and a pinch of salt (if using cheese be aware that the cheese has a lot of salt).
- Take the veggies off the heat and add them to the egg mixture. Reduce heat to medium.
- Pour a little splash of olive oil to coat the pan and then add the egg and veggie mixture. Move the edges around to cook the egg, giving the pan some good shakes so it doesn't stick.
- After the tortilla is almost set (about 3-4 minutes) put a large plate over the skillet (bigger than the diameter of the pan) and flip it onto the plate.
- Add another little splash of olive oil then gently put the tortilla back into the skillet to finish cooking the other side.
- Cook until its set, about 3 more minutes (you can

carefully poke the center of the tortilla when it's done it feels solid when you press on it).

- Enjoy! Serve with a plate of thickly sliced tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and a bit of salt or with a big green salad and bread. Lots of bread.

[Margit's website](#)

Check out the other [Madrid Lockdown Series](#) stories!

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## **Lockdown diaries: Cat, university administrator & mother of two in Seville**

Cat Gaa is a Chicagoan and remote worker who is coordinating the outgoing communication for an American university in Madrid while raising two bilingual hell raisers in Seville. The higher education and study abroad industries have been severely impacted by the ongoing crisis and Cat is using her

digital toolkit to keep students and their families closely informed on new developments in real-time.

## **What was your life like a week ago vs. today?**

My life ago was vastly different: my two boys, ages three and eight months, got dropped off at daycare around 9 AM, and I had a coffee at a neighborhood bar in Seville where I live before sitting down at my home office to work. When the Comunidad de Madrid decided to suspend classes, my workplace was immediately affected. I felt so disconnected and unable to help with the avalanche of calls from concerned parents, study abroad partners and prospective students. But it helped me see that the same would eventually happen in Sevilla, so I stocked up on necessities like formula and diapers, bought some craft material and new toys and started planning homeschooling lessons.

This week, my husband is taking over the child-minding while I work ahead as much as possible. Even though I've been remote since returning from maternity leave in December, my coworkers are trying to carry on away from the office, which has presented a few challenges, but we're making the best of it. My family is quickly realizing how much food we eat, how many loads of laundry we put on each week and that toddlers have very, very short attention spans.

## **What does the street look like?**

I live on a quiet street at the heart of the *barrío* de Triana.

Most of my neighbors are elderly. My home office has a clear line of site to a bus stop, and we live in front of a tobacco shop. The whoosh of the bus helps me keep track of time because I've given up wearing a watch – nearly every bus is empty as it passes by. There's usually a short line about four or five people deep at the tobacco shop, and I find myself looking out the window any time I hear someone on the street. Usually, it's someone on their phone, breathing in orange blossoms and chattering while walking their dog or toting groceries. At the moment, I haven't seen many masks because the rumor here was that the forthcoming heat would burn off the virus in time for us to burn incense. But both Holy Week and the April Fair are canceled and postponed, respectively.

Seville is a city that claims the street to be their living room. It's odd to not have the white noise at all hours.



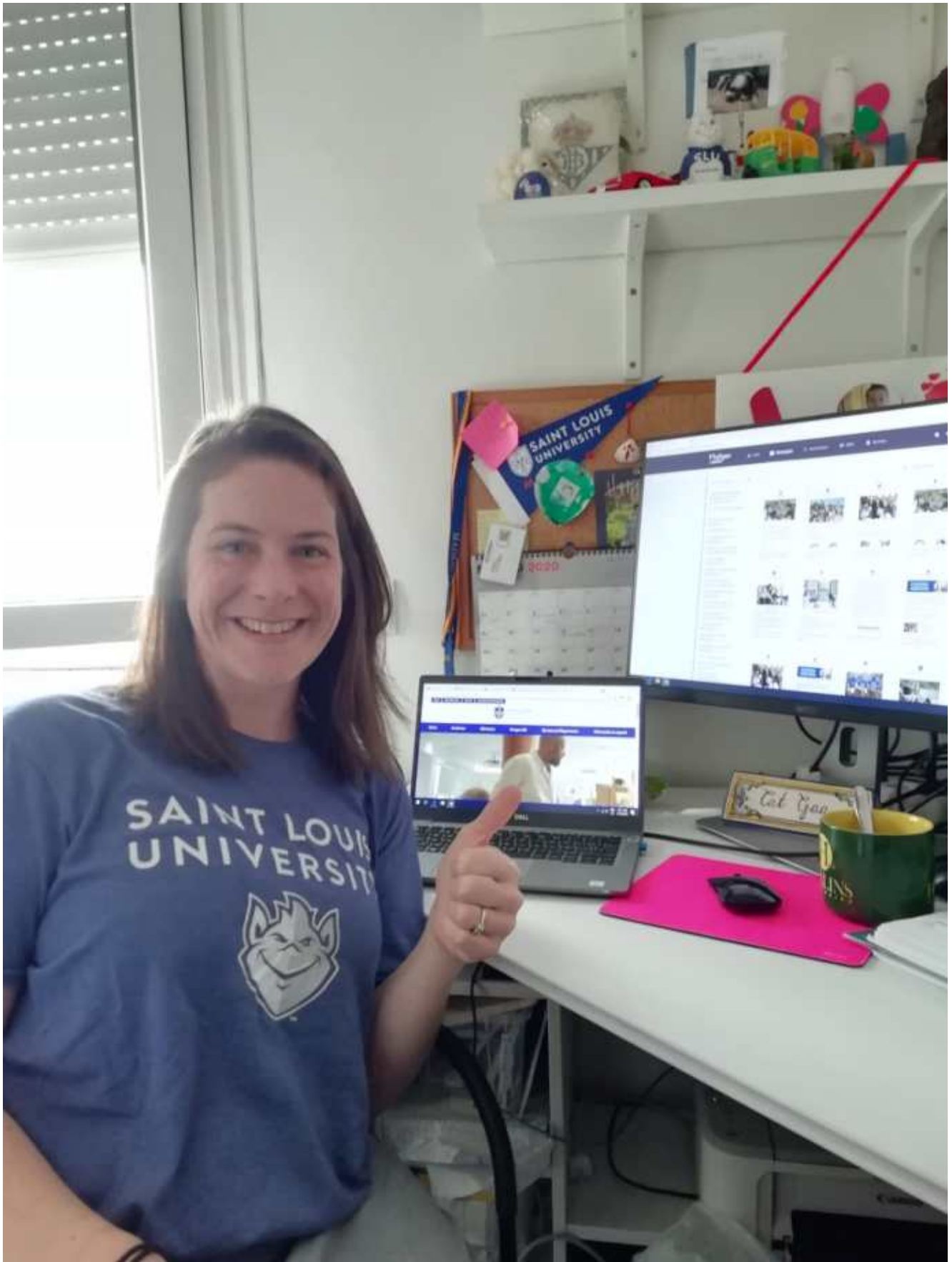
## Have you noticed any random acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?

I am part of a WhatsApp group with the other parents at daycare; in a class of 18 kids, two are medical professionals and have offered video consultations to rule out anything that doesn't merit a trip to the ER. Others have sent along material and games to keep this age group busy; I have helped some of the older children with English homework. Compassion for one another was severely lacking on a societal level, so I hope this situation brings people together. I have hunkered down in the house and not yet ventured out, and I live in a home rather than a *comunidad de vecinos*.

## How are you coping?

So far, just fine. I haven't left the house since getting the boys from their last day of school on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. We have a patio and a terrace, and I am used to being at home – really, it could be worse. But I worry about the psychological effects that this might have on a growing toddler who will likely remember this. We've made s'mores and dressed up in old costumes and had family members back in Chicago read bedtime stories to us. It's a great time to bond and work on some of those *tareas* that I was saving for the summer, like learning to get dressed or roll over. I am trying to keep things as normal as I can with schedules but letting my toddler's creativity and free play take over.





Next week will be different, I'm afraid: my husband is a civil servant and considered essential services. He got a free pass

during the first week of lockdown but will have to return to Madrid for at least six days. This means I'll be alone with the boys – working in the pockets of time I have – at 6 AM, after they've gone to bed, or whenever they're calm and occupied. Handling the cooking and cleaning. Homeschooling as much as one can. I'd love to use this time to finally dust off my French book or organize my drawers but I know I'll soon be on survival mode.

## **What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?**

Although I'd like to take an *exedencia* from my life for 48 hours and just go sleep in a hotel or have a few beers in Plaza Salvador, I think I will take my kids to see their *abuelos* when it's safe. They equate non-school days with spending time outdoors and with their grandparents, so explaining this situation to a small person has been difficult. I may just mandate that we see them outdoors, and preferably at one of those playgrounds next to a bar.

## **If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?**

No more knee-jerk reactions, and please make decisions on the whole. As a communications professional, I had to scour the news for the most current information, and many of the decisions seem reactionary as opposed to proactive. In times like these where bad or incorrect news travels quickly because of the technological resources we have, they need to step back and assess, and then use better channels for information.

See all [Madrid Lockdown Diaries](#) here

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## Madrid Artist Showcase: Diego Salas, Creative Audiovisual Director

Madrid, a hub of creative talent, is the home to artists working across disciplines, wielding various forms of expression. Local artist Diego Salas is the architect behind *Synesthesia*, a series of recorded visual productions in which he creates an immersive projected environment for Madrid's community of performing artists to use as a stage. Diego is proud of this project which has granted him the opportunity to collaborate with respected artists.



As an active member of Madrid's international community, Diego has designed [the Brotha CJ and the Othahood cover for their 2018 album Everybody Eats](#). The animation from this album cover was brought to life when it was rendered on the stage behind this group as they performed at Las Fiestas de San Isidro.



Additionally, Diego has acted in and produced [relatable web series](#) and short films.



His artistic capacity is not limited to grassroots creative projects. I have collaborated with Diego myself to build visually appealing infographics and corporate content for my clients, and he has also crafted logos and branding campaigns for companies in Madrid and beyond.

Several prints, visual designs and other creative works made by Diego will be presented to the public at [VeraArt](#)'s upcoming art show, curated by Maegan Gardner [at VeraContent on February 7th](#). Those in attendance can bear witness to local dancer [Daphne Binioris](#) dancing in synchrony with visual projections controlled by Diego in real-time in a postmodern performance. This will be followed by a performance by [Brotha CJ](#).

Diego hails from Lima, Peru. Like many of us, he has been in the trenches as a teacher and became fond of his adopted home of Madrid, navigating bureaucracy to establish roots here. He is deeply familiar with the process of starting a new life in a foreign country and just recently he celebrated his 14-year anniversary in this city.



Diego opened up about the challenges that he has faced as a freelance artist.

*There's a romanticized image of an artist who is always inspired. People don't see the hours or the process behind the scenes, sharing work on social media and building a community with other artists with a similar vision. These less glamorous parts of the process require constant attention.*

As we sat for the interview, Diego gave me a sneak peek of the new pieces he will present at VeraArt's upcoming event and talked about his creative process. Diego's lived experiences play a role in some of his pieces where he depicts the emotional aesthetic components of memories in surreal animations. His visuals are often inspired by music and nature. Stimulation from music evokes colorful mental images that Diego quickly recreates onscreen.

Diego had this to say about the volatility of creating art under capitalism:

*You will inevitably encounter negative feedback. Don't let imposter syndrome and the other haters and failed projects discourage you. Failure is part of the process and you can learn from it.*

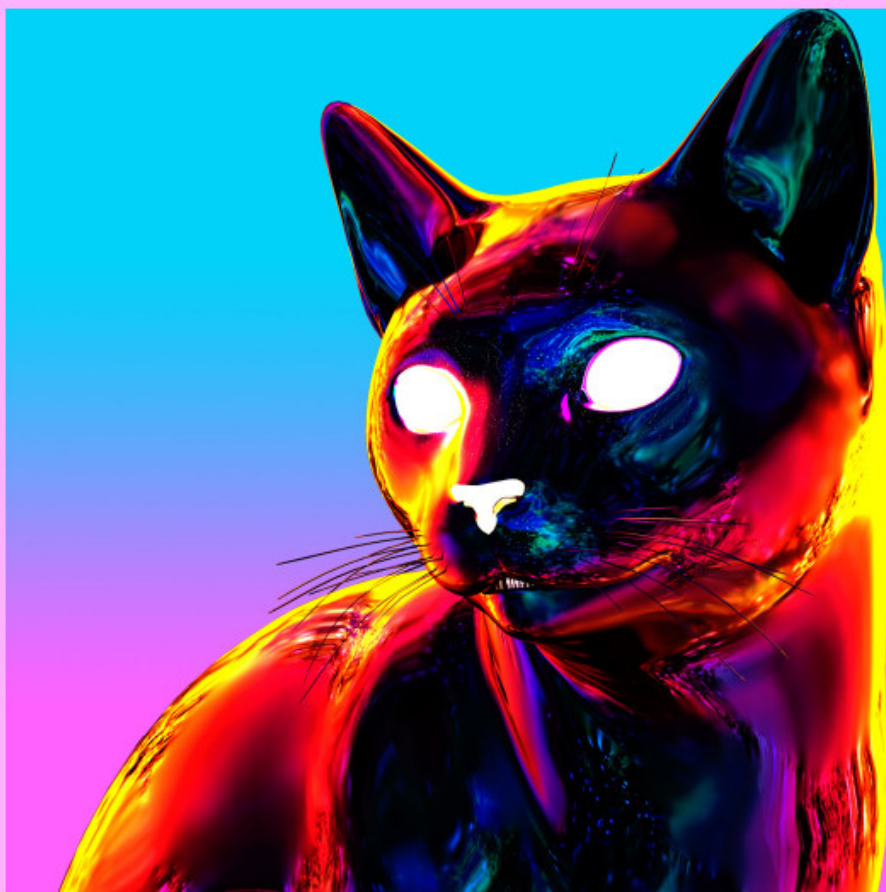
Diego's advice to aspiring artists is:

*Don't stop creating. Passion projects that are non-lucrative are valid forms of expression. Don't feel obligated to profit from your art or gain visibility and acclaim immediately, it happens with time and dedication.*

## Upcoming art show in Madrid

VERAART  
+ DIEGO SALAS

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 7TH  
C/ MARTÍN SOLER 6.  
NAVE IZQ



ART EXHIBIT  
LIVE MUSIC  
DANCE PERFORMANCE  
5€ UNLIMITED DRINKS

7:30PM

Be sure to catch Diego at VeraArt's event on February 7th in Madrid. Here's all the event details and make sure to sign up [here on Eventbrite](#).

**Diego Salas, Madrid-based**



# audiovisual artist

▪ [Instagram](#) | [Website](#)

*\*All photos by [James Stiles of Labl Foto](#).*