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The Closed Outdoors: A Hiker Quarantines in New York City

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The Closed Outdoors

A hiker quarantines in New York City

Derick Lugo

The Quarantine

My first impulse was to flee to the mountains. “The Appalachian Trail, here I come!” That compulsion was quickly dashed to pieces. The AT was not an option for me or other hikers seeking solace in its outdoor embrace. I was trapped in New York City.

In mid-March 2020, life took an unexpected turn into the unknown. New York was on lockdown; restaurants, bars, gyms, and unessential businesses were told to close their doors. New Yorkers were ordered to stay at home. The state of emergency had us quarantined in our small apartments for an uncertain period. The rest of the country soon followed suit, yet the Empire State, with a population of 19 million, was reporting the most COVID-19 cases. And with almost half of the state population living in New York City, it was no wonder the unknown virus severely affected us.

“STEP BACK, STEP AWAY FROM ME . . . HAVEN’T YOU HEARD OF SOMETHIN’ called the coronavirus? It’s been killin’ people!” An elderly man shot the remark to an unexpected patron at my local post office. The early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic made many people scared to be around others, especially when initial reports of the virus had it being fatal to seniors. As far as he knew, he could have been infected. I was unsure what to think of all of this.

I tend to lean toward optimism in difficult situations. It’s what got this inexperienced hiker to complete a long-distance hike of the AT. My Instagram stories were full of corona jokes, and with the discovery of TikTok, I was doing all the quarantine dances. Yet, as the weeks went on and the numbers of cases grew, the tone of this pandemic was far from funny.

Before the wide spread of the virus, I rarely watched TV news. Except for the last few seconds before the news hour concluded, it seemed like all I kept seeing were reports of bad events. For once I wanted to hear, “Breaking News: The United States and China formulate a plan to end world hunger. Other



Derick Lugo hiking around in Central Park early in the spring 2020 pandemic.

COURTESY OF DERICK LUGO

countries are eager to join the cause. And after the break, how the government is planning to supply thru-hikers with hundreds of hiker feeds all along the Appalachian Trail. Stay tuned.”

Now, the local and international news had nothing I truly wanted to start or end my day with. But once word got out that New York had become the epicenter for the pandemic, I needed to be in the know. I had hiking plans for the upcoming months, and I did not want to be caught off guard so I kept CNN on all day long, mostly on mute until I thought there was something I needed to know or if the Cuomo brothers were on.

They call it a man crush, maybe, but I was not the only one; the rest of the country was drawn to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. His confidence,

tough voice, and clear explanation of the situation was what New Yorkers needed. He didn't just give us casualty numbers; he took control and made us feel a bit at ease about the state we were all in. Now add his younger brother, a CNN news anchor with the same demeanor, and you have an interview that at times ended with some funny brotherly banter.

But I digress, distracted by the Cuomos. For the first few weeks, new developments of the virus, how it was being contained, and the daily restrictions were announced. Every day was a new extreme. The subways were left empty except for the essential and healthcare workers . . . and the homeless. Bank lines wrapped around the corner, when in the past there weren't even lines. Making a quick stop at the supermarket was nonexistent. Resources were running low and the rush for toilet paper left me confused. (How could I have missed that this virus caused uncontrollable bowel movements?)

During the first week of the city lockdown, I began feeling pressure on my chest, followed by chest pains. It felt like I was wearing a 60-pound backpack across my chest while climbing a steep mountain. Fatigue that made breathing a challenge took over my evenings. When the fever and chills started, I knew I was dealing with something I had never experienced before.

I did not rush to the hospital. With an inadequate amount of testing available, we were asked to stay home if we had flu-like or even COVID-19 symptoms. For almost two weeks, I had the worst case of the flu. Did I have "the Rona"? I don't know, but what I do know is that my tush did not need the extra toilet paper. Like the pyramids, the mystery of the toilet paper hoarding was unsolved. Best guess: aliens!

Daily developments continued to be broadcast; first, only the elderly and persons with underlying conditions were in danger, and children were not especially affected. Before we could finish our sigh of relief for the young, that report was not 100 percent accurate. Children were getting sick.

"Masks are not necessary. . . . Oh, wait. Yeah, wear them."

I couldn't keep up. Suddenly the news was becoming stressful to watch, and although after two weeks, I recovered from whatever it was, and I was as healthy and as strong as ever, the news was making me ill. I wondered how many people watching the news were getting phantom symptoms.

At its highest point, 45 percent of the United States coronavirus cases were in New York. Will the Cuomos ever report good news? My bromance with them was fading fast.

How can this get worse?

"People of color are at greater risk of COVID-19."

More than ever, I wanted to grab my pack and spend another six months (how long it took me to thru-hike) in the wilderness. Like Snake Plissken, I wanted to escape from New York, yet I couldn't do that either.

A Closed Appalachian Trail

Days after the city lockdown, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy announced the cancellation of several hiking events. This included Trail Days (the AT's biggest hiking festival) in Damascus, Virginia, and the closing of several shelters along the AT. A week later, the ATC advised hikers to stay off the trail. Their decisions coincided with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendation to stay home in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus.

This was a gorilla-size monkey wrench thrown into my 2020 plan to hike and tour my AT memoir in the hiking towns I had visited during my 2012 AT thru-hike.



Derick Lugo navigating a rocky slope during his 2012 Appalachian Trail thru-hike.

COURTESY OF DERICK LUGO

No hiking and no contact with others?

I'm done, put me away. This was a hard one to swallow.

For me, the AT is not only about the mountains, the scenery, and the terrain. It's also about the interaction with others on the trail. I could not have finished my thru-hike without resupplying in small towns, hostels, trail magic, and hiker feeds. I agreed with the ATC decision to urge hikers to stay home and attempt a thru-hike when the pandemic finally passed. Not necessarily because I thought hikers could infect each other and locals or vice versa, which was a possibility, but for me, my thru-hike was more than just a trail that led me up and down mountains. It was, to my surprise, about the community. The people not only helped make my thru-hike a success, but they also made it truly enjoyable. If that had been taken away, then I would have missed out on a vital part of my journey. I felt for the class of 2020 thru-hikers who had to cancel or postpone their adventures but in my experience, like my gear, I would not have completed my thru-hike—well, not easily or not as enjoyably—without human interaction.

Not Only Surviving, but Thriving

When we were advised to stay indoors, I, like many outdoor enthusiasts, understood the reasoning, but my hiking plans were disrupted. My initial reaction was diva-like.

“What the further?!”

I felt like a grounded 'tween being told that I couldn't use all electronics, including my cell phone. The kid in me was screaming, “When you're done stomping on my ambitions, why don't you sweep them away so I'm not bearing witness to its lifeless form? AAUGH!”

After my exaggerated moment was over, I eventually understood the reasoning behind the restrictions, and although I was not thrilled with them, I accepted them. The next step was to adapt and move forward. We were all going to pull through these life-altering times. The other side of these challenging times was going to be bright. But I didn't just want us to survive; I wanted us all to thrive.

I took to social media. I needed to see how hikers of all sorts were coping. It seemed that the quarantine had extended the hiking off-season. Many were using this extra time to continue planning a thru-, section- or weekend hike. Staying busy in this way kept the anxious hiker busy and sane. Research material, such as hiking books, either guides or memoirs, were read. Podcasts

and YouTube videos were also used in preparation. Spring hikes may have been disrupted, but in our hearts, summer and fall hikes were bound to still happen, and we were going to be more than ready.



A socially distant walk near the George Washington Bridge had to suffice. COURTESY OF
DERICK LUGO

Respecting the government guidelines to avoid groups, stay six feet apart, and wear face covers—hikers did just that. Yet there were still tons of open trails where a safe social distance hike was possible.

As a fellow hiker put it, “I don’t think most hikers are staying off the trail entirely. They are just changing perspective, choosing easier less populated hikes near home and being cautious to avoid gatherings.”

That may be so. I had to adjust my way of staying active. I was living with my partner on the top floor of a five-story brownstone walk-up. Three long flights of stairs replaced my mountain climbs. Thirty minutes up and down those steps left me feelin’ like I was on the approach trail to Springer Mountain.

Yeah, hikers were discouraged, yet we adapted and kept an open mind.

While our public lands, trails, and greenways were closed, were they healing, like India’s cities, where a clear blue sky could now be seen because of a lack of air pollution? I saw photos of luscious green grass growing on trails that no one had trotted on for weeks. Was this a blessing in disguise? Will a rejuvenated wilderness make our outdoor experience that much better when we can finally trek? One thing is for sure, the hardworking trail maintainers, who are as eager as anyone to get out onto the trail again, will have much work to do.

Until that grand day arrives, adapting and coping with the current situation has become a worldwide mission, especially for those who thrive on treading along a trail and breathing in the crisp, clean mountain air. Video communications such as Zoom and social media live streaming are used to share stories and photos of past hikes, as well as plans for future outdoor activities. All spring it was becoming clear that our feelings and motives for being out in nature were as sacred as the trail and mountains that evoked them.

For me and many others, the year drastically changed because of COVID-19. My book tour for *The Unlikely Thru-Hiker* and hiking plans screeched to a halt. Writing outdoor stories and attending Zoom book clubs became my new virtual book tour. Like the reflection on the sunglasses of my book cover, I had my sights on climbing mountains. I was aching to be out there again. Being in the presence of beautiful scenery can leave us in a heavenly trance, yet as Robert Macfarlane expressed in *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (Penguin Books, 2013), “But there are also the landscapes we bear with us in absentia, those places that live on in memory long after they have withdrawn in actuality, and such places—retreated to most often when we are most remote from them—are among the most important landscapes we possess.”

The pandemic has indeed left many of us with a ravenous appetite for the outdoors. We are ready to rage up a mountain as soon as our feet touch the trail. The absence of the outdoors has truly made our hearts grow fonder. How much more appreciative are we all going to be when we finally get to freely explore any trail our heart desires? Greater respect and wonder will run through us with a thrill we have never felt before.

DERICK LUGO—trail name Mr. Fabulous—is the author of *The Unlikely Thru-Hiker* (AMC Books, 2019). He lived in New York City for most of his life and in July moved to Asheville, North Carolina.

The Vertical Mile

An obsession of repeated climbs

Stephen Kurczy

AT A SECLUDED CRAG NEAR MY HOUSE, THERE'S A CLIMBING ROUTE called Malevolent Eye. It's 32 feet high, with a 3-foot overhang and a difficulty rating of 5.10-. It's tricky enough to challenge a good climber, with several blade-thin holds and a slippery, insecure lunge in the middle.

A couple of decades ago, the prolific Connecticut climber and guidebook author Ken Nichols ascended Malevolent Eye 50 times in one day. His record stood unchallenged until early 2020, when a mutual friend of ours—Brian Ludovici, then an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut and president of its climbing club—climbed it 70 times in a day. When I heard, I told Nichols—who is in his early 70s and still climbs religiously—that I wanted to try to set a new record and possibly break 100.

Connecticut doesn't boast the soaring cliffs of New Hampshire and Maine, so climbers here have to get creative to do long routes—especially when outdoors areas are closed because of a new coronavirus. The American Alpine Club in March discouraged climbers from visiting cliffs so as to not spread