

A REFLECTIVE PIECE FROM OUR TIME LOCKED DOWN DURING THE PANDEMIC IN CHAMONIX

OLLY'S ISOLATION MUSINGS

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To many of us, self-isolation means going to the mountains. It means getting away from cities and crowds and escaping to the wild countryside. Whether Snowdonia, the Lake District, the rugged Bens of Scotland in the UK, or up to the high glaciers of the Alps; we need the solitude and beauty that nature provides.

Self-isolating for over 8 weeks for me has been a strange and subdued experience here in the French Alps. For March, April and the first few days of May we've been locked down, working from home and only leaving for food shopping and essential trips like to the pharmacy and doctor appointments (no, not any local castle visits).

Exercise has been limited and strictly enforced to 1 hour per day within 1km from where you live. We were also limited to going no further than 100m in elevation from where we live, so no climbing any nearby hills and no trail running in the forests above the valley. Luckily the gendarmes (French police) couldn't limit home exercise.

The reasons are fair and understandable. Don't put extra stress on the health services by climbing a mountain and breaking your leg in an accident, thus using precious resources of the mountain rescue services and the surgeons and hospital wards to operate on you. Keep hospitals free for Covid19 patients.

There were only a couple of cases of people breaking the rules and getting caught in accidents / getting lost in the mountains and having to sheepishly call for help. Even if I disagree with the severity of the lockdown restrictions, especially limiting exercise and time spent outside which I believe are crucial to mental health and wellbeing, I can understand the principle of it.

However, the lockdown is now starting to be lifted and life is flowing back into the Chamonix valley. Our freedom radius has recently been extended to 100km and mountain activities are able to resume with mountain huts due to open mid-June.

My thoughts during the lockdown have been up and down but one thing has stuck. How will this situation change my approach to going back to the mountains?

We've seen how peaceful everything is with no human interruption. Wolves were spotted in the forests above Chamonix for the first time in years. I noticed big birds of prey flying closer to the valley floor due to the lack of noise pollution from cars and lorries. I could only imagine the large numbers of Ibex roaming the trails and eating all the shrubs till their hearts' content with no stress of trampling tourists.

We were already aware of the effects of over-population in vulnerable areas such as the Alps before coronavirus. We have already been aware of the effect of climate change on our beloved mountainscapes for a long time. But sometimes it's more difficult to change something if you're right in the middle of it. Perhaps this pause has come at the right time, and perhaps it has given us the time to sit back and think about everything from a wider perspective. What can I do to help? What can we do to help protect our environment?

It has been so nice being back in the mountains over the past few days. It is a place many of us claim to be home, although the mountains themselves would not claim us to be their inhabitants. I feel like many of us have returned to the mountains with renewed awareness and admiration, and especially a whole new dollop of appreciation.

We lay claim to these wild places, for the fun and enjoyment we experience. It sounds like selfish behavior but I don't think it is as long as we tread carefully. Time spent in the mountains is enriching in many ways. An enriched person full of experiences that only mountains can provide is a good human being to have on our planet. The more people experience the wonder of nature the more people can appreciate its vulnerability. Then, the more people can act. Whether that is by voting for parties that prioritise environmental policies, or whether that is by supporting businesses and charities that act on climate change rather than encourage it.

It all comes down to choices. Life is the choices we make. What will you choose to do once your 'freedom' is reinstated?

