

A normal life: An update from in COVID-19-free New Zealand

napavalleyregister.com/lifestyles/a-normal-life-an-update-from-in-covid-19-free-new-zealand/article_a62b00e4-8b5c-5fc4-8c22-c5d58aab6dbc.html

DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

August 2, 2020



DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

For the last 10 years, after I married an American-turned- New Zealander, we would travel each winter to spend three fun summer months at our home in the Southern Hemisphere on New Zealand's South Island.

Then we'd head home to California and spring, to our home in the Sierra foothills. I'd relish the lacy white blossoms on my apple trees, the bright yellow, red and pink tulip bulbs I planted the previous fall and the joy of feeling winter wake up into the fresh and exciting energy of spring.

But this year, at the end of March, just weeks before our scheduled flight back to California, COVID-19 stopped the world. New Zealand closed its borders, our flights home, through Fiji, were cancelled and a state of national emergency was declared as New Zealand entered a Level 4 lockdown, the highest level, for four weeks.

Jacinda Ardern, the 39-year old prime minister, spoke to the almost 5 million Kiwis that first day and then daily, together with the health minister, providing facts and specifics of what we were to do.

Stay home. Do not leave your property, even to exercise. For older people, order your groceries online and have them delivered. Similar, I believe, to the U.S. lockdown.

But the prime minister provided much more than a calm and reassuring presence. She exuded warmth and kindness. She encouraged the “team New Zealand” that we could do this, if we all would work together and follow the rules. She acknowledged everyone often for our efforts and for the sacrifices we were all making.

She did Facebook Live updates from her home, wearing a sweatshirt, after tucking her toddler into bed. When I listened to her, I felt seen and appreciated for facing the challenges, deprivations and even boredom, we were all facing.

We were in New Zealand in March 2019, when a man gunned down worshipers at two mosques, killing 50, including a 3-year-old child. Less than a week later, the government, led by Ardern, banned all semi-automatic military style weapons. And the citizens complied. Ardern went to the families of those killed at the mosque wearing a head scarf and hugged them. The nation stopped for a minute of silence one week later to honor those who had died, embracing the idea that we are all one. There is no “them and us.”

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, we watched and listened to Ardern’s daily briefings and followed the rules. After a month of total lockdown, which began on March 25, we gradually moved through levels three and two.

And then on June 8, 10 weeks after the first lockdown and 38 days without a case of person-to-person transmission of COVID-19, we moved to Level 1. As she had promised, and with a warm “Thank you, New Zealand,” in her announcement, we returned to normal life again (within our close borders).

(For a complete description of each level of New Zealand’s lockdown system, go to covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/restrictions/alert-system-overview/.)

The powerful deliciousness of 'normal' felt like food after starvation. We could go to a busy restaurant and sit inside, laugh, hug dear friends, shake hands with new ones, no masks, no social distancing. The wonder of it still lingers.

New Zealand is an example of what can happen with sane, solid, warm and encouraging, science-based leadership, even against the worst pandemic in 100 years. That there can be an end point, but it takes the sacrifice of being willing to follow the rules, even when they are annoying and inconvenient.

The distance of nearly 7,000 miles between here and California still yawns for me. I miss my home, my garden, my family, summer, my life there. But I realize that the life I'm missing, normal, COVID-19-free life, is not the life that is happening in California right now. I'm missing the life I left in January, not life as it is at this moment.

For now, we'll stay on here and enjoy normal, safety and sanity, though bundled up against cold winter winds that blow north from Antarctica and the South Pole.

But my heart is still there, cheering you on California. Stay safe. I am watching from afar.

Diane Covington-Carter is an award-winning writer and frequent contributor to the Napa Valley Register. www.dianecovingtoncarter.com