

# COVID-19 ONE YEAR ON

Outdoor professionals from around the world share an update of their experiences

This article is a follow up to one I wrote in autumn 2020 ('Global perspectives' in *Horizons* issue 91) in which I asked Outdoor professionals from around the world to share their experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on their work. In this article I've asked for an update on their situation, what they've learned over the past year and what they'd like to see moving forward. Here are their voices.

## WALES

### PERSPECTIVE BY:

**Jez Brown**

Climbing and Mountaineering Instructor

Jez started JB Mountain Skills in 2009 and has been working in the Outdoor industry since 1999.



“Welsh lockdowns meant there was a large portion of the past year where my normal work wasn't possible. However, as a provider of Mountain Training qualifications we were fortunate to be able to still run some courses during the second lockdown, due to education being exempt from some restrictions. Obviously we took a financial hit, but with Mountain Training courses, government support for self-employed people and a massive demand for courses outside of lockdown, it was still a really positive year.

From my point of view there was a lot of pent-up demand for climbing and mountaineering instruction, condensed into a smaller time period than in usual years. At the beginning of our first lockdown I started a YouTube channel which proved super successful; a combination of right place and right time, plus a shed load of hard work, especially as that sort of thing was very new to me. Adapting to the situation has massively increased the number of bookings and enquiries coming in, and rarely a day goes past in the UK without someone saying “Hi” at the crag before mentioning the YouTube channel and #slingsmountain. The success of this led to alternative revenue streams from YouTube, selling t-shirts and other affiliations. It's been really exciting to step up to the challenge of COVID-19 on my business and undoubtedly it has changed how I operate for the better. I still absolutely love the bread and butter of being out in the great outdoors, instructing, guiding or coaching, but it's ace to have an alternative platform to work with and to be able to form a new type of connection with people from all over the world. I'm extremely positive about the future and it's been heartening to see others making these strange times work for them too. The demand for our profession seems to me to be growing and growing, it just takes a new way of thinking to make the most of it.

If you were to ask me what I'd like to see in the industry moving forward, I think it would be looking at how to add more value where possible and being better at sharing the benefits of Outdoor Education at a grass roots level, so that things like outdoor adventure in schools gets seen as a necessity in a child's upbringing, rather than a luxury. We all know that the learning and health benefits are enormous, but do the people who make funding decisions know that?”

## PORTUGAL

### PERSPECTIVE BY:

**David Moreira Cardoso**

Outdoor Education Instructor



Starting as a multi-activity guide in 2007, David mostly works as a freelance Outdoor Educator around the world.

“I was working in the USA when Covid-19 first appeared and consequentially had to return to my native Portugal. The first lockdown in Portugal started on 18 March and the Outdoor industry in Portugal went to a standstill for most of the spring. However, some companies managed to return to work by adapting their practice for smaller groups and by introducing additional hygiene standards such as wearing masks, hand sanitisation, temperature checks and bigger spaces between clients/ groups. Promotions and special deals (e.g. lower prices or free places) were also offered, to attract customers to the outdoors. This allowed for a normal-ish summer season, with a smaller number of people participating, but it was clear that there was still a very keen clientele. This continued into early autumn but as per normal, activity levels dwindled with the worsening winter weather. This was then completely stopped by the second full lockdown.

The Outdoor industry in Portugal has suffered massively; the number of participants decreased immensely, companies have decided to shut down completely, and many of the instructors/ guides have moved on to other activities, finding work where they can, or are relying on government support. Some companies are using this time to reorganise. For example, new products and itineraries are being designed, remaining local, while long distance tours are being discontinued or are available on-demand. Also, new partnerships are being discussed amongst tour operators to create a stronger, healthier network. There is, however, a mix of hope and fear in Portugal: fear for an uncertain future, and hope in the vaccines which are slowly being made available. This could allow for the industry to slowly restart with the warmer weather arriving and some sense of 'normal' being restored.

One of the learnings of the pandemic for the OE industry is that virtual experiences can have a prominent and valuable place in the experiential curriculum both pre- and post-course. This can allow for early group development, like students and instructors getting to know each other. Another development is that more traditional schooling is looking at OE as a safer place to conduct learning and more class-based teachers are using a more experiential approach to teaching. My hope for the future is that access to the outdoors is seen as a necessity. I hope the industry uses the pandemic to its' advantage by providing services that are accessible to all populations. It seems to me there is still an idea that the outdoors needs to be in isolation away from the city, which we all know to be untrue. The industry that comes out on the other side will be a different one; most likely linear, with new skills but hopefully, more resilient, like all of us providers.”





## NEW ZEALAND

### PERSPECTIVE BY:

**Ian Ganderton**

Professional Development Coach, The Outdoor Education Group (OEG) (to March 2020)



Ian has over 30 years of Outdoor Education experience and is currently living and freelancing in New Zealand.

“The past year in New Zealand has been pretty crazy. It’s felt like we have been in a goldfish bowl of relative normality while looking outside the world has been burning. Here the government took firm action based on science combined with clear positive messaging and, as a result, the strategy of COVID-19 elimination has largely worked. This has meant Outdoor Education has happened relatively normally since September last year. I’m really appreciative of the privileged position this has put us in.

*It’s not all been plain sailing: we have been impacted by several short sharp lockdowns as infections have leaked through the borders and into communities. These have caused a stop-start uncertainty and have been very challenging for both Outdoor Education and the events and hospitality industries.*

*Due to our borders being closed, New Zealand’s large Outdoor Adventure tourism sector exists in a very reduced form (domestic tourists providing approx 10% of previous business) with some businesses in hibernation and many guides moving into other sectors like construction.*

*There has been lots of talk of a Trans-Tasman travel bubble with Australia and other bubbles with Pacific island nations. The problem has been community outbreaks on all sides of the water stopping these dead in their tracks. Right now there is lots of talk of something with Australia potentially happening at the end of April. This would be incredibly significant for the mountain and ski guides over the winter season.*

*The vaccine roll-out has only just started here and it’s not got the same pressure as elsewhere to happen overnight. There has been a significant media release today about how the government plans to reimagine the post COVID-19 tourism sector to be more sustainable for the country’s environment.*

*Moving forward, I think the NZ government needs to keep doing what it’s been doing: following expert advice and science to keep the population safe and businesses operating. The messaging they have been putting out has been simple, consistent, caring and clear. If ever you want to learn how to deal with a significant incident, I think New Zealand has both written and demonstrated the new effective playbook very clearly.”*

## CANADA

### PERSPECTIVE BY:

**Rachel Simoni**

Multi-activity Instructor



Rachel has 10 years’ experience working with children, four of those years specifically in Outdoor and Environmental Education. She has now moved on to teacher training.

“Although I believe that Outdoor Education is the best job in the world, this past year many Canadians have experienced the less ideal aspects of the profession, such as the lack of job security and benefits. Some things that have contributed to this include, but are not limited to, the seasonal realities of the job, the lack of policy and regulation surrounding our professional status, obligations, remuneration and of course COVID-19.

*In Canada, going into the Outdoor Education profession is financially a risky move and COVID-19 has only intensified that. The majority of people who join this career path have some support from family or friends, leaving the industry to mostly consist of white men. Moving forward, I would hope for the industry to aim to promote more diversity in their staff through scholarships, bursaries and wages that accurately represent not only minimum wage standards, but the investment that is necessary to procure and maintain employment through training, certification and expertise. When students have leaders who they can relate to, it empowers them to see what they are capable of achieving.*

*This last year I did the math and came to the conclusion that having a house and a family would not fit into the life of an Outdoor Educator in Canada, unless I went into management. I love this profession because I love spending time with children, so I retrained. I am now a student teacher in a primary school in British Columbia. We are able to integrate a significant amount of Outdoor and Environmental Education into our lessons through the science, social studies and art curriculums.*

*As I am living in a mountain town where teachers and parents ski together on weekends, Outdoor Education in schools has been made a priority. For many other schools, this is not the case as they do not have teachers who have access to or experience in the outdoors. Canadians are blessed with some awe-inspiring natural spaces. I hope that the Outdoor Education industry can diversify itself in order to ensure all students have the opportunity to explore these environments in safe and meaningful ways.”*



ANDORRA

PERSPECTIVE BY:  
**Lorena Gamo**  
Ski School Instructor  
Manager



Lorena is a ski school instructor/ manager with over 25 years' tourist industry experience.

“For the beginning I have to say that I'm living in two different situations this year. For one side, my personal situation and for the other, my professional/ general tourism situation. This year I had the opportunity of changing jobs, and fortunately I have a good new job in relation to the Outdoor industry and it's for that reason I'm so positive.

But, I have to say that it's because of this new job that I can see the problems in the Outdoor industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a ski instructor manager in a well-known ski station, I can see the numbers of this year compared with the year before. Obviously the difference is so big, but it was expected. At the beginning of the season we hoped that everything would be alright, but as time passed, things got complicated. We began to think that it would be impossible to open the ski resort, but now we are in the middle of the season (almost at the end) and we are open! I think, this is one of the clearest examples that we can change things!

All the staff at the ski resort have had to make a big effort to keep the resort open: I had to work as a secretary, as a ski instructor and obviously as a ski instructor manager. And like me, all the people here, all of them, have had to do some different roles and jobs. But it doesn't matter, we are a very good team, and we managed it!

I suppose it was different for different places and companies, and unfortunately not everyone can say the same, but I have a little hope, because I see the light at the end of the tunnel.

We are tourists- we need holidays to have different experiences, and we want to do different things during life, and we will be back in the world! I hope so!”

AUSTRALIA

PERSPECTIVE BY:  
**Ben Newham**  
Trainer, Mentor, Instructor, Leader at the Outdoor Education Group



Ben has seven years of experience in Outdoor Education.

“During the early months of the pandemic the Outdoor industry here in Australia was at a complete standstill. As the world waited to see how the cards fell, it quickly became clear we would not be getting back to work any time soon. As we waited, it was reassuring to see industry leaders working tirelessly to identify a path forward. The Australian government rolled out its Jobkeeper scheme to support not-for-profit organisations and businesses to keep people employed. Without this scheme, it's likely the Outdoor industry here would have crumbled. Towards the end of 2020, governments began to relax restrictions. It seemed we might be getting back to work, and some sort of new normal, sooner rather than later. Slowly, Outdoor Education programs came back on-line. We began to see staff and students return to the field. Despite several small outbreaks, the Outdoor industry seems to be building confidence in the way it operates in a COVID-19 world. So far in 2021, we've already seen thousands of smiling young people once again experiencing the joys of being outside, and provided Australia maintains low numbers of COVID-19 cases, there are no apparent reasons why we shouldn't expect to see momentum to continue to build.

For me, this pandemic has highlighted the importance of the work we do in the outdoors as educators, guides, facilitators or therapists. Whatever our title, we believe in the importance of experiencing the outdoors, in all its beauty and perceived discomfort. We understand the inherent benefits of being outside, in the wild, or cycling around the block. Which, of course, is particularly important now. Personally, I consider myself fortunate to have had a relatively manageable COVID-19 experience. Although it hasn't all been peachy, and I've had to make some significant life decisions, I'm grateful to work in this industry. The break from field work has left me refreshed and excited to get back out there, in the hills and on the rivers, sharing time with people outside, healing and moving forward together toward the

FRANCE

PERSPECTIVE BY:  
**Daniel Cummin**  
River Guide and Director of Experience Ardeche



With 25 years of Outdoor industry experience starting as a multi-activity instructor back in 1995, Daniel is also a qualified secondary school teacher.

“Here in France it has stayed steady most of the past year with cafes and restaurants closed and a 6pm curfew. People are encouraged to work from home if possible but we are not in lockdown. Well maybe 'lockdown lite'. We can use the outdoors for personal exercise but not for work yet. With our river trips running from late May this year we are hoping that things will improve quickly but the reality is that this is likely to be delayed due to the roll-out of vaccinations across Europe. Campsites, for example, still do not have a date from which they can open. Thankfully all the bookings I had which transferred from last year are still in place, although we still don't know whether any or all of them will go ahead this year. There are mentions of opening up for mid-June but no one knows to what level this will be: just for locals, just for the French, the wider Schengen zone or internationally!? We are hoping that most trips will go ahead as planned and that those that can't will be transferred once more to a date later this year or next year. If most end up being refunded then keeping the business going another year will be even more uncertain.”

THINKING  
ABOUT PIVOTING?

Read how Ivor used his  
Outdoor practitioner skills  
in new contexts  
from page 37.



From my own perspective, based in the UK, I've had jobs lined up in centre management but I was just waiting for a start date. This finally came after the government's recent announcement to allow domestic residential educational trips as of 17 May, so long as their improvements and criteria are met. Over the past year I've had to survive on state handouts in the form of Universal Credit (£400 per month), and the goodwill of family and friends. I am very grateful for all of this and I'm aware that others will face similar or more difficult challenges.

In many ways my summary and conclusion to this article is similar to the first: the industry is on the road to recovery, but it's going to be a bumpy one, some countries are further down the road than others and we're going to need to be flexible to adapt and survive. However, time is critical, and it's already too late for many who have been forced to leave the industry. For example, around 30 activity centres have had to close their doors in the United Kingdom (1).

#### REFERENCE

1. Bawden, A. (2021). Allow school trips in summer term. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/mar/11/allow-school-trips-in-summer-term-uk-outdoor-education-centres-say>

#### IMAGES

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The key difference between my last article and this one is that vaccines are now being rolled out and this has meant that the average number of new daily COVID-19 cases has fallen substantially in recent weeks in the UK (BBC website 19/3/21). Hopefully this will continue and build trust that people can start living 'normally' again. However, vaccines are not a miraculous 'silver bullet' and there will no doubt be virus variations and waves of infections in future. But individuals like Jez and countries like Australia and New Zealand (and even the UK) are showing us that there is a way forward for our industry. So if we can learn from the successes of others, be innovative in our programme design and delivery and follow the evolving science and government guidance, we can operate safely and get back in the field. After the year we've all just had, it's more important now than ever for both providers and participants! ■



**AUTHOR**  
Calvin Healey, Program Manager.

Calvin began career in the Outdoor Industry as an instructor for PGL in 1998 and has over 20 years experience in a variety of roles and organisations, most recently returning to the UK from his role as a Program Manager for The Outdoor Education Group in Australia.

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