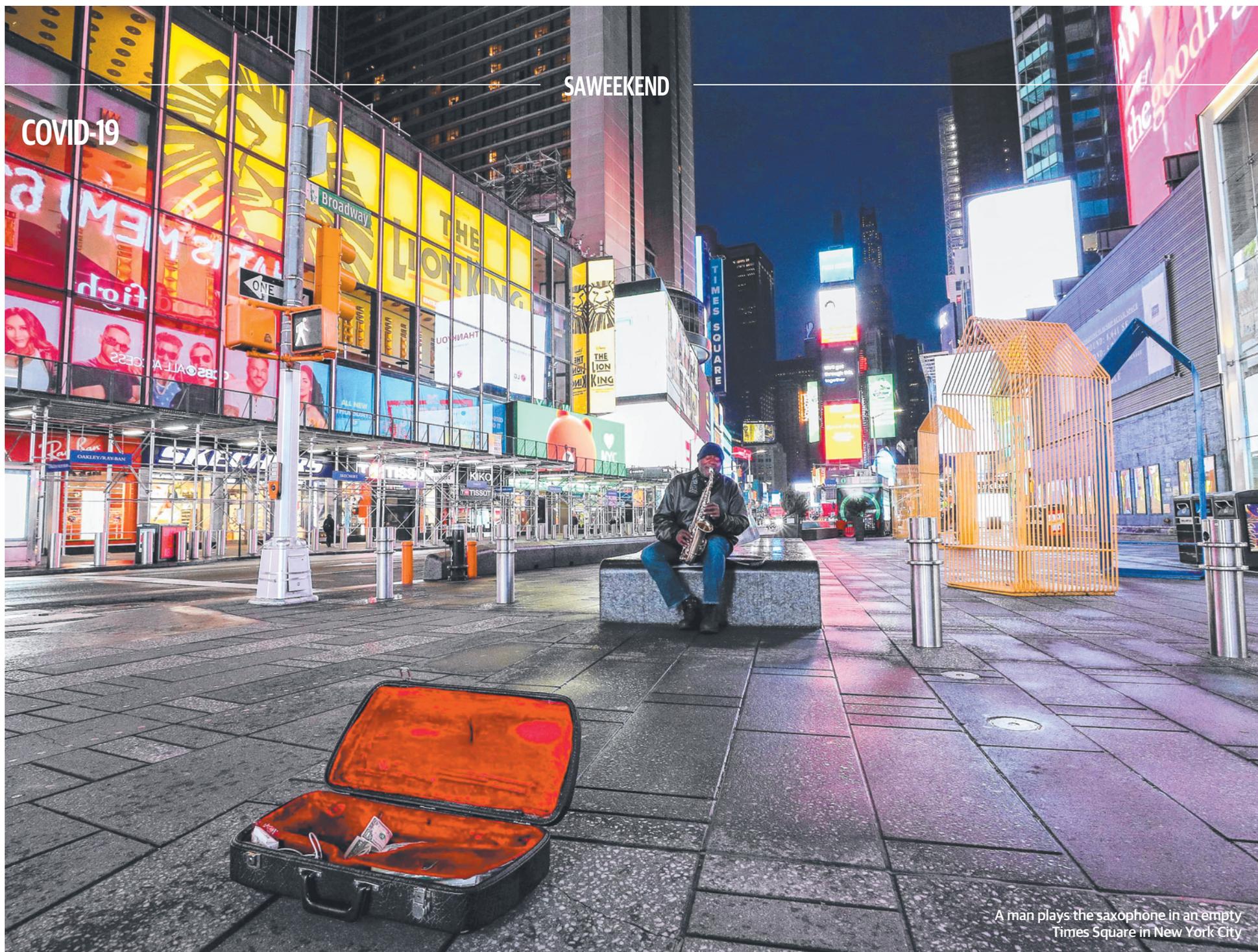


COVID-19



A man plays the saxophone in an empty Times Square in New York City

# PANGS OF NEW YORK

The city that never sleeps has been forced into a coma. She's bit hit harder than any other city on the planet. But locals know she'll bounce back ... stronger and more resilient than ever

WORDS AMANDA SMITH PHOTOGRAPH ARTURO HOLMES

**T**he Big Apple is shaken to its core. Central Park has been home to a mobile hospital. For a month, the Statue of Liberty was hidden behind a naval hospital ship. Times Square's taxis have been replaced by screeching ambulances. Flashing neon is the only sign of New York City life.

This is not the bedazzling New York City I met and fell for.

There are eerily empty streets, the now iconic face mask, and long lines wrapping around the block of grocery stores. Aisles of abandoned subway cars match the always-bare household supplies shelves – an ongoing reminder of the crisis we find ourselves in.

It's a far cry from the endless array of coffee shops, rooftops, parks, gigs, markets, restaurants, aimless wandering and spontaneity that have crafted my New York City experience since beginning the journey to move here from Adelaide in January 2017. A two-year travel expedition dovetailed into a pull towards New York – one that I couldn't ignore.

But now, the coronavirus death toll in the city is closing in on 30,000 and nearly nine million New Yorkers are holed up in their apartments, with no definitive end date.

The city has lost the very essence that's left so many indelible marks on so many of us, its people. New York's character is undefinable. It's what gives the city its energetic pulse. That outwardly confident bravado has done a 360, almost overnight. The great lady's got nothing to give right now. She's stripped back, out of her costume, to sleep and heal.

Although restless, New Yorkers are show-

ing resilience, humility and creativity – all traits that this city has home schooled into the population. That unquenchable spirit, the fabric that connects us all here, is starting to emerge.

There's the violin player on a Brooklyn rooftop, his bow singing to hopeful ears. People wait patiently, perched on their fire escapes to catch the mid-spring sun and cheer frontline workers. Sweet storefront notes urge people to “be kind” and “stick together”. And a giant love heart, dedicated to those who are weathering the eye of the COVID-19 storm, has been carved into Midtown's Bryant Park's expanses.

The city is a mecca for eternal optimists. Yet behind the curtain of statistics and the distressingly familiar images of refrigerated trucks waiting in back streets, there's one question on New York City's lips: How long will this last?

Two of the hardest hit industries are in every New Yorker's soft spot: Food and sport. Coronavirus brought both worlds to an immediate standstill with the implementation of social distancing laws.

Eating out is part of being a New Yorker. Restaurant rents are high, so tables are packed tight, which had previously only enhanced the intense intimacy of the iconic New York City experience.

Not now. Unthinkably, maybe never again. More than 733,000 New York residents are now suddenly jobless. Many of these were food service workers.

Michael Nopre, a chef from the Gold Coast who was working at an Upper East Side hotel, has been given a temporary leave of absence from his job. The landmark hotel has been shut down since March 22. >

## COVID-19

It comes at an extremely difficult time for Nopre and his partner, who are expecting their first baby in June.

“My greatest fear is keeping my wife safe,” he says. “We thought about escaping back to the Gold Coast, but she couldn’t renew her passport, as the embassy has been closed. It wasn’t worth taking the risk to travel. New York has been home for us for the past two years and we feel it’s safest to stay here and isolate ourselves.

“It’s challenging to keep the mind in shape, being stuck in an apartment. I only leave to get groceries and take my wife for a short walk in the sun and fresh air. We’re missing the one-to-one consultations with her gynaecologist – her regular appointments are now video calls.”

But his frustrations are tinged with gratitude for “the city that’s shaped us to be tough”.

**T**y, who works in IT for a major sports league, mirrors those sentiments. Ty was part of a strategic team that helped convert sports activities online early in the COVID-19 crisis.

Ty is concerned about contracting the virus after battling pneumonia twice in the past year. The floor of his building is now empty, which gives him more space as a refuge.

“I’m getting through this, juggling home schooling, work conference calls, and lots of cooking,” he says. “Keeping busy with a positive outlook and sense of humour helps and I’m quite enjoying being at home more with my family.

“My main concern is school. We had to withdraw our son, as the Mayor announced there will be closures up until the end of the school year. I’m afraid my son’s needs aren’t going to be met on a psychological, intellectual and stimulation level.”

This crisis is multifaceted and New York’s health, economic and political management are all facing major challenges. But having previously worked in four different countries, Ty and his family, much like others who find themselves in New York, are worldly and adaptable.

New York City breeds you to be tough, but in a good way. Her people are resourceful and stand united in a “there’s nothing we can’t do” way, and that spirit is evident on major and micro levels.

East Village Neighbours are a great example. This grassroots group of volunteers sprang into action when New York announced the lockdown. They do what any good neighbour would do – buy groceries for the sick and shelter seniors in their own homes.

The homeless community in New York City, like seniors, is particularly vulnerable. Coalition For The Homeless serve the more than 62,000 people living on the streets. The Coalition’s daily meal service was being supplemented by food donations from nearby, corporate cafeterias, all of which are now closed.

For at-risk people, New York is, in fact, a comparatively safe place to be where, by state law, public hospitals must treat anyone who comes in, including the uninsured and undocumented.

Jack Feldstein, a screenwriter and playwright originally from Sydney, has seen many undocumented immigrants through his work. He lives in the highly diverse New York borough of Queens, in Jackson Heights – near Elmhurst, one of the hardest hit COVID-19 neighbourhoods with a dense population of Hispanic and African-American people.

“My fears have ranged from rational to the irrational,” he says. “The rational being:



Will I catch the virus and get sick, and maybe die? And the irrational: Fearing riots on the streets, looting, and racism.

“Zoom has completely overtaken my work platform. I write for theatre and I’m in the process of arranging a virtual presentation of my new play, *The Descent to Dali*. I’m also onboarding another musical theatre project to adapt that into a film. Actually, I’m in talks with the people at Zoom to discuss the new art form of Zoom Plays as a new thing. It’s a brave new world, COVID-19.”

Feldstein sees upsides of this very trying situation – creating new communities and deepening the bond between existing ones.

“We’re all in the same boat and New York is a vast, tough place. We’re seeing what we did during Superstorm Sandy, the uniting of people. The mere fact of even continuing to live in New York makes you part of this community. New York accepts you, simply

because you stayed. The thing about this city is that even if you’re born elsewhere, you’re still a New Yorker.

“It’s a state of mind and a specific type of person who derives happiness in the midst of chaos and diversity. A person knows it, within minutes of arriving here, if they belong or not.”

New York can be a harsh teacher, even at the best of times. But she’ll teach you more about humility and the power of our collective energy than anywhere else. There’s a communal badge of honour everyone earns by living here. It’s a choice that requires daily reaffirmation to accept discomfort in exchange for life lessons. Everyone has their own New York story.

**F**ellow Australian Bree Pereyra, an experiential marketer, sees first-hand the ever-changing faces on the city streets. “I see a lot of weird things, but one day

stood out,” she says. “Right before the pandemic, I was working in Harlem in an area that’s home to local addicts and homeless people. There was a young man rolling around and I was watching him, 100 per cent sure he was going to come up to our table and try to get a free phone.

“When I was with a customer signing them up, he came over and picked up the whole table with paperwork, tablets and thousands of dollars of equipment. With the help of a few bystanders, we all stopped him and took the table back. Honestly, it’s times like this where I have the most fun.”

Before the world turned upside down, Pereyra was accustomed to dealing with the comic characters who coloured her day. But now she is having a difficult time staying busy enough to alleviate her anxiety.

“But I also have a weak immune system and have been sick three times since October. I don’t have healthcare and I’ve been



worried I'll lose my job," she says. It nearly sent her packing, like thousands who have made a mass exodus out of this great city.

"But I worked so hard to get here, I don't want to leave. In a city that goes one million miles an hour, you finally have a chance to sit back, reflect, and start anew. We can't deny there was social separation in the city before this. We've all found ourselves in the same situation, no matter who we are."

Apartments used to be something New Yorkers simply slept in, when the city offered a 24/7 playground. It's now a stark reality that one-third of renters couldn't afford to pay their landlord in April. An online movement, #CancelRent, is bringing to light tenants' inability to support their basic needs for shelter.

New York passed a statewide moratorium to protect renters with a 90-day eviction freeze. It's good news for the renters but the flow-on effects will be long-felt.

With no jobs, no rent and no taxes, when the lockdown is over ... will we be stepping back outside, into the same New York?

Lisa Breneger, a new mother, says: "What is New York without its restaurants, Broadway, concerts, bars and culture? If those things aren't part of New York once things start opening back up, the appeal of living here will be tarnished.

"If the quarantine continues on through this year, that changes the desire to want to be here. It's already getting hard seeing friends who live in other countries who have normalcy, while we're holed up in an apartment.

"In a weird way, though, I feel more connected than ever. We're all starved for social interactions, so everyone's taking the time to check in."

But for insurance underwriter, Amy, the demands of work and motherhood are taking their toll.



**“I’m proud to be a New Yorker and I wouldn’t change that...not for anywhere else**

Clockwise from above left: People wait for food in the New York borough of Queens; chef Michael Nopre; marketer Bree Pereyra; author Amanda Smith Photographs: Stephanie Keith/Getty Images, supplied

"I have to remind myself a number of times throughout the day how lucky I am to be safe, employed, and healthy," she says.

"I haven't been within six-feet of any human other than my husband and child since March 11. We have no help, no visitors, and I'm very lonely. Routine has been the key to keep me sane - taking short walks, doing yoga, eating well, and daily team video calls."

But her greatest concern is for her 92-year-old grandmother, who lives in a nursing home 15,000km away in Brisbane.

"I fear not being able to get home if the worst happens. I'm also pregnant again, and, sadly, my Mum won't be able to spend a month with us in September, like we had planned.

"I'm not taking any risks. None of my extended family or friends will get to see me pregnant or spend time with our wildly fun toddler, which breaks my heart.

"It's a time I can never get back. I relocated here in 2013 and this is not the America I moved to. Thankfully, seeing the blooming trees helps."

The turn of spring brings a sense of comfort to the city. This mood swing of nature reminds us that everything's going to be OK. This is a city that's faced down great challenges already, which has caused it to rethink, learn the lessons, adapt, reset and go again.

**L**ike many New York natives, the unfolding impact of COVID-19 - with its psychological shockwaves - is reminding Karen Ruiz of something she's tried to forget. 9/11.

"There was no warning to the people and the attack caught us by surprise that morning," she says. "During those days, we saw many people come together to save lives and comfort one another, physically.

"I think that's the worst part of this pandemic - that in the times we're anxious, fearful or have lost someone, we can't physically be there for them. We have to do it at a distance.

"I do have concerns for what this means for the economy, plus the physical and psychological health of others. As humans, we're social creatures. Whether you're an introvert or extrovert, interactions are critical. A long-term lack of connection can lead to loneliness and stress, which can have detrimental effects to physical and mental health. I'm also concerned for the residual trauma this will have."

There's no argument. New Yorkers are resilient, and Ruiz is confident the city will come back stronger and more united than ever before.

"You can see it in the hours the essential workers are putting in ... the retired professionals volunteering to be on the front lines to help save others ... and the communities who come together to help their neighbours and collectively pay tribute.

"I'm proud to be a New Yorker and I wouldn't change that ... not for anywhere else," Ruiz says.

Even in the most trying of circumstances, New Yorkers stand united in saying, "No, we're staying".

We see the bad and good, the fear and love, the tragedy and community. And while we're not able to link arms, we stand together in our commitment to make it through to the other side.

This is how and why our great lady, New York, will beat this thing.

Yes, New York doesn't always make sense. But she'll gift you more than you can fathom. We owe it to her to stay ... and help her become whatever she wants. Because, we know it'll be extraordinary.