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Life on ice: what Esperanza Base in Antarctica can teach us about isolation

Despite missing friends and celebrations, a community at the bottom of the world has learned to survive, even thrive

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Caroline Riches

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Until a month ago, the word “quarantine” conjured up images of someone joking about their bout of the flu, of animals entering our country, or of Sydney’s Q Station, where for 150 years until 1984, migrants suspected of carrying contagious diseases were put into isolation.

Quarantine has typically meant isolating people from the wider community; it has rarely been applied to the community as a whole. And the prospect can be terrifying.

There are communities in the world we could look to for guidance, communities that have been living in isolation and making it work - on a rotating basis - for decades. They exist in natural quarantine, surrounded by lots and lots of ice.

There are two scientific research bases in Antarctica that exist as civilian “towns”. There are children, a school, a medical centre and a gym. People can congregate, but supplies are limited. And the rest of the world and loved ones feel far away.

One such town is the Argentinian Esperanza Base, with around 60 residents and 10 families, which is sprinkled around Hope Bay, on the tip of the Antarctica peninsula.



Square little houses are painted bright red (so they can be seen in a blizzard). Photograph: Geoff Renner/Getty Images/Collection Mix: Subjects RF

I was lucky enough to spend some time at Esperanza in late 2016 as part of an Antarctic expedition with tour operator Chimu Adventures. Lately, I have been reflecting on this brush with isolation.

After a 14-month stint, the station’s residents were packing up to return to Argentina for Christmas. Sixty new residents were preparing to replace them.

There was a pre-holiday buzz in the air, and a sense of pride that comes from having lived more than a year on a slab of rock and ice at the bottom of the world, and having made it work. It’s a sense of achievement that we too will enjoy when we emerge from isolation a few months from now.

But first we must endure it. Those who live at Esperanza admit it’s not easy. The base’s motto is “Permanencia, un acto de sacrificio” (“Permanence, an act of sacrifice”). It takes patience, work and planning to make quarantine and isolation a success. Although their circumstances are different - the small community are still able to gather, touch and socialise -there’s much we can take away from how they live. Beginning with one essential ingredient.

Esperanza is Spanish for “hope”. The base is named in honour of three Swedish explorers who were stranded here in the harsh southern winter of 1902 after their ship was crushed by ice. They built a shelter of rocks, and after almost a year, they were rescued. Without hope and determination they would have perished.

Today’s residents of Hope Bay live in relative comfort. Square little houses are painted bright red (so they can be seen in a blizzard), the school is colourful and creative, and the communal hall, the Casino, is decorated with pride - Argentinian maps and flags and patriotic posters. Creativity brings joy; pride offers purpose.

There is gas oil for heating (the base uses 250,000 litres of it each year) and a reasonable satellite connection to speak to loved ones back home, or for the kids to play video games against old friends.

The pantry is a warehouse of frozen and tinned fare. Esperanza's chef requires military standards of organisation and some creativity to cook up tasty meals, day after day - like the pizza the entire community shares at the Casino on Saturday nights.

It made me realise how much we rely on supermarkets and the convenience of regular shopping. Without them, we use our imagination, we share ideas and we collaborate.

Food and fuel from the real world make it possible to live in Antarctica. But, like anywhere, it's human connection that sustains life.

The residents of Esperanza find it incredibly hard to miss big gatherings like birthdays, weddings and funerals; to connect regularly with loved ones and old friends. Social media and video-calling can help, but it's a different kind of connection: distant, remote. No touch.

In the quiet of Antarctica, people learn to rejuvenate instead by developing more intimate relationships with their immediate clan - and through nature.

Ana, who assisted her husband, Esperanza's chef, grew to love her new way of life. She told me, "when I need time to myself, I'm feeling sad or I'm missing people back home, I take a walk in the snow and appreciate where I am. When I'm still, I notice how the light on the ice changes every day and throughout the day."



'We cannot have problems on the base. We must be strong and determined and respectful.' Photograph: Caroline Berdon/AAP

"I could stay another year. I love the landscape, the views, the people, the community."

Which makes me wonder now, is a quieter, simple life, with more time with our close family, and more time appreciating the nature in our own backyard, something we could all get used to, and draw energy from?

The base's deputy, Eric Dorado, had missed little about Argentina during his year on the ice - "just beaches and heat". An unexpected takeaway was a newfound depth of patience and empathy he'd acquired from living in close quarters for so long.

At Esperanza, social problems are solved without delay. "We get together, we talk, we solve them," he said.

It is a lesson those isolating with flatmates or families can learn from. With fewer bodies, personalities seem bigger and emotions stronger. There are days when people want to disappear, be alone, see someone different, be somewhere different. "We cannot have problems on the base. We must be strong and determined and respectful."

Esperanza is a place of harmony - and pride. Despite the isolation, there is unity. Down there on the ice, the residents of Esperanza see their time in quarantine as a rare human experiment: to live, breathe and support each other in an isolated corner of the earth.

And that's an opportunity.

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