



SISTER CITIES

NEW ZEALAND

Connecting people globally for peace and prosperity

NEWSLETTER

April 2020

NOTICE - 2020 Sister Cities New Zealand Annual Conference in Ashburton (30 April - 2 May) has been postponed.

From the SCNZ board



Kia ora koutou katoa Warm greetings from New Zealand

Wherever you are in the world I hope you are coping well under the extremely difficult environment affected by Coronavirus Pandemic.

In New Zealand the Lockdown commenced on 26 March and we have been living under strict guidelines since then. Other than

grocery shopping at the local supermarket, I go for a walk, my only other outdoor activity. Every time I go for a walk I've found that people interact from a distance, by saying "Hello" "How are you?" and "Have a nice day!" or simply smiling at each other. That's nice.

It's a heartfelt story that a group of young players from Porirua's North Rugby Club have stepped up doing runs for Meals on Wheels as most drivers are elderly who need to stay home under the level four alert. The young players

are identified as "Rugby Angels" and their dedication and kindness are appreciated. Great community spirit!

I've been shopping for my neighbours who have been self-isolated since they got back from Australia.

I appreciate more than ever before how fortunate I am - good health, family, and warm and caring people around me. I also appreciate the modern technology so that we can maintain communication and support each other.

I've been worried about the safety of former SCNZ Youth Subcommittee members who have been travelling overseas and I am pleased to have managed to get hold of them, Bing Lou in Hungary and Michael O'Neil in Taiwan. They are safe and well, and I'd like to share their stories with you.

The life in this emergency situation is not easy, but it reassured me that the genuine people-to-people connection, locally and internationally, will never change.

Stay safe and well. Kia kaha!

Ngā mihi,
Warmest regards,

Hiromi Morris
President

Life as a Backpacker in a Pandemic

By Michael O'Neill, former SCNZ Youth Subcommittee member

For many of us, Covid-19 has totally upended our normal lives. For a wanderer (or some may say "digital nomad") like myself, who has spent most of the past two years backpacking from country to country, it's forced me to stay in one place, which is something I'm rather unaccustomed to.

That place, however, is not New Zealand. Back in late February, my Taiwanese friend and I had planned to visit Myanmar together. At the time, things weren't quite as



Michael contemplating at Shwedagon Temple

desperate as they are now, so we decided to just go and hope for the best.

Travelling across Myanmar and meeting the pious and extremely generous Burman people, I couldn't help but be awed by this oft-overlooked Buddhist country. It may not be as developed, but anyone looking to escape the oversaturated tourism of South East Asia would find it a real land of adventure (once travel is again possible, of course).

About ten days into the trip, however, as we were in the lush and mountainous north of the country, I checked the news one morning to discover that several countries in Asia were suddenly announcing total border closures. After evaluating our options, we decided to high-tail it to Taiwan, which is where my friend is from and is also the probably the place that has best managed to control Covid-19.

We couldn't board our original flight, which transited through Kuala Lumpur, as Malaysia announced a total entry ban for foreigners starting the day before it (barring even airport transfers). Worried that we were running out of options, we then immediately booked a direct flight to Taipei for the next morning, March 18th, which we could only just make by taking an overnight bus back to Yangon, the main city of Myanmar. While we were on that bus, Taiwan announced their total foreigner entry ban starting March 19th. Had the flight been a day later, I would have quite literally been stuck in Myanmar (a thought that I dreaded, given that Myanmar has the worst ranked health care system in East Asia).

Thankfully, we made it just in the nick of time, and after two weeks of home quarantine at my friend's place, I'm now put up in Tainan, a quaint old town in the south which I find quite comfortable. Life in Taiwan, for the

most part, goes on as normal. Schools, shops and cafes are open, and people are commuting to work. It would be hard to guess that there is a global pandemic if it were not for the fact that everyone is wearing masks (perhaps they do have some efficacy after all).

I intend to remain here until my visa-free stamp expires in July. I count myself extremely lucky to be one of the few New Zealanders travelling overseas who managed to avoid getting trapped in a country that's under a harsh lockdown or lacks the resources to deal with what's probably to come.

For now, all we can do is wait and wish for the best. To all the friends of Sister Cities, I hope you and your family are looking out for each other and finding ways to cope. I'm proud of New Zealand's handling of the crisis, and I'm confident that our country will come out of this in better shape than many others.



Ancient pagodas in Bagan, Myanmar



Chillin' in Taipei

Self-isolation in small-town Hungary

By Bing Lou, former SCNZ Youth Subcommittee member



Bing at Christmas markets at Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin

Who knew 6 months back, while we were packing up our lives in New Zealand for a new European adventure, we would end up self-isolated in small town Hungary.

My partner and I left New Zealand in November last year. Our plan was to visit his family in Hungary, find work, and settle somewhere in Europe to start the next chapter of our lives.

Along came COVID-19.

The global pandemic has certainly thrown our lives, like many others, into disarray. Travel plans went out the window, future arrangements were put on hold and job-hunting became much more difficult. All the while being forced to stay indoors and socially interact via a digital screen.

My partner and I were lucky to have immediate family to put us up when Europe began closing its borders to foreigners. I feel for those who are currently far from home or don't have anywhere to go. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's to appreciate what we have and not take anything for granted.

Surprisingly, Hatvan feels like the perfect place to bunker down. A small, quiet countryside town just 60km outside of Budapest, and a population of around 20,000. There are shops, bakeries, supermarkets, a gym even and an iconic hunting museum just a short cycle away. It has everything one needs, including the world's best cheese pogacs (a traditional Hungarian scone).

The Hungarian Government has yet to introduce a full lock-down like the one in New Zealand. However, physical distancing measures have been enforced, including restrictions on certain businesses, closure of schools and universities, a ban on visits to retirement homes, and mandatory quarantine and testing for those who are ill. People have been encouraged to keep their distance from others and work from home wherever possible. Various economic relief packages have also been announced for businesses affected by COVID-19.

More recently, Hungary passed a state-of-emergency



Visit to the iconic hunting museum in Hatvan pre-pandemic; biking around a nearby lake; Parliament building in Budapest

law. This gives the Government authority to bypass legal processes and make urgent legislation and decisions to combat the pandemic. There has been some controversy surrounding the law within the European Union (EU), due to it having no end-date. However, the Government has defended the law as an emergency response to COVID-19.

Despite all this, life seems to go on as usual. We still get our groceries at the supermarket, armed with facemasks, gloves and Dettol wipes, and keep to ourselves during outdoor ventures such as bike rides along the local lake, and walks through the nearby forest.

Recently, we also celebrated Easter or 'Husvet' as it is known in Hungary. It is usually a big celebration where boys go around reciting poems and throwing water (or perfume these days) on girls in exchange for chocolate, money and the famous Hungarian spirit called 'Palinka'. It feels like us females drew the short straw on that one. However, in light of the pandemic, people were confined to celebrate in their own homes. I woke up from a dousing of cold water by my partner, which did not end in his favour.

Families would usually come together to cook, eat, drink and be merry. Husvet literally means 'meat taking', symbolising lent and the fact that people usually give up meat in the lead up to Easter. Think Christmas dinner, served with a hearty meat soup; mouth-watering meatballs wrapped in soured cabbage, paprika and other aromatic herbs and spices; finished with a generous helping of sweet homemade bread and jam, as well as traditional meat skewing over an outdoor firepit. Hungarian anyone?

This year, our Easter celebrations were confined to a household competition of egg racing, archery and ball throwing in the backyard, along with a generous supply of pork meat from a traditional Hungarian 'pig slaughtering'.

The tradition has been rooted in Hungarian culture for centuries, and usually takes place during the winter seasons. Although, I don't think I could stomach such an event.

One thing I have vowed to take on from Hungarian culture, is their enthusiasm for outdoor firepits. Hungarians are masters of delicious stews, soups and other hearty meals, and the secret seems to be cooking in a smoky hot cauldron over an outdoor firepit!

Aside from learning Hungarian and having time to finally finish that book I've been meaning to read over the last two years, the silver lining in all of this is being rewarded the time to reflect on the things that truly matter. From seeing and hugging your family, to grabbing coffee with friends, or simply sitting at a park, we will no longer overlook the things in our lives that bring us joy. Moreover, we will forever be grateful to those who are putting themselves on the frontline of this pandemic, helping millions overcome illness, loss and fear.

The impact of COVID 19 truly hit close to home when a friend told us of the passing of a loved one. For many, the impact of this pandemic is profound and personal, and will continue to change perspectives, lives and the world as we know it. The road ahead will be hard, long and unpredictable. But we can all do our bit by listening to the advice of experts, staying at home, getting tested if necessary and keeping our distance to protect ourselves and those we love.

Although isolation isn't entirely a choice, I remind myself that I one-day I will be able to say that I survived COVID-19 in a country full of history, tradition, intrigue and heart-warming people.

Five facts you probably didn't know about Hungary:

- It invented the Rubik's cube and ballpoint pens.
- It founded escape rooms, and is the birthplace of famous illusionist Harry Houdini.
- Its landmass is one third the size of New Zealand but its population size is double.
- The only two languages in Europe that are similar to Hungarian are Finnish and Estonian.
- It is home to the world's first official wine region, the Tokaj region, which has been producing wines since the 5th century.



Traditional meat skewing over an open firepit, a typical Hungarian breakfast spread and cooking in a traditional Hungarian cauldron pot