

Lockdown diaries: James, co-founder of Devour Tours, on leadership and innovation in the food & tourism industry

There's nothing quite like being boxed into a corner to force yourself to become creative

James was launching food tours in cities across Europe just before the lockdown hit, so he and his team have had to drastically change course. Now they're innovating ways to keep sharing their passion for food and local culture with the world, and working together to get through this.

James Blick is the co-founder of [Devour Tours](#) and creator of hit Youtube channel [Spain Revealed](#), where he shares authentic culinary and cultural insights. In the days prior to the lockdown measures taking effect, I myself had the pleasure of taking the San Sebastian Pintxos and Wine tour led by Devour and visited Petritegi, James' go-to sidrería. It was truly a unique experience and provided an enriching window into the culinary offerings of the Basque Country.

As we wait for the tourism sector to bounce back, the team at Devour has been creating [online experiences](#) such as [live cooking classes](#) (yesterday James taught us how to cook a *tortilla* out of his own kitchen) and a digital cookbook: "[Recipes from the Devours Tours Kitchen](#)" with 52 recipes from cities across Europe, straight from local guides and chefs.

Here's James' lockdown diary.

What was your life like just before the lockdown vs. today?

In Devour, we were in full swing expanding our business by launching new tours in Paris, Rome, Lisbon, and London, and hiring new team members to help us to grow in these new destinations.

In my personal life, my wife and I had just bought an apartment in Madrid, and we were starting renovations. A week before we went into lockdown we were picking tiles and toilets. So, like for everyone, this virus caught us right in the middle of making plans for the future.

How has the lockdown impacted your industry?

Massively. Tourism and hospitality were the first to feel this crisis. About 6 weeks ago we started to realise that this was a serious situation. But every day we made a plan (cut costs 20%, for example), those plans were out of date and not drastic enough by the same time the next day. The majority of our guests are Americans and when Trump announced the travel ban we decided to suspend tours until 1 May (and clearly we'll have to suspend them longer).

At the time it felt like a forward-thinking decision, but

within 48 hours of making the call, we'd gone into lockdown. It's been incredible how fast this thing has moved. Sadly, we've had to lay off most of our team. Ideally, this is a temporary measure, but with zero tours and massive amounts of refunds being processed, the company would have gone under in a few months if we hadn't taken drastic steps. For those on our team who didn't have access to unemployment benefits, they're working part-time during the lockdown so they can pay their rent and get by – and together we're working to create a foundation for the future.

As I mentioned, this week we've launched our [Recipes from the Devour Tours Kitchen](#) digital cookbook that the entire team worked on together. It's been a true team effort and labour of love – and it's packed with 50+ incredible local recipes from across our cities in Europe. All the recipes are from staff members, guides and vendors, including lots of dishes we try on our tours. Perfect for lockdown cooking! Sales of it will really help Devour have a better shot at getting through. If anyone is curious or would like to buy it, you can [check it out here](#).



What's the first thing you'll do once this lockdown is over?

I wish I had a better answer for that. A simple walk with my wife alongside Madrid's river would be lovely.

Have you noticed any acts of kindness or uplifting things recently?

There is a videographer team we work with who creates YouTube videos for Devour. In the early days of lockdown, they sent us an unsolicited video they'd made that compiled footage of previous shoots with messages about all the things that we love and that bind us as a company. It was an inspiring video

and something perfect to share on social media with our guests (who we call Devourers).

More importantly, it was a striking act of generosity from them. They had work dry up so used the extra time to create something for free for their clients. It reminded me that this is an important time to slow down and think of the people around you who might need help and to reach out to them.

How are you coping?

I would love to have a day or two of the infamous Coronavirus lockdown boredom! I'm coping by getting on, but also there is no other choice given I work in tourism. Each day is filled with work to chart Devour's course through this and also I'm trying to pivot my [YouTube channel](#) (where I usually feature videos of me eating in bars) to more 'at home' content. I think a key lesson for me is that those who take advantage of this time to experiment and try new things will find those experiments pay off on the other side of this – there's nothing quite like being boxed into a corner to force yourself to become creative.

Probably the most important coping mechanism for me is an hour of yoga every morning. I use an app called [Yoga Studio](#), which costs about €2 a month, and there are a variety of classes I do. Also, I'm conscious not to eat crap or drink too much (or too early) – apparently beer sales in Spain are up over 70%!

What goals are you hoping to achieve as our time in lockdown continues?

Work-wise, my key goal is to navigate Devour through this. I'm sure the products and ideas that we create during this time will outlast the virus and the lockdown. We've just come out with a digital recipe book this week featuring recipes from all the team, and also kicking off a series of daily live online workshops and cook-a-longs on our [Facebook page](#) – everything from how to prepare a Madrid aperitif, to everything you needed to know about coffee, to me cooking a *tortilla de patatas* live.



Once we're giving tours again, I think there will be [online experiences](#) that we continue to sell. Also, I'm loving cooking (isn't everyone?) – I've been making cooking videos for my

YouTube channel, and I'm also looking forward to getting out the paella kit on the terrace once the weather warms up and figuring out how to make a damn good paella once and for all!

Do you have any tips for how we can help those in need?

If your industry isn't financially impacted, or if it's financially benefiting from this, then certainly supporting small businesses who need help by buying their online products. When a business is struggling and needs cash, anything helps and all sales uplift spirits. Help doesn't need to be financial. In our building, people are offering to do shopping for elderly residents who don't want to risk going out.

Who are you in quarantine with? Any advice for people in a similar situation?

With my wife, Yoly. We get on really well, so I don't feel like I have much advice to give. I guess keep a structure. If you used to have a date night once a week, find time to do that. It's easy to get lazy and wind up just eating dinner in front of Netflix each night. Set the table, eat a meal, talk to each other. And also, just because you're locked in together, doesn't mean you have to do everything together at all times. Don't feel guilty about needing "me time" – a good way to do this is to listen to a podcast and cook something, while your partner is in the lounge.

If you could tell the government one thing right now, what would it be?

Provide some specific relief for tourism companies – debt relief or more flexible options for protecting your employees while also protecting cash flow. The measures introduced so far seem designed under the presumption that once the lockdown ends, all businesses will be able to open their doors at 100%. I'm sure they know that's not the case, so I just wish they would give support that reflects that reality. But international tourism is going to take 9-18 months to recover, or longer.

What's going on in your hometown and would you like to send them a message?

Auckland (New Zealand) has COVID-19 cases but a lot fewer, and its physical distance will help it control the virus more I would think. NZ's physical isolation was part of the reason I left, but it also has many benefits. I have no message to send – I just hope that people treat this seriously, and take precautions early, rather than only really taking notice when the death rates began shooting up (as happened to us here in Spain).

- Follow James on IG: [@jamesblickspain](#) and his YouTube channel [Spain Revealed](#)
- Also follow [Devour Tours](#) on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) to stay up to date on their [online experiences](#) and upcoming tour dates
- Check out the [Recipes from the Devour Tours Kitchen](#)

digital cookbook

Check out all [Madrid lockdown stories](#)

If you'd like to get involved and share a compelling story from this ongoing chapter of history, reach out to Daphne Binioris (daphne@veracontent.com) and Daniel Catalan (a96039@aup.edu)