

World of difference

Jacqui Kenny lives with anxiety and agoraphobia, but she's found a compelling way to explore countries and share her unique view of them with a global audience. **by SARAH LANG • photograph by ADRIAN MALLOCH**

It's not often that an agoraphobic travels the world. But London-based New Zealander Jacqui Kenny doesn't necessarily need planes or trains to get around. In recent times, Kenny, who has lived in London for 15 years, has "explored" about 80 countries from her home using Google Street View. A visual representation of the surroundings charted on Google Maps, Street View stitches together photos of locations to create a three-dimensional online world where you can "look around". (The millions of photos are mostly captured by cameras atop cars.)

Between 2016 and 2018, Kenny – a digital-media creative taking time out from work because of anxiety and agoraphobia – used Street View to "visit" places ranging from Peru and Puerto Rico to South Africa and Senegal. When she found a setting she liked, she took carefully composed screenshot images. "I was looking for something to help distract me from negative thoughts – and to create something that might help provide a purpose for what I was going through."

She was never entirely housebound, and her partner, Tom Roope, came home each evening, but sometimes she spent most of her waking hours on the project. "It was like stepping into a parallel universe."

Her aesthetic favours remote locations, stark backgrounds, pops of colour against pastels, striking topography and plenty of "negative space" (usually, a wide skyline). "Images of homes by the desert captured my

imagination the most." Many images have no people. Some show small figures eclipsed by their background.

Think a blue mobile home in front of a Kyrgyzstan mountain, two women wearing headaddresses in a dusty Senegal town, and a football pitch in Peru that resembles an infinity pool. Her images feel cinematic and sometimes surreal. "I wanted my images to convey feelings of isolation and emptiness like I've experienced, but also hope."

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Kenny began posting images on her Instagram page. "The day I added 'the Agoraphobic Traveller' to my bio, I had a good friend with me because I was really nervous. It wasn't an easy decision to 'come out,' so to speak. But I really thought more conversations were needed around mental-health and anxiety disorders to help try to eliminate the stigma. I initially worried that opening up about my mental-health issues might negatively impact future [work] opportunities, but potentially

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helping others outweighed that.”

Followers struggling with their mental health began messaging Kenny, telling her their stories and often asking for advice. Connecting with them, she began feeling a little less alone and a little less anxious. Largely through word of mouth and Instagram shares, her audience has grown exponentially. She now has 135,000 followers globally.

For Kenny, 47, agoraphobia is less a fear of open spaces and more a fear of being in public places where she

might have a panic attack and perhaps not be able to get home quickly. However, she can push back a little against her agoraphobia these days – and even push herself to travel – although flights are her worst fear. Kenny once needed months of therapy before boarding a plane. “One minute I’d be fine, and the next minute I’d be worrying that I’d try to exit the plane [through a door] or lose my mind.”

But she managed fairly well on a plane to Auckland in December. After many delayed flights, she got into managed isolation just early enough to get out on

December 24, meaning she could spend Christmas with her mum, dad, two sisters and brother. “Quarantine was fine. I got a harbour view in a five-star hotel, they brought me tasty meals and the staff were incredibly helpful and asked after my mental health, which meant a lot. I’m so lucky to be here.”

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, her partner couldn’t come with her. Kenny isn’t sure when she’ll return to London – probably when Covid-19 has loosened its grip a bit there.

During the first lockdown, she was

concerned about all the people who were sick, but she managed to enjoy spending the summer with Roope. “We hung out in our little garden, made a tiny pond and grew veges. But when lockdown happened again, I became more anxious.”

Kenny, who grew up in East Auckland, worked mainly in administrative and marketing roles in the advertising and digital-media industries. Then she landed a job in the Auckland office of global film-production company the Sweet Shop, where she

helped directors come up with an overall visual feel for their films.

During her early twenties, she began experiencing anxiety and panic attacks. The symptoms of the latter included a racing heart, shortness of breath and feeling faint and disconnected. Initially, a doctor put it down to something she’d eaten.

Only her family knew at first. “Anxiety and panic attacks weren’t talked about much then. A few close friends knew I struggled with my mental health, but I always played it down. If, say, I couldn’t

World travels: images created by Kenny using Google Street View, clockwise from top left: Mexico, US, Kyrgyzstan, Chile, Mongolia, US, Chile, Mexico.

make an event, I’d make an excuse and never tell the truth: that I was too anxious.” But she was determined that all this wouldn’t restrict her life.

She moved to London in 2006, and through a work connection met Roope, a Danish digital-media designer. With three business partners, the couple set up award-winning digital production

Anxiety spike

Kyle MacDonald, an Auckland psychotherapist who specialises in trauma and anxiety, says that since Covid-19 struck, there has been a spike in people presenting with anxiety or (more serious) anxiety disorders, to the point that he and many other therapists are booked up many months in advance.

As he notes, it's important not to confuse anxiety about leaving the house (because of Covid) with agoraphobia, a severe and fairly rare type of anxiety disorder with specific symptoms. Although it's often thought of as a fear of open spaces, it's actually a disorder where you feel extremely scared of and avoid situations or places that would be difficult to get away from or get help in. For Kenny, it's a fear of being in public places where she might have a panic attack and perhaps couldn't get home quickly.

company the Rumpus Room, which, for 10 years, created campaigns and immersive experiences for audiences. Clients included US singer/songwriter Pharrell Williams, pop duo the Pet Shop Boys and Nike.

However, Kenny's anxiety and panic attacks continued. In 2009, she was diagnosed with agoraphobia and over the years, it worsened. "The further I went from home, the harder it became. I needed to know exactly where I was in relation to home, otherwise panic set in. I still worked full-time from the office, but struggled travelling to meetings, worrying about having a panic attack."

In 2016, she needed time out from working. She could go to only a few nearby spots. "I felt incredibly scared and lost"

That's when she discovered Street View. Her work isn't just curation, given Kenny considers all aspects of the composition, including finding the subject matter, framing the shots and considering angles, light and so on. "I don't think it's photography, although it requires similar skills. I let others decide what it is." Some have called

her a "virtual photographer". Others simply call her an artist.

In 2017, Kenny's project took off in ways she had never imagined. Google made a short doco about her for its "Search On" series about people using its technology for good. On World Mental Health Day, Google's home page featured a link to the doco (it has since had more than 1,753,000 views on YouTube).

The doco captures Kenny's joy on walking into her first exhibition, sponsored by Google. Held in Soho, New York, it featured prints she'd chosen inside a long, narrow, illuminated glass case. "I'd

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designed the exhibition, helped by Farrow Design in London, but I was amazed seeing it in person." Visitors could also don virtual-reality headsets to see panoramas that surround some of her images.

At the launch, Kenny and many of her US followers (some travelled from other cities) mingled with gallery owners and journalists, including one from the New York Times. "I was emotional. Now I think, 'Did that really happen?'" Five thousand people visited over several weeks. And proceeds from selling some limited-edition prints raised about NZ\$20,000 for the not-for-profit Brain & Behavior Research Foundation. Kenny has also held some small London exhibitions.

The Agoraphobic Traveller project has morphed from a hobby to a photo series to an exhibition and now to a book, after many requests from Instagram followers. She decided, why not? Kenny chose to self-publish the book, called Many Nights, due out in a month or so. Initially, there will be about 2000 copies, available through her Instagram page.

The book features about 60 images – and, yes, she says it was hard to choose them. "I went through my 40,000 screen-shots maybe five times to reduce, reduce, reduce. It's a journey of the mind during a tough time, not a travel book, so I picked

pictures that helped tell that story. I've got quite emotional seeing it laid out, because it represents everything I've been through."

The book includes an essay by award-winning British author Emily Berry about Kenny's work and its themes. The pair had connected on Instagram.

Kenny wants to get the book into schools, because mental-health problems often start in the late teens or early twenties. Teachers and students have messaged her and shown her work in classes,



including photography, art, technology, architecture and psychology. "If any high school wants a free copy, please contact me through Instagram."

Instagram followers keep asking her to post more images; there are only about 200 on her page. She hasn't posted in a while, because of perfectionism and a slight step back from social media. "Through Instagram, I've met people from all over the world with agoraphobia or anxiety, and lovers of photography and art. That's been one of the best experiences of my life. But the more followers I get, the more I worry if people will like a post. When they do, there's a fine line between excitement and anxiety. I'm working on this because I'd like to post more images."

Originally, she replied to every one of the hundreds who messaged her. "Many people want advice, and I've given it when I can, but sometimes my mental health was so shitty that I felt unable to help. It did get overwhelming and, logistically, although I'd love to, I can't get back to everybody."

Companies and organisations have also contacted her, asking to collaborate. She's picky about that, but sometimes she says yes. And who would say no to doing what is thought to be the world's first remotely directed artistic photoshoot? "It was for Lexus' launch of its UX vehicle, and was an epic experience."

Kenny, who could choose any location in Europe, searched Street View to find places that lent themselves to her aesthetic – and that would work with the SUV in the shots. She chose the Spanish island of Lan-



zarote, for its remoteness, pastel buildings and black volcanic soil.

How did she direct from her lounge in London? With a lot of preplanning and innovation. The photoshoot crew drove one white and one blue vehicle to the locations she had chosen. One vehicle had a 360-degree video camera and a stills

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camera mounted on its roof, while the other was positioned to be photographed (later, the vehicles would switch places). "As the car with the cameras cruised around, I used the 360° camera to get a sense of composition and angles." Also, a colleague "walked" Kenny around areas using FaceTime on her phone.

Then, using FaceTime, Kenny instructed the crew; for instance, move

the vehicle a little to the right, or wait for the right light. Each time she called "action", a crew member pressed the button on the stills camera and a photograph was taken.

"It was an epic experience." Watch a short behind-the-scenes clip, New Horizons, on YouTube. The accompanying caption calls Kenny an "elusive photography phenomenon and influencer".

"Ha! I'm not that at all. These are things that happen if they happen, rather than me searching things out."



Kenny pushes herself out of her comfort zone, but not too far too soon. For instance, she declined doing a TEDx talk and speaking at a cultural festival.

"The live element of not knowing how things will go is what scares me. I'm pushing through this fear, though, knowing that the more I expose myself to something, the easier it gets. In June, I'll do my first live talk." It's an online, interactive session with teenagers through a Japanese education service.

Kenny isn't sure where the Agoraphobic Traveller will go next. "I enjoy finding creative and visual ways of talking about mental health, whether that's art installations, a video game, an animated film or even virtual-reality worlds."

She and Roope are investigating how artificial intelligence could be trained to identify Street View locations that match her aesthetic. "All this plays on the idea of who the creator of these images is. The [Street View] car driver? Google? Me? And later, maybe artificial intelligence? I don't know and that's exciting."

She doesn't need therapy or medication at the moment, having previously taken antidepressants for 10 years and switching between publicly funded and private therapy. Mindfulness and meditation have also helped. "I'm doing so much better, but it's tough at times. I hate going from feeling okay to feeling absolutely shit."

Like others, she finds it frustrating when people want a neat resolution narrative – "you know, you battled with and overcame the illness on your 'journey', and learnt so much."



From left: Kenny in Auckland; the London garden she and partner Tom Roope have developed; on her first venture out after a lockdown in the UK.

"There's something dangerous about the expectation that this is linear, from illness to health. As in, it's disheartening when other people think there are easy solutions or quick fixes, such as a certain amount of therapy sessions. Sure, for many people things get better at times, but it's not like everything goes away."

Often, it's more about acceptance and management, and ups and downs.

Kenny has shown her followers, and anyone who hears her story, that, as she puts it, "you can use your limitations to find new, interesting ways to see the world". She's also shown that mental illness doesn't have to define you. Does she feel like a role model? "No, but I like that people take what they want from what I'm doing and that it affects them on some level." ■

Distinguishing agoraphobia from claustrophobia: Psychology, page 44.