

TROUT & SALMON

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HARD TIMES

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IS IT TOO SOON FOR A COVID

retrospective? Am I tempting the fates by looking back in the hope we can now look forward?

I'd say there have been five truly dark days in the time that I have run Fishing Breaks. With the first, Black Monday in 1987, I left home in the morning for a day of guiding with my mortgage rate something under 10%. I returned home with it closer to 20%. The second was the Foot & Mouth outbreak of 2001. It is hard to believe that we are just past the 20th anniversary of 9/11, but that was the third. The fourth, what we thought at the time to be a financial Armageddon, was the Lehman collapse of 2008. And, of course, to complete this misery quintet, Covid.

Which was the worst? Until Covid I think I would have said Foot & Mouth. Yes, 9/11 was shocking and awful but we were largely onlookers. In 1987 and 2008, all you could do was hang on for the ride in the hope things would get better, which they largely did. But for us, running rural businesses, Foot & Mouth was close up and personal. And if you thought the government response to Covid was bad, just cast your mind back to 2001. It was a disaster. None of the government departments involved came close to dealing effectively with what should have been a straightforward animal health issue; only the intervention of the Armed Forces brought order to chaos.

I escaped lightly; there was not a single outbreak in Hampshire and few in chalkstream counties, though we spent almost every day of that season waiting for the hammer to fall. But hundreds of fisheries unfortunate enough to be in quarantine areas closed to never reopen. Guides and gillies marked the end of their working lives on rendering details. There was no furlough. No rates relief. No bounce-back loans. For most of the country it was a disease played out solely on TV screens. Sympathy was long. Cash was short.

Covid was, or maybe I should say is, different as we were largely all in it together and it is of a scale and duration that none of the others came close to touching. The day after the Prime Minister announced the first lockdown was the most daunting of my commercial life. As we began the process of unwinding hundreds of bookings for thousands of days, I did wonder in my darkest moments whether I'd have a business at the end of it. But my pessimism was misplaced.

Twenty months on, it is hard to believe how fly-fishing has not only bounced back but had a renaissance. First confined to our homes and then our borders, the British have embraced the great outdoors in a way I've never seen in my lifetime. Fishing has boomed. Regulars became more regular. The lapsed returned. Newbies took a chance on something new. And many have liked what they tried.

So, where does this leave us? Next year, with more international travel (hopefully), will the staycation die a death and fly-fishing return to its niche activity status? My gut feeling is not. Fishing requires not bucketloads of money but habit and time. Which is harder to motivate: the person who fished last month or the one who fished last year? Plenty have the habit back.

As for time, we've more of it and value it more. The predictions for work from home may be overdone, but the simple maths is that, if you once commuted for two hours a day that's a lot of hours in a year to use doing something you enjoy. Now when you announce to the family you're off fishing, not only are you gratefully ushered out of the house, but you might find yourself accompanied by a companion other than the dog.

I can live with that. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.