HOME

The Man Who Gave Up Everything to Live Alone in a Forgotten Ghost Town

By bestfolkmedicine · 11/09/2026 · 7 min read



Most people dream about escaping the noise for a weekend. **Brent Underwood went much further—he moved into an abandoned mining town high in the California mountains and made solitude his everyday life.**

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At roughly 8,200 feet above sea level, overlooking the vast landscape near Death Valley, sits **Cerro Gordo**, a former silver-mining settlement where weathered wooden buildings, abandoned mine shafts, rusting machinery, and the remnants of another era remain scattered across the mountainside.

Once home to thousands of miners and families, Cerro Gordo eventually faded into near silence.

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Then Underwood arrived.

What began as an unusual investment eventually became something much deeper: a long-term experiment in **simple living, resilience, solitude, purpose, and preserving history**.

And his story raises an intriguing question for anyone overwhelmed by modern life:

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What happens to a person when almost everything familiar is stripped away?

From Comfortable City Life to an Abandoned Mountain Town

Underwood wasn't raised in the wilderness.

Before Cerro Gordo, his life included New York City, travel, entrepreneurship, and running a hostel in Austin, Texas. Then, in 2018, he and business partners purchased Cerro Gordo for approximately **$1.4 million**.

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The property included hundreds of acres of rugged California landscape and the surviving structures of what had once been an important silver-mining community.

Initially, the vision was relatively straightforward: preserve the historic buildings and eventually allow visitors to experience the town.

But everything changed in 2020.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, Underwood traveled to Cerro Gordo intending to stay temporarily and watch over the property.

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Temporary turned into months.

Months turned into years.

He had effectively become the resident of his own ghost town.

Life Without the Conveniences Most of Us Take for Granted

From a distance, living alone in an abandoned Wild West town can sound romantic.

Reality is considerably tougher.

Cerro Gordo's remote mountain location means ordinary problems can quickly become serious ones. The town has historically lacked running water, and reaching it requires traveling a steep dirt road through difficult terrain.

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Snowstorms can isolate the property. Equipment breaks. Supplies must be planned carefully. Extreme temperatures can make outdoor work exhausting.

Something as simple as realizing you're missing an ingredient or household item isn't solved by walking to the corner store.

A grocery trip may consume hours.

Living there forces a level of preparation that modern lifestyles have largely eliminated.

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Yet those inconveniences may also explain why Underwood became so attached to the place.

When almost nothing comes easily, ordinary accomplishments begin to feel meaningful again.

His Days Became Surprisingly Physical

Modern life allows many of us to move through an entire day without doing much physical work.

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Cerro Gordo offers the opposite.

Underwood's routine has involved caring for animals, maintaining historic buildings, shoveling rock, repairing infrastructure, clearing roads and working on restoration projects.

There is no separation between "exercise" and everyday life.

Movement becomes necessary.

Humans lived this way for most of history—walking, carrying, lifting, repairing and working outdoors because survival required it.

That doesn't mean everyone should abandon the gym and move into the wilderness. But there may be something worth remembering here.

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Our bodies weren't designed only to exercise for one hour and then remain sedentary for the rest of the day.

Regular natural movement—walking, gardening, carrying groceries, climbing stairs and working with our hands—can be a valuable part of a healthy lifestyle.

What Extreme Solitude Taught Him

Perhaps the most fascinating part of Underwood's experience isn't physical.

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It's psychological.

Modern culture often romanticizes escaping society.

We imagine that if we could simply leave our jobs, traffic, phones, emails and obligations behind, everything would suddenly become peaceful.

Years of isolation taught Underwood something more complicated.

Solitude can remove distractions—but removing distractions does not automatically remove your problems.

In interviews, he has explained that being alone can force you to confront questions you've been avoiding. With fewer distractions, your own thoughts become harder to escape.

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That distinction matters.

Solitude and loneliness are not the same thing.

Solitude can be intentional. It may allow someone to think, create, process emotions or simply rest.

Loneliness, however, is the painful feeling that meaningful human connection is missing.

You can experience one without the other.

Even Underwood has acknowledged experiencing loneliness while also finding tremendous meaning in his unusual life.

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The wellness lesson isn't that isolation is inherently healthy.

It is that learning to spend some time comfortably alone may be.

Nature Changes Your Sense of Time

One of the biggest differences between life in Cerro Gordo and life in a city is rhythm.

Cities run on clocks.

Nature runs on light, temperature, weather and seasons.

Underwood has described organizing physical work around cooler periods of the day and ending evenings by watching the sun move across the Sierra Nevada and Death Valley landscapes.

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It sounds simple, but spending more time outdoors can reconnect us with environmental signals that modern indoor lifestyles often obscure.

Morning light signals the beginning of the day.

Darkness signals rest.

Seasonal temperatures change activity.

Weather changes plans.

You don’t need a ghost town to experience some of this.

Even relatively small habits—morning walks, eating outside, gardening, hiking or watching the sunset without your phone—can bring more awareness back into everyday life.

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Then Disaster Struck

Cerro Gordo’s isolation doesn’t protect it from tragedy.

In 2020, its historic American Hotel was destroyed by fire.

For Underwood, it was devastating. The hotel had survived for generations and represented one of the town’s most important structures.

Rather than walking away, however, he committed himself to rebuilding.

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Restoring the American Hotel subsequently became one of the central projects in Cerro Gordo’s revival.

It revealed something important about resilience.

Resilience doesn’t necessarily mean feeling calm when everything goes wrong.

Sometimes it simply means deciding:

I’m going to continue.

A Strange Thing Happened: Isolation Created Community

Perhaps the greatest irony of the story is that the man who moved into an abandoned town eventually brought thousands—and then millions—of people into its story.

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Underwood began documenting his experiences online through his **Ghost Town Living** videos.

People became fascinated.

They watched him explore abandoned mines, repair historic buildings, survive storms, discover artifacts and slowly breathe life into Cerro Gordo.

Volunteers eventually began traveling to the property to help.

A project that had once been remarkably solitary turned into a community centered around preserving an almost-forgotten piece of American history.

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And perhaps that's the most unexpected lesson in Underwood's journey.

We often think purpose must be found internally.

But meaningful purpose frequently grows when **something we care about begins connecting us with other people**.

Why His Story Resonates With So Many People

Millions of people aren't fascinated by Cerro Gordo because they secretly want to live without plumbing in an abandoned mine.

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The story resonates because it represents something modern life often seems to be missing.

Less noise.

More purpose.

Fewer possessions.

More meaningful work.

Less scrolling.

More time outdoors.

Less convenience.

More capability.

Underwood's lifestyle is undeniably extreme, and complete isolation certainly isn't appropriate—or desirable—for everyone.

Human beings need relationships, community and support.

But his story invites us to reconsider how many things we call "necessary" truly are.

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Perhaps we don't need to abandon society.

Maybe we simply need to occasionally disconnect from the parts of it that exhaust us.

You Don't Need a Ghost Town to Simplify Your Life

There is a healthier middle ground between nonstop modern stimulation and moving alone into an abandoned mining settlement.

You can recreate some of the benefits of slower living without disappearing into the mountains:

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- Spend an hour outside without checking your phone.
- Walk somewhere you would normally drive.
- Cook food from basic ingredients.
- Grow herbs, vegetables or flowers.
- Learn a practical skill with your hands.
- Create periods of intentional silence.
- Watch sunrise or sunset without photographing it.
- Spend meaningful time alone—but maintain close relationships.
- Remove possessions or commitments that no longer add value.
- Choose projects that give you a genuine sense of purpose.

None of these ideas is revolutionary.

That's partly the point.

Some of the things humans may be missing most are remarkably ordinary.

A Forgotten Town—and a Different Definition of Wealth

Brent Underwood originally bought Cerro Gordo as a remarkable piece of property.

Over time, it became something else.

A home.

A responsibility.

A history project.

A physical challenge.

And, perhaps most importantly, a source of purpose.

His story isn't necessarily an argument for abandoning everything.

It's an invitation to ask what you're carrying that you might no longer need.

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In an era defined by constant notifications, consumerism, schedules and digital stimulation, one man living among abandoned buildings in the California mountains discovered an unusual form of wealth:

time, responsibility, nature, meaningful work—and enough silence to hear himself think.

And maybe that explains why the story of a forgotten ghost town feels so strangely relevant to modern life.

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