

# HOME *is where you lay your* LAPTOP

With the world of work now more flexible than ever, many young people are upping sticks and packing their businesses into their backpacks. It may be the trip of a lifetime, but it can pose issues for the cities they're leaving behind, writes *Sophie Perryer* »



The days of nine to five are fading fast. As international operations become the *modus operandi* for modern businesses, many employers are recognising the value of moving to a more flexible working model, allowing them to connect with clients and customers round the clock.

With the need to be chained to a desk diminishing rapidly, beady-eyed Millennials have spied an opportunity: they have packed up their working lives and set out on adventures across the globe. These digital nomads, as they've come to be known, are eschewing dingy offices and instant coffee in favour of a wholly flexible working life, entirely on their own terms, that allows them to visit a new city every week if they so wish.

It's certainly a tempting prospect: total control over the hours you work and the projects you take on; a significantly lower cost of living; and the choice of working from a beach-front hammock. But by jetting off with their businesses in their backpacks, digital nomads are disrupting the typical chain of career progression, along with the urban economies they are eschewing in favour of a more flexible lifestyle.

#### For the many, not the few

The term 'digital nomad' was coined in 1997 by authors Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners when the duo published a book of the same title. The rise of digital nomadism was precipitated by the increasing ubiquity of the internet, which has facilitated an altogether more flexible working model over the past 20 years.

Technological developments such as laptops, mobile phones, wireless internet and cloud-based applications have allowed workers to become 'location independent', meaning there's no longer a need to be present in a fixed office location from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Digital nomads have taken that independence to the next level, figuring that if you can work for your Paris-based employer from your Paris-based kitchen table, why not from a co-working space in Bali?

Of course, this lifestyle is not accessible to everyone. Although its scope is growing, it's generally reserved for those who don't have customer-facing jobs, aren't required to be physically present for meetings with colleagues, and need nothing more than access to the internet and a mobile phone to work.

Becky Freeth is one such example: she left her job as assistant entertainment editor at a British national newspaper last year to pursue life as a digital nomad, writing freelance to support herself on her travels. She credits the newspaper industry's rapid shift towards digital content with facilitating this transition: "In almost a decade in journalism, I've seen a dramatic shift to online publishing. Print magazines

have rapidly been superseded by digital publications. Fewer writers are permanent – they're freelance, and even when they're office-based, they generally hot desk, meaning that they're required to be adaptable."

Ross Cox, owner of co-working platform Dispace, added: "Actually, there are much fewer limitations these days – it's not necessarily about what you do, it's more about whether your industry can adapt to operating outside of a single fixed location." He argued that the number of businesses that are able to embrace this style of working is much larger than you might think. As such, it's the corporate mindset that's in need of an update.

#### Live like the locals

For those choosing this lifestyle, the perks are clear: it's a chance to satisfy their wanderlust in an economically viable way. "The reality is that you don't need to take a career break to go exploring anymore," Freeth said. It's also a great way to develop an understanding of other cultures – something that is difficult to achieve during a two-week holiday. Katie Silcox, a freelance journalist, photo editor and owner of online travel magazine *Contemporary Class*, told *Business Destinations*: "As a digital nomad, you're still having to work, you're still having to do your shopping, get your hair cut, or whatever it might be – you're doing the local things rather than drink cocktails poolside." This, she said, has allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of destinations across the globe, by experiencing first-hand the quotidian practicalities of other cultures.

Silcox also credits her lifestyle for allowing her to share elements of her own culture. Last year, for example, she wasn't able to return to her home in the UK for Christmas. Instead, she told *Business Destinations*: "I hosted Christmas at my house in India, for about five expats and five Indian people who had never experienced a British Christmas." Digital nomadism, as Silcox's experience proves, is not solely about garnering personal experience of other cultures, but giving others a chance to share in nomads' own cultural traditions.

This lifestyle can also prove transformative for nomads' careers, allowing them to achieve a better work-life balance. "By working online in an environment where [the] cost of living is so much lower, we take on as much work as we actually need to, not feel pressured to," Freeth said. "Instead, we have the benefit of accepting the work that will help us progress in our fields and when we do it, we set our own agendas and time frames." Silcox even found that additional work came flooding in once news of her nomadism spread. "Once they found out that I was freelance, companies [started] approaching me, and I was able to accumulate new projects."



#### Importance of connecting

Some locations are much better equipped to host a community of digital nomads than others, due to factors such as the availability of co-working spaces, the cost of living and how agreeable the weather is. Great Wi-Fi is one of the most essential requirements, Freeth said: "Nomads depend on fast, instant and reliable connections. Suddenly, Wi-Fi is essential for business calls, emails and, in my industry, news bulletins, when you can no longer rely on mobile data to supplement the connection."

Co-working spaces are also vital, not only for attracting new nomads but also for supporting existing communities, giving them a place both to work and network. Nomads often share projects among their communities – for example, if one receives an offer of work that they are unable to take on, they'll recommend another nomad with the requisite skills. Without co-working spaces, it would be much more difficult to establish an understanding of the various skills of different nomads, and – just as importantly – it would be a far lonelier lifestyle.

Freeth explained the double-edged sword of developing personal relationships as a roaming worker: "Digital nomads come and go, so you quickly accept that the connections you make are transient, but the greatest thing about it is that you learn something new from every person you meet – whether it's a new coffee shop to work from, a restaurant recommendation or some practical life advice." This ever-evolving port-

folio of skills and knowledge also makes nomads a valuable commodity for businesses, particularly those looking to expand into new markets. By having a multitasking freelancer on the ground within their target market, companies can give themselves a head start against competitors by taking advantage of a nomad's specialised local knowledge.

"At the end of the day," Freeth said, "the digital nomad community shares ambition at its core. Whether it's from a financial, professional or a personal perspective, each person you meet has sacrificed a lot to be here to create a better future for themselves."

That ambition, and the lengths that nomads are going to in order to achieve a better future while improving their present, is key to this lifestyle. There's a common misconception that digital nomads are escaping reality, or hanging onto the last clutches of youth by embarking on an ill-advised gap year. It's a reductive assumption that undermines the resilience it takes to be one of these workers.

#### Left behind

While those pursuing an itinerant lifestyle are off having the time of their lives, however, the families, friends and cities they have left behind must adjust to their absence. For those who have been nomadic for some time, their families and friends are accustomed to time differences and holidays spent apart, but the same cannot be said for the urban economies that digital nomads abandon.

In a survey conducted by Katherine Conaway, co-author of *The Digital Nomad Survival Guide*, more than 65 percent of respondents were aged between 24 and 34, the age range in which most people step onto the housing ladder, get married or have children. Those pursuing the ultra-flexible, location-undefined lifestyle are not hitting those traditional life markers at the same time – if at all – and that's having a knock-on effect on all sorts of other social and economic markers, from the number of first-time buyers in a given area and primary school admissions to progression up the career ladder.

It's a particularly significant issue for urban economies, which rely on spending from permanent and temporary residents to ensure that all kinds of businesses are supported. But in cities like London, which digital nomads often leave due to the high cost of living, the ratio of leavers to permanent residents is steadily becoming more skewed. For example, the city's permanent property market stalled from Q1 to Q4 2018, with properties remaining on the market for an average of 201 days, a 15 percent increase from the end of 2017. Meanwhile, short-term rentals are booming: data released by Inside Airbnb shows that the number of London listings on the home rentals platform rose by 292 percent between April 2015 and July 2018. »

HOW DIGITAL NOMADS ARE AFFECTING HOUSING MARKETS

201

THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS PROPERTY REMAINS ON THE MARKET IN LONDON

292%

INCREASE IN LONDON AIRBNB LISTINGS BETWEEN Q2 2015 AND Q3 2018

20,493

AIRBNB LISTINGS IN LISBON

17,221

AIRBNB LISTINGS IN BARCELONA

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## THE BEST CITIES FOR DIGITAL NOMADS

A REPORT BY ONLINE HOME RENTAL COMPANY SPOTAHOME HAS FOUND THE BEST CITIES FOR DIGITAL NOMADS BY MEASURING FACTORS SUCH AS INTERNET SPEED, THE AVAILABILITY OF WI-FI AND ANNUAL SUNSHINE HOURS. HERE ARE FIVE OF THE BEST:



### BELFAST, UK

Belfast is rapidly becoming a booming business hub – it was found to be the UK's fastest-growing urban economy in a recent study. The abundance of co-working spaces means you'll never be short of somewhere to set up a temporary office, while the city scored 10 out of 10 for internet speed in Spotahome's survey. Moreover, Belfast's resident community of start-ups, which collectively raised £18.2m (\$23m) in capital last year, provides plenty of networking and potential freelance opportunities.



### LISBON, PORTUGAL

Lisbon has seen an influx in digital nomads over the past year thanks to its balmy temperatures, affordable rent and excellent transport options. The Portuguese city also boasts an abundance of cultural attractions, including museums, galleries and music halls. The biggest pull, though, is the thriving community of flexible workers that have already temporarily settled in the city. Regular meet-ups, mentoring workshops and friendly faces in co-working spots all over the city make it easier for new nomads to settle in.



### BARCELONA, SPAIN

Similarly to Lisbon, Barcelona benefits from an attractive climate where temperatures rarely dip into single figures, as well as a low cost of living. The start-up scene has exploded in the Spanish city in recent years and it now boasts more than 100 co-working spaces, so digital nomads certainly won't be short of partnership opportunities. There's free, high-speed public Wi-Fi in most locations – even the city's 5km stretch of beach. Additionally, the digital nomad collective CODINO regularly hosts meet-ups and events in the city.



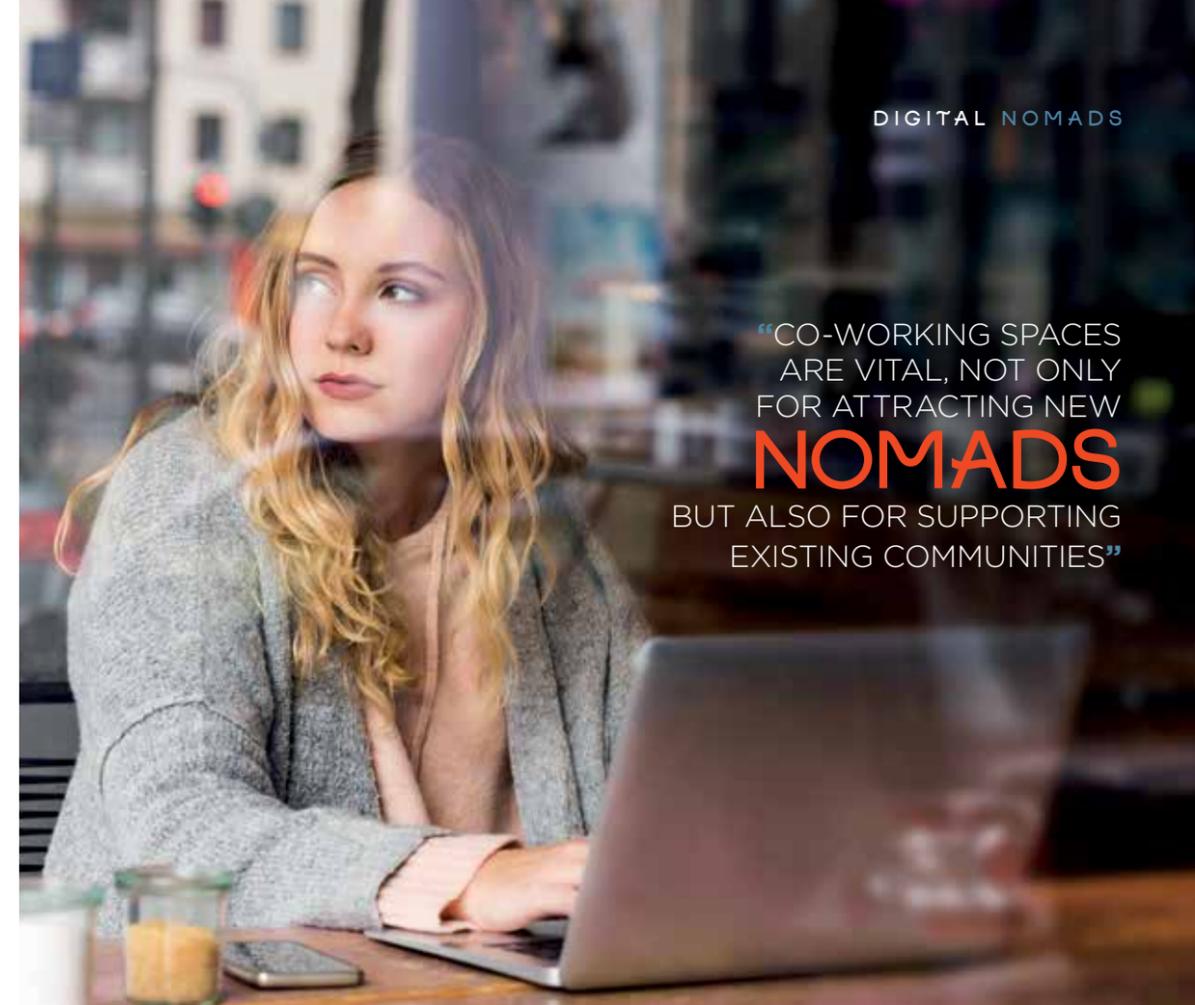
### BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA

Queensland's capital is a great choice for European nomads wanting a taste of life on the other side of the world. The city is famed for its friendly community of freelancers, who populate the many cafes and co-working spaces that have launched in recent years. Brisbane is also in the midst of a business revolution, so there are lots of work opportunities to be picked up. Beware, though, of Australia's notoriously strict visa system, which can make it difficult for digital nomads to secure entry in the first place.



### LUXEMBOURG CITY, LUXEMBOURG

Luxembourg is a multilingual country, making it an attractive destination for digital nomads from all across the globe. The Central European city has bolstered its digital infrastructure in recent years and has aspirations to become the continent's leading IT hub. Its high quality of living, safe environment and ease of access to other European cities bring a steady stream of businesspeople, some of whom use the city as a base before travelling elsewhere. The cost of living for longer periods, however, is relatively high.



“CO-WORKING SPACES ARE VITAL, NOT ONLY FOR ATTRACTING NEW **NOMADS** BUT ALSO FOR SUPPORTING EXISTING COMMUNITIES”

While this may not entirely be the result of a rise in digital nomad culture, there's a clear causality. Instead of opting to purchase highly priced permanent homes, London residents are exploring short-term rental options using platforms such as Airbnb, which are more accommodating for flexible, nomadic lifestyles. The phenomenon is not limited to London, either – Airbnb has more than four million listings for variable stays worldwide, with many in popular digital nomad destinations such as Lisbon (20,493) and Barcelona (17,221). Cox, however, believes the rise in location-independent workers could help revive regional economies. As a direct result of their flexible lifestyles, digital nomads can work anywhere – so he believes there's no reason they couldn't work in smaller towns and cities and help to boost those smaller urban economies.

“Digital nomadism means that a business can have an office in the capital, but it can hire people all around a country,” he told *Business Destinations*. “Those people can live in other towns and cities, and those cities will profit because people are buying houses there, eating out there and buying things from other businesses there.”

However, this relies on economies having all the tools necessary for digital nomads to be able to work effectively, such as fast Wi-Fi and co-working spaces. Across Europe, this simply isn't the case; according to broadband mapping from the European Commission, in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Germany and the UK, between 60 and 75 percent of citizens have access to 30 megabits per second (Mbps) broadband, which is fast enough to send email but too slow to stream much video content or download large

files. Some countries such as France, Italy and Poland fare worse, with around 10 percent of French citizens having 30Mbps broadband access in some areas. If economies in these regions hope to benefit from digital nomads, they will have to seriously bolster their digital capabilities.

#### Where the heart is

The rise in digital nomadism is symptomatic of a greater shift in society, towards a more flexible way of working, facilitated by the ongoing progression of technology. More than that, though, it's an indication that the way we value 'home' is changing. Once upon a time, we put a fixed abode as the centre of our world – it held the bed where we laid our head every evening and the window that displayed the same view each morning. Work, too, conformed to the pattern of everydayness: we undertook the same commute, sat at the same desk, and drank the same coffee from the same cafe on the corner.

Now, in an era where work can be wherever we lay our laptops, it's logical that our definition of home is becoming less fixed too. Digital nomads have taken ownership of this flexibility and utilised it as a tool to further their careers while expanding their awareness of the world we live in. For them, travel is no longer a two-week (or even one-year) excursion – it's a way of life. This, too, is creating a larger shift in the world of work, one that will open up new opportunities for businesses large and small. With more and more people choosing nomadism year on year, it's time for economic markers to catch up with the lives we're living now. **BD**