



Becoming location independent

NAIMA MORELLI

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Life as a digital nomad takes a little more than a laptop and a Lonely Planet guide.



Combining the work you love with a nomadic lifestyle seems to be the contemporary dream for creatives. Today, thanks to the Internet, an increasing number of freelancers are putting their Pinterest-perfect life into practice.

But while this might seem to involve nothing more than leaning out of Parisian windows and carrying around laptops on Mexican beaches, there is a lot of hustle behind the scenes. Contrary to appearances, approaching a location independent lifestyle with a holiday mindset is a recipe for failure. It takes a lot of hustle, stamina and organization to keep yourself on track while on the road.

Travel blogger Shannon O'Donnell, founder of A Little Adrift (www.alittleadrift.com), has spent the last seven years building a location independent lifestyle and she has seen the international landscape slowly changing

character. Back in 2008 there was a real dearth of online resources available to digital nomads. Setting out into the world with your laptop in tow was still a rarity.

Shannon used to spend hours in new towns searching for decent Wi-Fi and a coffee shop from which to work: "Now, friends have written entire blogs dedicated to the best cafés to work from in Southeast Asia. It's a totally different landscape - I feel like I've found a tribe, a community of others who understand some of the unique challenges of building a business from the road."

According to Shannon, what urges freelancers to choose the path of digital nomadism is the realisation that working online means you are already location independent. "You just have to look at your life and decide if you're currently living in the best spot to meet your personal life goals, as well as a spot that will help you develop your business."

Cost of living is often part of the equation: "Many digital nomads set out to places like Southeast Asia because the cost of living is lower, so they can invest more time and stretch resources further while they are getting their businesses off the ground."

Jeannie Mark of Nomadic Chick (www.nomadicchick.com) sought location independency to get out of her comfort zone: "I no longer wanted to live with regrets. I was 38 years old and the future I saw before me didn't reflect who I was inside."

The scariest part for her was to be potentially perceived as old: "Aging is such a stigma in North America that even my own family expressed their concerns that I might destroy my retirement savings or my career position. But I knew that living a life I wanted, no matter my age, was more important than dissenting voices."

For Jeannie it was a double leap: into freelancing and into location independency. But she wasn't going into it without a safety net: "It's smart to have some money behind you. Start a savings plan of some kind, and then meanwhile begin planning your travels or overseas life until you're ready to launch your freelance business."

Both bloggers made travel an integral part of their business. If you are a visual artist, like Veronica Kent, the initiator of the Telepathy Project (www.veronicakent.com) and lecturer at VCA, the connection is less straightforward, but no less relevant. While some artists consider travel as a break from work, for Veronica, art and travel have always been entwined: "I went to school in Asia for a while as a child and the vivid memories of living in a place where I didn't understand the language combine with memories of visiting temples, calls to prayer, Hindu trance dances, midnight shadow puppets and monkeys, tigers, jungles etc. This early experience had a huge effect on me and I continue to seek out places that provoke a similar sense of wonder."

She has always been drawn to professions that allow location independence: "Before I was an artist, I was a tour manager for an orchestra, so travelled a lot with them. And before that I was a cook - again this was a job I could do anywhere." As such she and her family have moved around a lot both in Australia and overseas.

Veronica has recently been to Rome on a one-month, self-initiated residency. For her the trip was about feeding her imagination for a new artistic project: "There is always a certain hunger for looking and experiencing that comes with being an artist, so perhaps we are all naturally predisposed to a nomadic way of living."

To strike the right balance between exploration and actual work is always a challenge for digital nomads. Jeannie made a point of trying to do one new thing a day - see a site, do a tour - and devoting the rest of the time to work: "Lately I have been busy working on a book and my retreat business, so doing that one thing is not so easy anymore. But that's the beauty of this lifestyle - it's all adjustable."

In order to stick to a working routine Shannon recommends travelling slowly: "I have weekly client meetings every Monday, so I never schedule travel then (I usually fly/take a bus or train on Tuesdays) and I ensure that I have several down days each week in a place with good Wi-Fi so I can sit with a coffee, get everything in order and keep on top of client work."

She treats her exploration of the local area as an alternative to Netflix: "There are still a lot of hours in the day even if you're working 40 hours a week. I wake early each morning and usually do client work four days a week from about 6 a.m. local time until lunch. Then I go explore in the afternoons - plenty of time for both!"

Of course, organizing for the next destination and dealing with unforeseen circumstances takes time from the actual work. For Jeannie the solution lays in having the right mindset. “You can never know how to deal with the unpredictable, other than to remain as calm as possible when things happen,” she explains. “In terms of organizing, everyone is different. I’m typically a one-month in advance planner, but sometimes spontaneity hits and I decide to suddenly leave and plan for the next week!”

Spontaneity is also a big part of Shannon’s modus operandi. “I am a last-minute planner and I prefer to do only the bare-minimum research on a place before I arrive,” she explains. “I would say I spend a few hours a week planning the organizational part, about 35 hours working and then the rest of my days are spent exploring my current city.”

For Veronica, preparation is vital in order to know where to look for inspiration. The challenge for her is to not fall into obvious tropes when dealing with loaded material: “I read up on the history and culture of the place and try and find films and fiction based there. I make sure I know about the key collections, exhibition spaces and ARIs.”

On a more practical level, she also seeks out and follows up on any connections she may have with people or institutions in the places she visits. In Rome she applied to be a reader at The American Academy, which meant she had access to their collection and to a beautiful and quiet library, café and garden to work in during the day.

While a life on the road is definitely one of endless discovery, it also has its emotional drawbacks. “It can be lonely at times, and it can be exhausting if you start moving too quickly,” explains Shannon. “It’s easy to get caught up in the number of neat places you could visit, but juggling work and travel means you’re constantly batting around a lot of ideas and information in your brain.”

On the emotional front, Jeannie finds that sometimes people don’t understand her way of living, assuming she’s running away from herself: “The truth is that you can never run away from who you are. So feeling secure in who you are helps you weather emotional lows.”

Jeannie also notes that when you’re on the move, it’s sometimes hard finding new relationships and maintaining the old ones: “Your best friends - the ones that knew you way back - are far away, and it’s hard also in the romantic department.”

On the other hand, for those who have a family like Veronica, making sure to spend time together is also not easy: “I’m lucky enough to have a partner who is a musician. So, like me, outside of teaching we make up our own hours. It just takes careful planning so that we can tag-team parent. If it’s a tour or residency that the girls might also enjoy, then we try and plan these around school/university holidays.” Veronica has included her eldest daughter in a lot of the work she makes: “She is a great traveller and I love having her on the road with me.”

But after all that, there’s a reason we keep seeing all those creatives sitting under palm trees with their laptops, which is that, for the creative nomad, the experience of travelling and immersing oneself in other cultures often overrides the drawbacks. “I’ve learned so much about myself as a woman, a human contributing to our planet,” concludes Jeannie. “But also, there’s certainly a financial benefit to it. I chose this lifestyle so I can afford to live and still do the creative things that nourish me. It’s a choice that I happily live with.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.

