

# WHEREVER WORKS



Co-working spaces are popping up from Boston to Berlin to Bali—all you need is a laptop and Skype. Are you ready to become a “digital nomad”?

Elle (Canada) 1 Nov 2015 By Sarah Treleven

Last year, the now 32-year-old and her husband moved to Ubud, Bali, for a year. Gordon spent her days counselling “burned-out Westerners”—some based in Bali but most back in North America. She took appointments via Skype at an open-air co-working space called

seeking out Wi-Fi-connected co-working offices and even work-friendly vacation destinations around the world that give them greater control over when, where and how much they work. Some digital nomads work their way around the globe for extended periods, some take mini “workations” and others only go so far as to work in co-working spaces in their hometowns or when they travel for business. They come from a diverse range of backgrounds, but some jobs are more portable than others: tech experts, marketing professionals, life coaches, journalists

snorkel in the afternoon.” She typically buys memberships—either by the week or month—that entitle her to a floating desk. (Prices can range anywhere from \$12 a day to hundreds a month, depending on what services and how much network bandwidth you use.) Laforest-Sabourin did take a stab at conventional office work—she worked as a coordinator for an artist-management company—but found that the lifestyle didn’t suit her. “I’ve never been excited about nine-to-five,” she says. Instead, she set off to travel and found herself on

A beach in Goa, India, with

Hubud, where she paid a membership fee for shared access to the workspace and Wi-Fi. She now splits her time between Bali and British Columbia and is planning to open a holistic-wellness centre in a retail space in Ubud, but she still does the counselling at Hubud. It’s just five minutes



**The Surf Office, a workation retreat, and the nearby beach in Gran Canaria, Spain**

and entrepreneurs.

It can be hard to nail down specific numbers on a remote workforce—in particular for those who call themselves digital nomads. Telecommuting has been on the rise for some time. The most recent data from Statistics

an iPad and a 3G network—which set off sparks about the ability to work remotely. None of her childhood friends in Montreal classify themselves as digital nomads, but she says she has met plenty of people aged 18 to 35 on the road. “Generation Y is definitely trying to change the rules,” she says. “The goal is not at all about working on the beach; it’s about having more flexibility and the professional freedom to work the way you want to.”

Co-working spaces are popping up globally from Boston to Berlin to Bali—and so are “workation” hotels, like [Coconat](#),

from where she practises yoga. Some mornings, she watches local women spend hours arranging rose petals in jugs of water. “I feel that this path has given me freedom,” says Gordon. “Living in Bali has also allowed me to explore many creative hobbies that I would never have a chance to enjoy if I lived full-time in Vancouver.” She spends some of her spare time learning Bahasa Indonesian, designing clothes and making jewellery. NOMADIC TRENDS Gordon is part of a growing community of “digital nomads,” or wandering workers who aren’t tied to any particular

Canada shows that one in five university graduates works from home—a number that is growing. A 2013 study by BMO found that 23 percent of Canadian companies now offer telecommuting or remote working. FlexJobs, an online service for professionals seeking location-independent work, just released a list of 25 major corporations—including IBM, Aon, SAP and Dell—that are actively recruiting workers for remote positions, from nurse practitioners to software engineers.

## LOCATION INDEPENDENCE

a retreat just outside Berlin with both indoor and outdoor desks and cabin and tent accommodations. (This is not your stuffy hotel business centre filled with suits—most guests are casually dressed and split their day between laptop time in the communal workrooms and relaxing at the nearby lake.) Johannes Voelkner, a German online marketer who works remotely and runs Webworktravel.com, has even arranged the site’s first-ever “digital nomad cruise,” from Spain to Brazil, in November. The website is part of a growing online community offering tips on

location. Upwork, an online freelance marketplace, h

Defines digital nomads as workers “empowered by technology to break free of the constraints of the physical workplace.” In 2014, the company commissioned a survey of 847 digital nomads. Ninety-two percent of those surveyed said they are happier since abandoning a traditional nine-to-five office.

Digital nomads seem to be the next generation of telecommuters: workers who are no longer content to work from home in isolation while wearing their pyjamas. Instead, they are

Daphnée Laforest-Sabourin, a 26-year-old marketing project manager from Montreal, relies on co-working spaces both at home—she likes the café-like atmosphere at GAB, a coffee-shop/coworking space on Saint-Laurent Boulevard as well as La Gare in the Mile End neighbourhood—and when she packs up her laptop to work in San Francisco or Paris. Earlier this year she spent two months working at Nest, a co-working space in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. “I was really productive,” she says. “I would work all morning and then

the work lifestyle, from how to deal with visa issues to the best job boards to the best communities for digital nomads. His top destinations include Costa Rica, Spain and South Africa. (Another online resource, Nomadlist.com, offers a city ranking based on cost of living, availability of co-working spaces, cafés with Wi-Fi and leisure activities; its top three cities are currently Budapest, Chiang Mai and Phuket.) Voelkner finds that most digital nomads—typically in their 30s—come from North America and Europe. In August, Laforest-Sabourin attended DNX Global in Berlin, a

massive semi-annual roving conference about location-independent work that's part of a self-declared "freedom revolution." "It was really great to meet like-minded people," she says. Laforest-Sabourin is now working on building her own site—Technomades.com—which she hopes will become a hub for franco-phone digital nomads.

**INTERNATIONAL OFFICE SPACE** Ubud is perhaps best known as the Balinese paradise made famous by Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*. But Hubud, where Gordon works, is helping broaden the vacation destina-

tion's reputation as a bit of a hot spot for entrepreneurship. Peter Wall, a Canadian former journalist, and his two business partners opened Hubud—"hub in Ubud"—in 2013. The open-air co-working space, with high-speed Wi-Fi, private Skype booths and a juice bar, has close to 300 members. It's almost at capacity, so Wall has plans to move into a larger space.

The 40-year-old moved his wife and three children to Bali in 2010 and quickly fell in love with the island's charms, from his kids' bamboo school to the monkey-filled forest next to his house. His

ticket to Cambodia and then later moved on to Ubud—"Everyone here is looking for their Javier Bardem," says Lee, referring to the *Eat Pray Love* movie with Julia Roberts.

Lee is still based in Ubud and has reinvented herself with a new business venture: *Screw the Cubicle*. Over Skype, she coaches stressed executives in Toronto, New York City and Hong Kong, all looking for encouragement to ditch their daily grind and pursue a passion. She has been certified as a True Purpose coach. She averages about three to five clients a month, giving them one-to-one

coaching in sessions over six to 10 weeks. Beyond being a workspace, she says, Hubud acts as an "ideas exchange with like-minded people." And when she's not working, she simply gets on her scooter and drives, visiting Bali's idyllic beaches or mountain hideouts where sweet strawberries grow wild. *LIFE ABROAD* Of course, life on the road as a digital nomad isn't all arranging-rose-petals-in-jugs-of-water bliss. Gordon says that setting up a business in another country has many challenges. "Life is not quite as linear and simple here in Bali," she says. "Rules and regula-

travelling on my own and I got lonely," says Lee. "Hubud has helped, but sometimes those friendships can feel transient. After two years here, I have found a core group of friends who are mostly expats." Even in Montreal, LaforestSabourin hosts a bi-weekly meet-up for nomads in need of human connections. "It's important to find a community wherever you are," she says.

It's also worth noting that many digital nomads head to destinations where the cost of living is lower and every dollar earned stretches much further. Lee says she could live in Vancouver on



**The Hubud co-working space in Ubud, Bali**

world—this planted the seed that she could work from anywhere.

Lee returned to Vancouver in 2011, where she purged her belongings until all that was left were two Rubbermaid containers she could store in her mother's garage. She bought a one-way

her earnings from remote coaching but definitely enjoys perks—like more disposable income for travel—while living in Bali. Ditto for Laforest-Sabourin, who says that she allows herself roughly the same budget everywhere she travels—which means a much smaller and less glamorous apartment when she's renting in Europe versus Mexico or parts of Asia. In Bali, Gordon has "helpers," including two personal assistants, a part-time chef and a virtual assistant in the Philippines—none of which would be affordable in Vancouver. When she returns to B.C. for part of the

wife h

Found work as a yoga teacher. But he wanted more structure for his professional life. Hubud is now a key destination for digital nomads from around the world. "The cost of failure is lower in Bali," says Wall. "We have lots of micro-entrepreneurs focused on a specific product." That includes one Israeli woman who manages a software business with 20 employees who work all over the world and an American human-rights lawyer who manufactures a sleep mask.

There are more Canadians too. Lydia Lee, from Vancouver,



**Montreal's Halte 24-7 co-working space**

frequently works from Hubud and says it's the perfect place to share ideas as she remakes her professional life. For Lee, 32, the life-altering moment came in 2010 during her sixth business trip in as many months. "I had a complete meltdown in Russia," she says. "It was the dead of win-

contract work—typically

contract work—typically

"If you aren't a focused or disciplined person, you may get distracted in an open, social office"

Or you might struggle with creating your own

Schedule each day."

year, she works at a medical practice on Salt Spring Island, which enables her to top up her income. **THE EVOLUTION OF WORK** But beyond the cost-of-living calculations, there is a broader social current at play. A 2013 joint United Way Toronto and McMaster University study found that nearly half of working Canadian adults face some degree of work precariousness, mostly as a result of contract-based employment. According to Statistics Canada, the number of self-employed workers across the country increased almost 45 percent between 1989 and 2007. As a result,

Devoid of benefits and conventional job security—is on the rise.

At a time when many workers feel both disposable and overextended, a digital-nomad lifestyle can be a response to both job insecurity and how technology has made us accessible and accountable to the boss 24-7. “For at least a generation, there has been a broken promise that if you work hard and pay your dues, you’ll move up,” says Sean Lyons, an associate professor of organizational management at the University of Guelph. “But after 10 years of working, there’s an increasing

sense that all of this hard work does not necessarily pay off. So why put in all the hours if it’s not going to lead anywhere?” Still, there are career implications to becoming a digital nomad. Lyons says many people worry about switching to full-time remote work because they’ll be at a disadvantage if they miss impromptu meetings and important gossip. “It’s less risky to ‘go nomad’ later in one’s career,” says Lyons. “Once you’ve built the connections necessary to work more independently, it is generally easier to maintain them.” Plus, he says, being a nomad can present great

networking opportunities.

Laforest-Sabourin says that her millennial generation accepts that they’ll change jobs many times over a career. But she points out that digital nomads don’t necessarily have to give up all the perks of a traditional salaried position. She just scored a full-time gig with Human Made—a digital development agency where all the jobs are remote—to work on Nomadbase.io, a real-time global locator for digital nomads.

“We used to have a culture of presenteeism, the sense that you’re missing something if

you’re not in the office,” says Lyons. “The tide is turning on that as Gen Xers slowly move into management positions.” Lyons says that workplace experts have told many employers that location independence will attract younger workers. One 2014 survey by the Conference Board of Canada found that 70 percent of full-time workers aged 18 to 29 would prefer to telecommute. Companies, he says, are finally starting to pay attention.

While digital nomads aren’t exactly trading their uncomfortable office chairs for gently swaying hammocks, Gordon says the

delineation between work and life has changed: “I now feel like I have freedom personally, professionally and geographically.” Lee says that working from anywhere in the world is a pleasure, but she emphasizes that the digital-nomad movement is about more than just avoiding a cubicle. “The freedom to wear no pants while working is great, but the work has to have purpose.” n



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