

# HOW TO BECOME A DIGITAL NOMAD

The beginner's guide to working from anywhere

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*Resources, tips, tools and advice to start your own adventure around the world.*

**"Live wherever you like. Work on things you actually enjoy."**

That's the dream, and it's what many of us spend our whole lives searching for. But I'm not here to tell you how to live your life. Instead, I want to share with you how I've chosen to live mine. To give you a little bit of inspiration if you're feeling trapped.

Perhaps it's your boss. Or the hours. Or you just want a change.

There's a hundred and one different reasons that could trigger this feeling. The feeling that there's more to life. That you can do more, and be more. That you can experience more and have a thousand crazy stories to share with your grandkids.

That's what I wanted. That's why I started living this crazy life.

I guess you could call me a digital nomad. Or a lifestyle entrepreneur. Or a remote worker. It's hard to really classify all the people chasing this dream in a single tagline, but for arguments sake let's go with digital nomad. I like the ring to it.

## **WAIT. WHAT'S A DIGITAL NOMAD?**

This term gets used in both good and bad ways. I use it because it's the simplest way to explain to people what I do. I have a business which I run from my computer. All I need is an internet connection and my laptop, and I'm good to go. Anywhere in the world.

But I didn't start out this way.

I was a freelancer initially, and as my client base grew and I started getting asked to provide more services. Things I couldn't do myself. So I created an agency and hiring staff. We're still growing. My team is 100 percent remote, just like me, and working across Asia, Europe and Australia.

Most of the digital nomads I know work for themselves, though as companies realize the benefits of contractors it's now common to see "remote workers" with full-time jobs. They've simply landed a gig that pays a monthly salary, but with no office to work from, they can move wherever they like.

## OK, BUT WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO WORK REMOTELY?

I left my corporate job in 2013, and I don't believe I'll ever go back.

Don't get me wrong, the company was great, but I wanted more. I wanted actual work-life balance. I wanted to be able to take a day off because there's a festival going on. I wanted to jump on a plane without a second thought and take a trip somewhere, anywhere. These days, I want to be able to spend time with my kid.

In short, I just wanted a better quality of life.

I was frustrated that I'd be spending the best years of my life working and just waiting to retire so I could start exploring the world. Maybe I was a little impatient.

I wanted to start living now.

Becoming a digital nomad has allowed me to:

1. Regain control over every hour of the day
2. Work on projects I'm actually passionate about
3. Live wherever I like, anywhere in the world

## NOW COMES THE REALITY CHECK

Before you get any further, it's time to tell yourself you're not crazy. It's perfectly normal to want to enjoy your life, and technology has enabled us to do it. But here's the reality check. It's damn hard work. You need to figure out:

- How to make money
- Where you want to go
- How to actually get there
- How to get a visa to stay
- What to take with you
- Where you're going to live
- Where you're going to work
- How to stay in touch with family

Oh and don't forget disaster planning. When you're on the road, you need a backup. Then a backup for your backup. Then maybe one more just in case. In my experience I've found that anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

It's almost guaranteed.

But what about the hard part.

It's time for some of the hardest conversations you'll ever have to have. How to convince your friends and family that you're not, in fact, crazy. Or having a quarter-life crisis. That it's actually a good idea to throw some clothes and a laptop into a bag and head off into the unknown.

For me, this was far easier than what most of you will experience as I was already living abroad.

My parents had accepted the fact I'll be away from home for many years to come. Leaving the corporate world was just another notch on my belt. My friends had also given up asking "when are you coming home" and switched to topics like "we are coming to visit."

All I can say about this is to be gentle. They may not understand, or fully accept your choice, especially if you're walking away from a decent job.

Use your knowledge of your parents to reassure them that the decision you're making makes sense. My parents are completely logical, and after dipping my toes into freelance I knew I could make enough income to cover my continued living costs in Bangkok. Which is exactly what I told them.

That, and I had enough savings to last me about 12 months. This was my safety net, and to be honest I think they were a little bit excited for me.

All that was left was to jump right in.

## **LEARNING TO MAKE MONEY ONLINE**

This is the first thing you need to figure out. But do it before you leave home.

Trust me.

It takes time to build trust with clients and secure anything close to a regular income. I freelanced on-and-off for months as I built a portfolio of work. I used these first clients to double down and secure more work that was higher paying once I was freelancing full-time, but I was working very long hours those first few months.

When it comes to making money we've got other guides that discuss these tactics in detail. In short, pretty much every money-making opportunity falls into one of these categories.

### **Become a remote worker**

Either convince your boss to let you telecommute, or start applying for positions with companies that hire remote staff. This will give you the stability of a regular paycheck, and it's just like having a normal job, except you can work from anywhere.

## **Become a freelancer**

This is the path I took before starting my own agency, as I built up a base of clients using platforms like Elance (which has now become Upwork) while still working full-time. You just leverage an existing skill you have, and find clients willing to pay you to work.

## **Start an online business**

The final category is one of the hardest for someone just starting out. You've got to build a completely online business which you can run from anywhere. Digital services like website development agencies are the most common, though ecommerce stores and programs like Amazon FBA also work.

Pick one of these strategies, and once you've got money coming in regularly it's time to start thinking about relocating.

## **SO WHERE CAN I GO?**

Honestly, anywhere in the world.

The trick is to ensure you're making enough money to cover your cost of living. That's why Chiang Mai has become almost a Mecca for aspiring digital nomads, as it's got a decent infrastructure, it's affordable, and there's a strong international community there to help you get started.

Seriously. You can live off like a grand a month.

For me, I spend quite a bit more than that, but the logic is the same. Find somewhere you can afford to live, go there and enjoy. I've mostly been based out of Bangkok, as it's a massive city I rather like, and I can travel pretty much anywhere I want from here.

Other spots I've enjoyed have been Budapest (Hungary), Tallinn (Estonia) and Osaka (Japan).

If you want to start looking up destinations one of the best resources is Nomad List, but fair warning. The information isn't always 100 percent accurate, so don't trust their budget numbers to the letter. You will spend more than you're planning. Or maybe that's just me.

## **SO HOW DO I GET THERE?**

This one's easy. Jump on Google flights and book something. You don't need to over-think it.

Just ensure you've got enough funds to cover a return ticket should something go wrong. If you're really worried you could always go for just a few weeks the first trip. Then once you're comfortable and you "know" it's all going to be OK, plan for an extended stay the second time around.

## SO HOW DO I STAY THERE?

The biggest problem when it comes to the digital nomad lifestyle is visas. Governments have yet to keep up with the digital economy, and except for a few key programs (like the one for Spain), there's not really a visa for people like us.

We're too new. Governments are still learning how to handle us. I won't dive into the details of visas here as that would be a book of its own. Every country has a different set of requirements.

**Now before we get too much further I want to make it clear the following isn't legal advice. Nor should it be interpreted as such. You need to research the country you're planning to visit, and ensure you're not breaking any laws by working remotely from there. Plus the laws change (all the time), so do your due diligence before you go anywhere people. It's just good common sense.**

Good? Good. Let's get back to it.

Most of the digital nomads I know use tourist visas. A tourist visa doesn't allow you to "work" within a country (you need work permits and special approval for that), but it's a bit of a weird situation for digital nomads. You're working. But you're also on holidays.

It'd be like a businessman replying to emails from a beach in the Maldives. He is on holidays, but he's working. How should the local government handle this? In my experience, most places just ignore it. Which is perfect, because it means we can just get on with our business.

The trouble comes when you want to stay longer than a normal tourist visa allows.

As you fall headfirst into a downward spiral of visa runs, here's where problems appear. Governments don't particularly like tourists doing back-to-back visa runs, and countries like Thailand are trying to eliminate the loopholes that allow people to stay in the country long-term on visas like this.

I recommend moving countries when your visa runs out. You'll get to see far more of the region, and it can work well if you plan your moves around your visa's expiration date.

But you can find solutions if you fall in love with a particular place. Or a person from that place. But that's a whole other topic for a whole other book.

You've also got to be careful about doing work locally. Say you meet a local bar owner and he needs your help. I would highly, highly advise against this. Just like working behind the bar you also can't build him a website, or whatever digital service it is you're offering. You're definitely breaking the law (in Thailand at least) by working for a local Thai company while you're on a tourist visa.

Save yourself the headaches and focus on serving international clients, that have nothing to do with the country you're currently in.

## SO WHAT DO I BRING?

Google's going to be your best friend here. They've got plenty of packing lists showing what other digital nomads are taking with them and we don't need to repeat it all here.

Really, you just need your tools and equipment to get work done. For me that's a laptop. Then just some toiletries and about a week's worth of clothes. Everything else is a luxury. Try to pack light on your first trip. I know you'll want to bring everything with you (just in case), but I could barely pick up my first backpack it was that full.

I could hardly walk anywhere with it on, and my knees hated me when I did.

Less would have been far better.

Half the things I never even used on that first trip.

In addition to your stuff, there's a couple of other things you need to plan. Get decent international travel insurance and have an emergency fund so you can cover any expenses that come up.

Oh, and a backup plan should things not turn out the way you had thought. There's always a solution, it's just a matter of being ready to adapt when the situation demands. But that's also the fun part about our lifestyle. We can go with the flow.

For the things you're leaving behind, I say sell them. Unless it's got a sentimental value, get rid of it because it's just taking up space. I've got a box sitting at my parents house since 2009, and a suitcase full of winter gear. There was far more when I first left, and I've been whittling it down every time I go back. Looking back I should have just donated or sold it all from the start.

## SO WHERE DO I STAY?

This one's easy. Jump on Agoda and book a hotel for a few nights.

This way, you can get the feel of a new town first, before booking anything for the long-term. You'll often hear of a great deal or a fantastic place to stay from the other digital nomads at the local coworking spaces, or you may avoid a catastrophe if you find a neighbourhood isn't to your liking.

Then it's just a matter of doing a little legwork.

Go walk around the neighborhood you want to stay. There may be a sign up with a number to call, or an apartment building with a receptionist who can show you the available rooms.

Or if that all sounds too hard, just jump on AirBnb and book an apartment for as long as you need. I've done this plenty of times too.

## **OK, NOW WHERE DO I WORK?**

It's really up to you. Some people prefer the peace and quiet of their apartment. Others like the buzz and energy you get at a coworking space. I really like coffee shops, but not for more than a couple of hours otherwise I'll drink far too much coffee.

For the most part, I'll be working from my apartment.

The real trick is to ensure you're productive.

You will need to work if you want to create a decent income for yourself, so just follow the strategy that works for you. You can use a tool like Workfrom or Coworking Coffee for ideas on places nearby, and then go and get your work done.

## **DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR FAMILY**

This last one is really important, especially to re-integrate when you come home from your trip.

You need to put a consistent effort into maintaining your friendships and the relationships with your family. If you've never lived away from home the transition can be a shock, and it's normal to get a little bit homesick every now and then, especially around the holidays.

You can overcome this by keeping in touch.

I call my folks three or four times a week, for no reason other than just to say hi and see what they're up to. Skype has been awesome at helping me stay in touch, and don't be afraid to be the one to reach out and call the friends you haven't spoken to in a while. They'll appreciate it.

Becoming a digital nomad isn't for the faint of heart, but it's also getting easier and easier to do. There's so many benefits of living your life the way you want to, after experiencing this lifestyle I can't imagine ever doing it another way. You'll not catch me in an office anytime soon, unless of course they're one of my clients.