Globetrotting Digital Nomads:
The Future of Work or Too Good to Be True?\(^1\)
Beth Altringer, Ph.D.
Harvard University

A growing urge to make a change

Two years ago, Alex Pszczolkowski’s company collapsed. He was a software engineer in Warsaw, Poland. Instead of starting over locally, Alex left home to become a ‘digital nomad’, a new class of workers who combine travel and working from anywhere with an internet connection, and who give us a glimpse - both alluring and troubling - of the future of work. When faced with limited options at home, and an outlet to “escape the nine to five”, Alex set off for Bangkok. “I always knew that at some point in time, I’d like to travel the world with my laptop, experience life to the fullest, and yet maintain the technical skills without becoming rusty.”\(^2\)

About a year after Alex moved to Bangkok from Poland, Andy McLean, an ex-banker originally from New Zealand, left London to start a new venture. Instead of moving to Silicon Valley or New York, he ended up at a co-working space called Hubud, in Ubud on the tropical Indonesian island of Bali. Ubud, an inland town of around 30,000, is home to the famous Green School and also the setting of the ‘love’ section of Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestselling memoir, Eat Pray Love. Hubud’s local architecture, global marketing, and members-only speedy wifi make it a magnet for digital nomads. Its members come primarily from Europe and the United States and walk around in t-shirts with slogans like ‘Escape the City’ (a popular website that helps people leave their ‘9-5 prisons’). The enviably vacation-like photos that digital nomads share with friends back home make it seem like these workers have cracked the code to finding dream jobs. Andy, like many others, turned nomadic after years of frustration in his job pushed him to breaking point. He hoped to find more balance, and his search led him to Hubud.

Co-working spaces like Hubud have exploded in recent years. Nomads just starting out rely on online communities to decide where to go. While it’s hard to estimate how many people give up a permanent location and a traditional job to become digital nomads, some of the better-known online communities, like the Dynamite Circle or Nomadlist, have thousands of members. Nomadlist tracks a number of factors like internet speed, safety for solo travelers, weather, and air quality worldwide to determine ideal locations for its community. At the time of writing, two thirds of the top six Nomadlist

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\(^2\) http://blog.sailsoftware.co/2013/09/12/how-i-thought-i-wanted-to-become-a-digital-nomad.html
locations were in Thailand (the other two are Las Palmas, Canarias and Taghazout, Morrocco). Ubud scored 61% (compared to Bangkok’s 100% rating), docked for poor average internet speed and lack of air conditioning.

I met Andy when I started researching nomads last year. I traveled to Hubud and joined them as one more digital worker hunching over a laptop at the open-air bar with rice paddies stretching into the background, eating at the raw vegan cafe, and taking video calls while lounging on artisan bamboo furniture and bean bags. My interest in this community was piqued almost by accident. My work combines design, behavioral science and innovation and I kept hearing about Ubud. It seemed to be succeeding at two notoriously difficult city challenges related to my interests: it was home to a growing number of world-class sustainable design initiatives, and it was attracting a disproportionately large international startup community. This combination is so unusual that in 2014, I created an immersive course on it, taking students there in early 2015 to investigate how Ubud manages to attract both entrepreneurship and green design, and whether this is replicable elsewhere.

We met with entrepreneurs, coders, digital artists, consultants, coaches, and other professionals based there. Most of them worked independently, some formed location-independent teams, and some worked for larger companies that granted them the freedom to be anywhere. Most nomads we interviewed were quick to point out the benefits of working from anywhere, and on their own terms. We asked them about their lives, how they became nomadic, and their current work. We asked what works well about this lifestyle, and what is difficult. We asked whether it was working financially, and that’s where things started to get interesting. It was surprisingly hard to figure out how things added up.

So after the course, I launched a global survey focused on nomads’ financial planning with the help of one of my former students at Harvard, Daria Evdokimova. In early 2015, we began asking nomads (confidentially) whether they are earning and saving enough compared to responsible financial planning norms back home. I wanted to figure out if this is a viable career lifestyle, a subsidized holiday, or a relatively high-risk financial and career gamble. The study attracted hundreds of responses, and provides a rare glimpse at different types of nomads, and their respective income levels. Alex from Poland and Andy from London are real people who tracked their nomadic life on their blogs. To respect the confidentiality of study participants who have not written publicly about their experiences, I’ve changed their names and added an asterisk.

**Might working-while-traveling be the future of work?**

Several key trends are boosting the appeal of a life of working-while-traveling. Wifi access is improving dramatically even in remote regions. Fierce competition for digital talent, particularly in engineering, is giving some workers the power to decide to be based wherever they want as long as they
get their work done. The cost of living in many major cities is already exorbitant and continues to rise. And young people in particular are placing a higher priority on flexible professional lifestyles and personally meaningful work. What’s clear is that if pursuing a meaningful career while traveling the world is viable, who would not choose this option? If -- all else equal -- you could do just as well professionally, but with more autonomy, flexibility, and excitement outside of work, then surely nomads have cracked the code on work-life balance. The question is whether this promise is real, and if so, what it means for the future of work.

Companies and other researchers are noticing similar shifts in workplace trends toward more autonomous, project-based work. In their book, The Alliance, Reid Hoffman (LinkedIn founder), Ben Casnocha and Chris Yeh argue that we have moved from an era of lifetime employment to a period of free-agency-style work. They see work as increasingly “temporary, sporadic, and informal”, and argue that we should embrace this change. This shift, they argue, might help us create a more equal society, if everyone can start thinking of themselves as startups who work on a project-by-project basis. If every individual is a startup, they say, the ‘keeper’ of their career becomes more about his or her network than any particular employer and we should all focus on building useful, broad and deep networks.3

While intriguing, and perhaps inevitable, it’s not yet clear to me that a free-agent workforce will stymie growing inequality. It might exacerbate it. Despite Hoffman’s unbridled enthusiasm for a freelance future, it’s hard to see how it could be rosy for everybody, especially those who don’t work in tech. John Lilly, a Greylock Ventures colleague of Hoffman, for example, isn’t convinced that free-agent work will solve inequality. Rather, he thinks the middle class was a twentieth century anomaly: “There was no middle class, then there was a middle class, now we’re back where we started—it’s hollowed out. I don’t see where the middle class is going to come from.”4

If Hoffman’s view of the future - that free agency projects, an expanded network and tech skills will lead to greater income equality - is right, then digital nomadic lifestyle should work for those who are capable of it. Digital nomads may provide an early glimpse at what these shifts might mean for a tech-savvy middle class in the future. Nomads cobble together careers as entrepreneurs and freelancers, often prioritizing their own terms, and, while they want success like anyone else, they also seek balance and don’t at first glance seem to be cut from the same uber-ambitious cloth as the titans of Silicon Valley. The most successful nomads in our research have in-demand skills, have proven themselves already, and are finding their own definitions of a high quality of life.

A closer look at nomad demographics

3 http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/12/the-network-man
4 http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/12/the-network-man
Digital nomads aren’t just tourists. Most have been at it for at least three months (25%) and another 37% have been going for over a year. And they don’t go just anywhere; they go almost exclusively to places where living and running a business costs less. They primarily go back and forth between North America or Western Europe and South East Asia, and call at least two places ‘home’. Nomads are either self-employed or small business owners (75%), and most of them started with low cost businesses at home (less than $25,000 annual business costs). Even those nomads who are employees of companies based in their home countries gravitate toward lower-cost countries, thereby making their salaries more valuable. Salaries that would allow for a modest means in top global cities allow for living like royalty in nomad hubs like Indonesia and Thailand.

Typically, nomads opt for career tracks that are more flexible than those they left behind. Many consider themselves consultants and service providers in tech, media, online sales, finance or life coaching. Less than a fifth say they work in education, entertainment or manufacturing. Nomads rarely work in science, retail, healthcare, farming or the military.

When I started this research, I expected the bulk of digital nomads to be Millennials looking for more flexible and meaningful careers. Research suggests that today's college graduates are expected to stay in a job for less than three years, which is a significant shift away from careers spanning decades at the same company. Finding an ‘interesting’ job is something that 86 percent of Millennials are looking for, as well as having a ‘positive culture’, which is an important factor for 88 percent of young workers. Millennials are also redefining traveling. According to the UN’s estimates, 20% of all travelers (200,000,000 people) are young people. Since unemployment rates for this generation now are higher than they’ve ever been, many are not starting out with the option of a traditional career. The opportunity to work overseas as a teacher or freelancer while traveling full time looks almost too good to be true.

The study did show that a number of Millennials are on the road (34%), yet, contrary to expectations, nomads as a group were more mid-career than Millennial. The largest group among nomads were people like Andy - frustrated professionals in their 30’s (42%) - leaving corporate careers that they didn’t enjoy (often finance and consulting) and taking advantage of the fact that these careers had helped them build a cushion of financial security. When we asked what prompted the choice to go nomadic, the specific reasons differed, but the arc was strikingly similar. They had not enjoyed their work for a long

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7 http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/how-millennials-are-changing-international-travel/373007/
time, and a crisis - of identity, or relationship, or change of circumstance - nudged them to make a major change.

Living the Dream: The most successful nomads

The idea of working wherever your laptop and wifi can take you seems irresistible, as Prerna Gupta, a Bay-Area tech entrepreneur explained in a piece for Vogue about her experience. Who wouldn’t want “a life driven by experience and adventure, not by a desire for more things?” She and her husband and business partner, Parag, took the leap to nomadic work when they began to fight at home, and began to question why. “We never used to fight,” she says. “In trying to understand what was making us so unhappy, we found ourselves reminiscing about a trip we’d taken when we were still living in Atlanta to a sleepy surf town in Costa Rica. We’d met people who traveled from place to place, staying for weeks or months at a time, moving on a whim, whenever fancy would strike.”9 The couple decided that if they scaled back radically on expenses, they, too, could live and work in paradise.

Their plan, like many in our study, was straightforward and idealistic. The two had amassed enough savings to last a few years and began to dream of writing books together, taking surf lessons, and having more free time. They didn’t know if they’d come back to traditional work later, or stay nomads forever, living off the sales of their yet-to-be-written book. Initially, the change was exactly what they wanted. They spent a month in a communal beach house in Sri Lanka. Their social life felt freer and easier than it had in years. The painstaking planning required to schedule dinner with friends in San Francisco was replaced by frequent, fun and spontaneous socializing with new friends and fellow working travelers who steered conversations toward sunsets and surf and away from work. It’s unclear whether work went so well. They tried to work on hammocks on beaches, emulating the nomads they’d met before. The intensity of the sunshine made it difficult to put in long hours of writing. Days rolled into weeks and soon months. The dream of writing books together never quite materialized; but they found success in other ways. They raised enough funds to hire a small team for their budding ‘narrative technology’ business, Telepathic, which at the time of writing was still in stealth mode. They moved back to the Bay Area to grow the company, telling themselves they’d maintain some of the balanced mindset from their time as nomads, that they’d keep costs low and “focus on the right things this time.”10

The upper-income bracket from our study consists of three groups: independent finance professionals, serial entrepreneurs (Prerna would fit this group) and elite software engineers. While as a whole, this bracket brings in $8000 per month on average (typical for the elite engineers in the study), a

10 Ibid.
tiny portion – mostly independent financiers and unusually successful serial entrepreneurs – brings in much more ($25,000 - $50,000 per month). Unsurprisingly, high earning nomads have minimal debt.

The very highest earners in the upper-income group aren’t much like the others. They express different motivations for this lifestyle than other nomads. Take Barry* from San Francisco in the study, a business owner now based in Asia, who seeks an advantageous tax situation and advises others like him to do the same: “Set yourself up to live tax free. Get a residence in a territorial tax country that has limited cost and time requirements. If you're American, renounce your citizenship. Only maintain one home not many at the same time.” There is nothing new about what Barry is doing; location-independent finance professionals have lived a lifestyle that looks a lot like digital nomadism before there was a term for it.

The next highest earning subgroup of the upper-income nomads is more varied, but many are serial entrepreneurs or were early employees of very successful companies. They describe their experience much like Prerna. Some actively earn money from their nomadic work; but most are earning from outside sources and investments. For many, digital nomadism is less like a long-term career move, and more like a creative break or a mid-career version of a gap year that college students often take before committing to long-term plans. Those in this group who do stick with nomadism usually find ways to earn enough locally for their lifestyle to pay for itself so they can keep their savings in the bank. Prerna, like comparable examples in our data, enjoyed more work-life balance and a rekindled romance with her husband and business partner. However, within months, professional ambitions lured the couple back to the Bay Area to grow another company.

The most interesting subgroup of high-earning nomads include highly sought-after salaried employees of tech companies who have arranged to work from anywhere, and elite freelance coders represented by talent firms like 10x Management (a Bay Area technical talent agency trying to kill the 40-hour work week). Many in this group have made nomadic work their long-term lifestyle. This subgroup is not always moving to different countries; there are plenty who choose to work remotely inside their home country. Altay Guvench, co-founder of 10x, says that most of the people that 10x represents are independent (rather than salaried) and in fact his agency doesn’t do full-time placements. Sometimes, he says, “We'll sign someone who's currently employed and we'll help them transition to freelance, or a part-time gig turns into a full-time or equity position, but in general we exist to make freelancing a more viable work option.”

Altay distinguishes between travel-oriented and other 10x placements. The agency only represents about a dozen working travelers, like one who recently spent two months at Clown College just for fun. Most of their talent pool wants to work remotely “in the comfort of their home or coffee shops, schedule work around peak creative times (e.g., the middle of the night), or raise kids without
disappearing to an office for most of the day.” Altay argues that this level of autonomy is “even more valuable than the paycheck,” and notes that he also hears this from Uber drivers. Instead of following the default 40-hour workweek and norms of traditional office life, 10x Management helps top talent find and maintain the ‘freedom to hack’. In their manifesto, they offer an “infinite runway” where “you can create and iterate as much as you want, without burning through your savings.” To make this easy to do from anywhere, the agency provides elite tech freelancers only as much structure as they need (including help with mentorship, office space, on-demand domain-specific help (legal, technical), educational opportunities, business and personal development and perks (laundry, massages, food). For those who need it, 10x helps connect them to investors, co-founders and employees. The agency clearly solves many of the pains of digital nomadic work, but only caters to top tier tech talent.

The last type of nomad in the upper-income category actually makes little to no income, but has enough savings that it doesn’t matter. Making money is seldom a primary goal; the plan is to dip into savings initially, and, soon after, earn enough to pay local bills and leave savings in the bank. They are categorized as upper-income because their lifestyle appears the same as those who earn much more. Their story starts out much like Prema’s. One example is Andy, who we met earlier at Hubud, who logged his progress in Bali on his blog. Andy helped finance multiple small local projects including the Songan water pipeline for a local village. He made an effort to integrate with the local community more than any other nomads we met. This alone made his extended break worthwhile, but it didn’t feel like real work to him. He wrote about missing the comfort of traditional work: “I have been out of... my profession for what feels a very long time now. Without the natural, and often taken-for-granted, support structures of employment, I have really had to fend for myself. I’ve missed these things. It hasn’t always gone well. It’s usually been a confusing time. One moment I’ve had clarity, then something else has come along and caused distraction.” Andy started out committed to escaping corporate life, yet grew increasingly frustrated with the uncertainties of nomadic life.

Subsidized vacation or serious work?

Upper-income nomads make working from anywhere look lucrative and laid back. Rich may be great, but for those outside of the upper-income tier of nomads, easier work is not always a blessing. After Alex Pszczolkowski had been working from Bangkok for his Polish clients for two months, he began to see his jobs reduced to smaller and less interesting challenges. Instead of landing opportunities to design websites from scratch, he got hired to maintain and modify existing websites. Yes, he was getting to travel and seek adventures and work to offset his expenses, but he was struggling to meet his third goal of keeping his technical skills at the top of their game.
Alex, like Prerna, returned home, but instead of glorifying nomadism as she did in an article she wrote for Vogue, Alex wrote in his blog about two intractable problems with nomadic work, both of which came up repeatedly in the research. The first problem was the difficulty in getting gigs as challenging as he would have gotten back home in Poland. He could pay his bills, but that wasn’t enough for career planning. He began to feel “a constant feeling of underachievement and wasting time.” The second problem was the “illusion of location independence”. Sure, he could in theory work from anywhere in the world, but to be sufficiently productive, he needed reliable internet, a quiet and comfortable location that enabled him to focus, and easy access to activities he enjoyed, like a decent gym, without the added hurdles of the administrative logistics of finding new places all the time. Alex says he “found out the hard way that creative, meaningful work requires some routine. Changing your location once a week, working from benches, hammocks, cafes, bars and hostel floors is a cool way to fund your vacation, but it certainly doesn’t help you when tackling hard programming problems.”  

At the bottom end of the high-income bracket of nomads, sits a group of quality, reliable software engineers like Alex and a few of the more successful of the online marketers. One example from the study is Jeff*, a tech entrepreneur in our study from London who is now based in Southeast Asia. Jeff’s story starts out a lot like Alex’s. He encounters the same difficulties, and nonetheless wants to stay nomadic. Jeff makes $1100 per month, sometimes more. He knows he’s unlikely to get rich as a nomad, at least by UK standards. This profile is common amongst long-term nomads at this income level. Jeff has a simple approach to his career: “we live in a global virtual workplace now. Go where you are happiest and [life is] cheapest.” Nomadic work seems to work fine for people like Jeff as long as ambition for bigger projects and family pressures don’t push them back home.

As we get into the middle and lower-middle income levels in the dataset, we also encounter more debt (nearly 60% carried over $60,000 in debt), and this is where nomadism as a career choice seems most precarious. The most common careers at the lower end of the income spectrum were in online sales and marketing, life coaching and blogging. Many in this group cite Tim Ferris’ Four Hour Work Week as their lifestyle inspiration. One of the more successful examples that matches our data is Johannes, an online marketer from Germany who set up his venture in South Africa. He initially turned nomadic to force himself to avoid a traditional career track. In Germany, he says, the salaries were ‘too tempting’. He didn’t want good salaries to lure him into a typical nine to five job in tourism. In Cape Town, the financial situation felt less risky. He could afford to take an entrepreneurial route because he “needed less

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12 http://www.webworktravel.com/become-digital-nomad/
money to enjoy a good quality of life.” But, as was the case for Alex, wifi was seldom as reliable as he needed, especially in beautiful spots, and it was always difficult to focus amidst throngs of happy travelers.

Like Alex, Prerna, and Andy, Johannes became nomadic following a life crisis (a breakup). He sought refuge in travel and enough work to pay the bills. Inspired by Susi Mai’s kiteboarding video, he kicked off in the Philippines, and chose subsequent locations based on kitesurfing opportunities. Johannes loved it for two years. Then, like so many others, the productivity challenges of nomadic life began to wear on him. Unlike Alex, Andy and Prerna, Johannes persisted with nomadic work. Instead of year-round nomadism, he chose a base for six months of the year (in Terifa, Spain) and launched WebWorkTravel, an online destination and lifestyle guide that connects other nomads.

A cottage industry for dealing with mid-life changes

Despite the inevitable realization that it is hard to stay productive as a digital nomad, their numbers continue to grow. Perhaps this is because nomadism almost always starts with a fantasy that untethered work might lessen the stress of mounting adult responsibilities, and usher in an easier, more connected, joyful life. It’s a compelling dream, and there is a lively cottage industry of nomads - coaches, bloggers, event organizers - who fund their lifestyle by teaching others how to be nomads. This group is mostly 25-35, single, based in resort-style (as opposed to urban) locations, and became nomadic following an epiphany moment where they left a highly constrained personal or professional situation to move to a co-working space by the beach. Their financials were the hardest to figure out, and our data suggest that most do not earn enough from life coaching or blogging to do well financially. Those who do well appear to earn income from additional jobs, like teaching yoga or English, or outside sources. We observed tension between this group of nomads, and those in other industries who sometimes resent nomads they see as ‘selling’ their lifestyle via scenes of bikini-clad yoga, fresh smoothies by the beach, and posed shots in outdoor co-working spaces. One participant describes the frustration: “They post pictures of themselves lying around on the beach, and then my clients start thinking that I’m less reliable if I’m a digital nomad.” The tension may be inevitable. Bloggers and coaches get disproportionate attention because their work is very public. It’s also the entry point to nomadism for many people.

Andy who we met at the start of this research in Hubud wasn’t looking for a life coach, but he did begin his journey after a mid-career crisis. He wanted a change. I keep coming back to Andy because, though the details differ, his nomadic journey, age and income matched the most common story in our data. After deciding to go remote, Andy signed up for a startup program in Bali hosted by Tribewanted, a network that runs programs in places like Papa New Guinea, Fiji, Sierra Leone, and rural Italy. Andy was

13 http://www.webworktravel.com/become-digital-nomad/
inspired by Tribewanted co-founder, Ben Keene, who had once asked “I wonder if I can rent an island?” And then did so in Fiji.

Andy felt reassured by Ben when they first connected. “The first time I spoke to Ben was over Skype last year and when we got to the dreaded ‘what do you want to do’ question, he immediately put me at ease by saying something to the effect of “it’s not important right now, we can work on that”.” Once on-site in Bali, Ben continued to impress Andy so much that he listed him as one of the four most influential people in his life this year (the fifth was Andy himself). Delighted as he was by Ben, Andy was struggling to narrow down his startup ideas, and struggling to keep up his blog about his startup. When it wasn’t going very well, he pushed himself harder, yet felt unable to establish a productive routine. He described feeling “desperately lonely at times.” A month later, he promoted his startup, Startup Bank Challenge, on a global banking podcast. Though excited that his idea seemed to interest people, he could not quite get it off the ground: “I need customers and it’s [sic] not started well. I only have three confirmed lads to join the team. As usual, there’s a lot of talk and not enough substance. It also questions my real motivation for this project.”

**Sometimes success means going home**

Andy never found the new business partner and the career clarity he sought. Within months, he called it quits on his startup blog. In his final blog post, he writes: “I’ve decided to stop writing this ‘startup’ blog because I don’t have a startup... this experiment is not working for me. It’s nearly six months since I arrived in Bali and I’ve not yet found a project that has captured me – one where I can spend lots of time on it with someone that shares a similar vision. Maybe I was deluded in thinking there would be more people like me here in Bali.”

What surprised me most about Andy (and others like him in the study) was how he portrayed digital nomad life with startling candor compared to other descriptions I had read. He wrote about how this was not an economic success for him, that the experience was thought-provoking but did not live up to his hopes, and that he was leaving with little more clarity than when he arrived. What puzzled me even more is that as a nomad Andy seemed to lose, rather than gain, confidence in his skills: “If I am ever asked what my skills and strengths are, I always say to lead and motivate. Here though, I’ve not managed that.” He had hoped to create a website linking local business owners (who neither speak English well nor have digital skills) in a way that would appeal to tourists. Andy spoke to everyone who would listen - to Bule, Balinese, nomads, Hubud, Tribewanted. He couldn’t get traction. “I’ve had no success. And, I

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14 [https://medium.com/@HappyDaysInBali/why-i-am-already-in-love-81f9e46ae6fd#qehyz0gdw](https://medium.com/@HappyDaysInBali/why-i-am-already-in-love-81f9e46ae6fd#qehyz0gdw)
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17 [https://balistartup.wordpress.com/2015/03/22/closing-this-experiment/](https://balistartup.wordpress.com/2015/03/22/closing-this-experiment/)
actually don’t know what the reason is. What I know for certain though is that the constant is me. So, it’s my failure.... I am lucky to have relative financial freedom, enough to have a go at this experiment. But, there comes a point where one has to be honest with oneself and ask the hard question: What am I getting out of all this and where is it all heading?”

Andy, like Prerna, and Alex (but not Johannes), returned home within the year I’ve been researching nomads. He continues to meet up with like-minded folks, past and current nomads, in the London area. Like Prerna, Andy is determined to not to lose sight of the priorities that nudged him into nomadism.

**How viable is a digital nomadic future of work?**

The allure of a more adventurous lifestyle unconstrained by traditional work places and schedules is clear. It is also clear that to make it work requires overcoming a number of serious and under-represented challenges: slower career development, the illusion of independence, the uncertainty of freelancing, the high administrative cost of constantly planning travel and work and basic living, a perception that nomads may be less serious about their work, and a lack of traditional employment support structures (e.g., professional feedback, external financial incentives, administrative support, work friends, and various safety nets that can pick up the slack if something goes wrong). These challenges affected all of the income groups we studied; the most notable difference between the groups is that those in higher income categories can better afford to absorb these career risks.

The more time that my research assistant and I spent time with nomads the more we began to question the viability of this lifestyle for most people. On average, nomads make around $1000 USD a month, which at first glance, goes very far in a low-cost location. But this $1000 average doesn’t tell the full story. It is heavily skewed by exceptionally high earners, which hides the fact that the majority of nomads are making very modest salaries, not saving adequately for the future, and consistently struggling to keep their skills at a level that will allow them to return home where they left off. Most nomads who aren’t top web developers take significant salary cuts. It’s exciting that many nomads are able to finance their current lifestyles in low-cost locations, but few are saving for the future. The nomads in our study saved 17% less as nomads than they did back home, and this decrease was offset almost entirely by an increase in spending on food, travel and hobbies as nomads.

The tricky part of deciding whether to leap into location independence is that there is so much promotion out there, yet very little real information about what it will cost you -- both financially and in terms of foregone alternatives like skills you would have gained back home. It helps to start out like Prerna or Andy, privileged enough to have a cushion to afford an extended break, regardless of whether it
makes economic sense. No doubt this is why nearly all nomads move from the developed world to less expensive places where their home currency is worth much more than what the local population makes.

I set out to explore digital nomadism as one possible future of work – one that might, like Hoffman’s vision of a free-agent workforce, set us all free to be startup versions of ourselves. It turns out that most active nomads will move back home once the initial excitement of travel wears off. While not for everyone, career nomadism can be viable for some people, especially elite programmers, financiers and other professionals willing to accept the inherent challenges of life on the road or lucky enough to have a support system to offset these.

Many committed nomads are creating spaces and services to support other nomads, adding to a network of affordable, adventuresome, balmy, high speed internet hotspots like Hubud. As nomads circulate from hub to hub, they belong more to this global nomadic community than to any local community they visit. The allure of all this is understandable, but it leaves me with an unsettling question: if digital nomadism works best for those who can already afford to buffer its risks, what does it mean if the tech savvy freelancing middle class of wealthy countries work remotely from poorer countries where they can jump a few rungs up the class ladder compared to the local population? If digital nomads are indeed a laboratory for the future of work, I’m inclined to agree with John Lilly: I don’t see where the next-generation middle class is going to come from.