

Out of the Office



© Pete Cass



Just another day at the office: Melissa Ng (left) runs her design studio MELEWI from a mountain in Bali, Indonesia. Designer and entrepreneur Mark Stephen Meadows (top right) hitchhikes in Mexico with his dingy. Studio Swine (bottom right) sets sail in the North Atlantic Gyre, harvesting plastic waste and melting it for crafts with a Solar Extruder, an onboard device the studio designed.

This story comes with a warning, especially for those of you with a full-time job: upon reading this, you may experience restlessness, envy, heartache, irritation—and possibly an overwhelming sense of resentment about your daily commute. You may find yourself daydreaming about exotic locales and a carefree, untethered life.

On second thought, perhaps that's not so much a warning as a promise: you will daydream, and that may be exactly the right thing to do. Working remotely—very remotely, in some cases—is becoming increasingly practicable for creatives, and many who have taken this wide-ranging path now describe themselves using the popular collective moniker “nomads.” Increasingly, designers, illustrators and others are working from far-flung locations, whether based on the needs of the project or their own desire to wander. Technology is a key factor in enabling this lifestyle, of course. In addition to the digital platforms built to ease workflow in any workspace, such as Slack and Mural.ly, a clutch of new networks has sprung up. These networks serve the specific needs of those who, rather than making the daily trek to the office, are taking their laptops to, say, a boat in rural Vietnam.

That's not an implausible example of a creative nomad's workplace. In fact, it's one of the many places where Singaporean designer Melissa Ng has worked over the past few years. Ng, 25, has run her design studio, MELEWI, from Australia, Japan, Mexico, France, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the aforementioned boat in Vietnam, to name just a few. Her favorite work locale to date?

“Sydney, sitting just in front of the Harbor Bridge and the Opera House. I must have looked very odd grinning maniacally as I was hacking away at my laptop.” MELEWI, which focuses on user experience (ux), user interface (ui) and product design, comprises a team of designers who are based in Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and Greece.

Such a dispersed model is not unique to Ng's team. Designer Laila von Alvensleben, 30, works with Hanno, a ux design studio that numbers Uber among its startup clients. Hanno's designers also rove the globe. Von Alvensleben is based in London and has traveled to Brazil, Argentina and Switzerland while working for Hanno. “All our collaboration and communication happens online across different time zones,” she notes. “Saying that we use more online tools than the average design team is an understatement.” Also hailing from London, Alexander Groves, 31, and Azusa Murakami, 30, co-owners of multidisciplinary and nomadic design firm Studio Swine, have worked in cities ranging from Dubai to Paris. Their travel informs their diverse projects, which have included commissions from Microsoft and Swarovski: “The change helps [us] get a fresh perspective—less in a bubble and more global.”

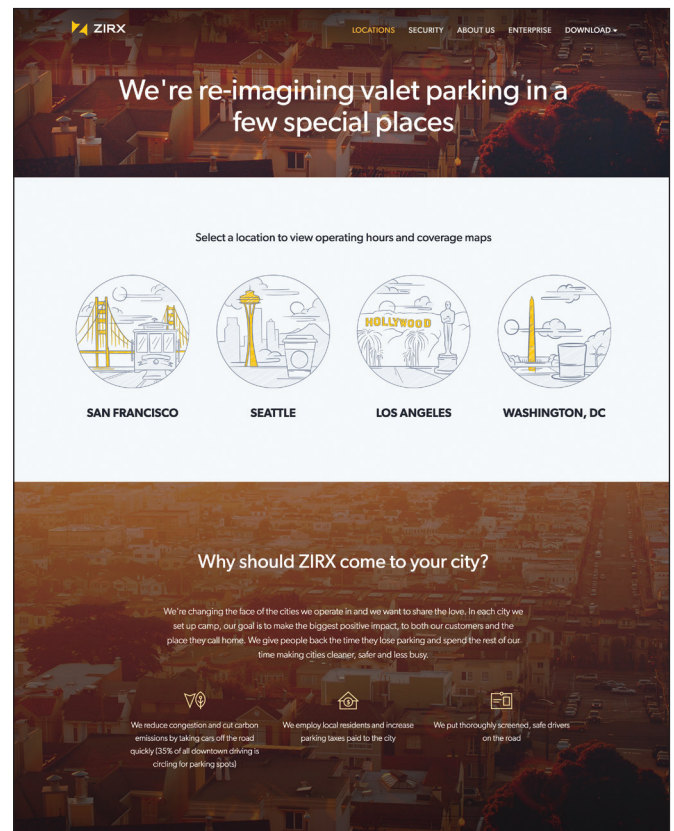
All of these designers represent a version of the nomadic lifestyle, which is hardly uniform. Youjin Do, a journalist from South Korea who has been working on a documentary about nomads, notes, “Some people travel 25 percent of the year and stay in one city the rest of the year. Others travel every two to three months. The key [factor] is that they have the freedom to choose where

they work and live regardless of where their company or source of income is located.”

A couple of other commonalities are noticeable among the nomads described here: they are all millennials (or close to it), and their work is largely tech oriented. These qualities are true of many creative nomads, but not all. Take, for example, Mark Stephen Meadows, 47, who has been working remotely ever since his flight to San Francisco from Paris was canceled on September 12, 2001. The American designer and entrepreneur, who founded two startups geared toward the design and implementation of avatars, has worked largely from his sailboat over the last decade, journeying to Mexico, Central America and Panama. He admits that the boat has its drawbacks—the main one being poor Internet access—but he also says he has probably done some of his “best invention” there. Jean Jullien, at 31, fits the description of a footloose millennial, but as a successful illustrator and designer whose recent projects include a clothing line, an animated series and skateboard designs, he’s living proof that serving the tech sector is not a requisite for the nomadic life. Jullien has traveled extensively of late; when contacted for this article, he had just returned from Hong Kong, one of five locations he had visited in the course of a month. He doesn’t label himself as a nomad, but says, “I travel a lot for work and holidays, and I enjoy the fact that we live in a day and age where that is compatible with a professional practice such as mine.”

Like so many other global freelancers, Jullien’s way of life has been enhanced by online networks. He says, “I always carry my sketchbook, which is more of a visual diary. I share it on social media, and this usually leads to people seeing that I’m in their country and very kindly getting in touch and offering to show me around.” Naturally, Twitter and Facebook are go-to platforms for nomads—there are Facebook groups dedicated to the digital nomad lifestyle—and there is also a subreddit where nomads share experiences and pose questions about essentials like freelance visas and insurance. The last few years have seen the rise of websites and networks that cater exclusively to nomadic workers. Making It Anywhere offers tools, support and a blog aimed at “anywhereists” who want to run their own businesses from the location of their choice; and NuNomad presents “nomadic destination guides” and features interviews with nomads working in a range of fields, including graphic design.

The platforms that most nomads cited when asked about their favorite online resources were Nomad List and #Nomads. These are both the creations of startup entrepreneur Pieter Levels—better known online by the handle @levelsio—who is something of a star in the nomad universe. Two years ago, Levels, now 29, left his hometown of Amsterdam to explore Asia for nine months. “As I was traveling,” he recalls, “I discovered that I liked places with certain characteristics,” naming nice weather, friendly people, affordable hotels and a fast Internet connection. He



It’s not all fun and games. Even as they work from picturesque destinations, these designers craft serious work. Laïla von Alvensleben contributed to the design of this website for ZIRX, an on-demand valet parking service based in San Francisco.

made a spreadsheet with information about a list of cities, shared it on Twitter, then watched as others began to add data on everything from weather to Internet speed. In the summer of 2014, Levels built Nomad List, a site based on the database, and it quickly gained recognition in the startup and nomad worlds alike. Last summer, the site reached the first page of Reddit—arguably the highest echelon of Internet fame.

With the success of Nomad List under his belt, Levels created other online products aimed at his nomadic base: Taylor, a digital personal assistant software that can feed information about a city to a newly arrived nomad, and Remote | ok, which aggregates remote job listings. Levels’s chat site #Nomads, which he launched just a few months after Nomad List, has 3,500 members (at the time of writing) who share nomad experiences and tips.

Most remarkable about Levels’s platforms is their ability to cultivate community across a group that is, by definition, disparate and mobile. He notes that #Nomads has “spurred relationships, and our meet-ups have let people that used to be alone in a city meet other digital nomads. It’s also got people together who are now building startups. Just bringing people together will always result in interesting stuff happening. It’s human.”



Illustrator and designer Jean Jullien's fancy-free lifestyle influences his work, with its uninhibited approach and jubilant style. He posted these three illustrations to Instagram from the Grecian island of Ithaca: a man reads by the seaside in an illustrated collage (left); a flamenco dancer wears a dress made of rose petals (center); and swimmers limber up before diving in (right).

Nobody understands that truth better than Justin Gignac and Adam Tompkins. They're the founders of the creative freelancer platform Working Not Working, which makes a select group of creatives' profiles available to a roster of potential clients. The two advertising creative directors started the network in 2012 with "300 of the best freelancers we knew." They now boast a stable of 5,000 that includes photographers, illustrators (including Jullien), animators, directors, and ux and ui designers, along with more than 230 client members. Through events like their Drinking Not Drinking soirees, where members get the chance to meet in person, Gignac and Tompkins hope to provide some of the workplace camaraderie that freelancers may miss. Gignac says, "One thing we realized about being independent: the freedom's great, and being able to work wherever you want, that's really great. It's also really lonely. Part of what we're trying to do for the community is to get people together so they're not as alone and have people to bounce ideas off of." The opportunities to socialize are proving fruitful for Working Not Working's members. "Collaborations are happening organically," Gignac says. "People are coming to our events, and they're meeting other people... And then they're collaborating and just making cool shit happen."

Connecting has obvious benefits for all workers; but having general control over the balance between working and, well, not working, seems even more essential to a lifestyle that fosters creatives' productivity. Meadows, asked about how a flexible work situation affects his process, noted recently, "I'm delivering some work for a client today, and it was in taking yesterday off that I had some of my best ideas for this project. Doing things that have nothing to do with work gives me the room to invent novel work solutions when I least expect it." Traveling at will can boost creativity and shape projects as well. Jullien says, "I never get as much inspiration as when I'm traveling. ... I get inspired by whatever is around me. What I did in Hong Kong a couple of weeks ago is

very different from what I did in Norway last weekend or France this week." Ng is even more emphatic about creatives' need to work outside traditional boundaries, geographic or otherwise. "We refuse to work in a traditional client-agency setting," she says. "That's essentially working in a silo, and a product, website or app should never be designed in a silo." Gignac puts it best, if wryly: "Creatives as a whole are very delicate little flowers: you have to put them wherever they're best to grow. So if a creative is an amazing illustrator, and they like working from a beach, cool. Or if they like working from their apartment, or a coffee shop or a park, then do that."

Research seems to support the notion that, in general, a worker who chooses his or her environment is a happy worker. A study conducted by Nicholas Bloom, PhD, a professor of economics at Stanford University, suggests that employees allowed to work from home are more productive. Granted, Bloom's subjects worked at a call center, and in the *Harvard Business Review*, he noted, "More research needs to be done on creative work." Still, his findings are paralleled by those of a recent Gallup report, which found that employees who spend some time working remotely actually log more hours and are more engaged than their office-bound counterparts.

Will this data encourage more employers and clients to hire creative nomads? There certainly seems to be incentive for them to do so, primarily as a means of attracting and keeping a cutting-edge team. "Nowadays, remote working is the best benefit that a company can offer to talented people," Do says. Gignac agrees: "To be able to allow your employees, whether they're creative or not, to have that flexibility, is only going to help you lure the best talent." He adds, "[Companies] that aren't figuring it out are going to have a really hard time keeping up with everybody." Agencies and other employers take note: it's time to begin rethinking what your workforce will look like—and where it will be—in the near future. Creatives: feel free to start dreaming. [ca](#)