

What Does it Mean to be a Digital Nomad?

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Nomads experience this radical freedom: they travel *because* they do not know what they will find. They are distinct from tourists wanting a picture of the Eiffel tower, and different from religious and spiritual travelers seeking redemption at Mecca, or awareness on the Peyote desert of northern Mexico. For all of them, the reason to go was established before they left.

By discovering their trip's meaning after arriving, nomads reverse the conventional relationship between journey and destination. Instead of going somewhere to be there, the destination is only there as a way to justify and orient the going. Practically, there are strategies for achieving this commitment to what does not yet exist. Buying the cheapest air ticket currently available to a capital city on a separate continent is a kind of random location generator, and so a way of going without expectations. Desktop globes can be spun as geographic roulette. Regardless, it is not about the randomness, but that every method initiating nomadic traveling traces back to a single incentive: finding a way to shift the purpose from the beginning to the end.

The paradigmatic nomad

A century after her death, Isabelle Eberhardt's story is widely shared as a precursor to today's swirling gender ambiguities. Before she became a symbol though, she was history's paradigmatic nomad because she incarnated what is at stake when the reason for going is filled by the going itself. She was born into minor aristocracy on her mother's side, and into the learned idiosyncrasy of her father, who was a tutor, anarchist, and daring adulterer. Eberhardt studied languages and cultures intensely, travelled to Algeria at twenty, and died there in a

flashflood at 27. A life that initiated with privilege and opportunity ended in anguish: she perished nearly toothless and married to an Algerian foot soldier with no prospects.

She “went native,” that would be one way to capture her time exploring the geography, religions, and cultures of north Africa. Less sentimentally, she had no return to her past. The French administration in Africa refused to acknowledge her, at least publicly. She had no relatives or home to welcome her back to Switzerland. She had no money to get back even if she tried.

The significance is not that she ended up impoverished and nearly alone, but how she got that way. This is the critical aspect: for her, traveling consumed the traveler. As European women were restricted legally and culturally from journeying alone in northern Africa, she shaved her hair and used clothes to convert her bony frame into that of a young man. From there, free voyaging can be traced through her short autobiographical narratives recounting the trip’s cultural and religious explorations. An extensive list of transformations accumulated. Besides briefly becoming a man in appearance and in name, Si Mahmoud Saadi, she also exiled herself from expatriate gathering places. She adopted the local dietary habits. She learned the rules of desert survival. She experimented with a series of Islamic faiths and ultimately adhered to a remote and mystical sect of Sufism where her devotion and prominence as a believer was sufficient to warrant an assassination attempt by a rival sect.

Studies produced by Stanford University have revealed the potential for online avatars to modify the real-world behaviors of their users. The idea is that users imitate and then become their avatars instead of the other way around. What is most notable about Eberhart’s travels is that she was *her own* avatar. To explore Africa she needed to project herself with modified dress, habits, and beliefs. It may be that initially those superficial presentations disguised who she was, or stood in for her like a character she played, but eventually the role absorbed her.

About personal identity, Nietzsche prominently declared that under every mask, there is another mask, meaning that every psychological attempt to divine our true selves reveals a superficial representation hiding something else underneath. Nomadism accepts the logic but runs it the other way: on top of every mask, another can be placed, and that presented self *becomes* the genuine self. It

becomes an identity as true and authentic as any other that can be found underneath, or before, or left behind.

Ultimately, what makes Eberhard paradigmatic is that she exposed herself to her voyage. She allowed the habits and values that the trip required to literally define who and what she was. The journey – not the person taking the trip – was the dedication. As it happened, the trip went poorly, and while better outcomes are always possible, her experience also teaches that there are no guarantees, there is no certainty that the emergent identity will be broader or wiser or happier. What comes next may well be narrow and miserable. There is no way to know until it is too late.

The defining characteristics of the nomad:

- The reason for traveling is not knowing what to expect
- The trip's purpose is determined after going
- The traveler's personal identity absorbs the trip's demands

Obstacles to nomadism today

Before digital reality streamed employees around the globe, traveling to a different place for an extended stay required getting a job there. The project sunk travelers into the fouler depths of their new city: the exploitation of off-the-books waiters paid in cash at the end of the night, the informal merchandising, the illicit services. There was usually personal debasement, but it always had the virtue of providing valuable lessons about the locals, about who they were, how they acted, what they wanted. There are few more effective ways to gain exposure to others than to be humiliated by them.

Getting the work visa for legitimate employment proved nearly as enlightening. A few passport-sized photos and a gritty lawyer who knew how to expedite the paperwork got the process started. The requisite bribery in some cities cost more money and patience than in others, but once the oily logic of the particular bureaucracy was learned, the experience always proved worth the effort not only by providing a step out of exploitation, but also because the habits of the bureaucrats typically illuminate a culture's unwritten rules.

Today's nomads arriving with computers and credit cards instead of journals and cash are different at that critical moment. For them, the question of economic survival is more about calculation than adaptation and hope. Part of the reason

digital nomads congregate in Porto and in Lisbon is that Portugal combines the decadence and cost-of-living of a third world-country, but with low crime, and a resident visa exempting all income earned outside the country from taxation. There is an upfront cost to be paid, but it can be a good purchase for those drop-boxing deliverables to the US from a stone-walled, 18th century apartment. With a few additional administrative acrobatics, the result can be nearly zero taxation, which works for most people.

It is also true, though, that foreignness is stripped away from the experience when it is no longer necessary to wring cash out of the new culture. While it is true that nomads do not travel to make money, it is also true that making money is the among the most direct routes to nomadic traveling.

A wider divergence between the pre- and post-digital nomads opens on the level of personal information. It used to be that traveling automatically severed identifying data: in the new city there was no one to know about a traveler's previous tastes and experiences. Today, the website PimEyes will take any pictured face and return the URLs where it has appeared. The links can go back years, chaining travelers to homes, jobs, beliefs, friends and lovers. Anyone who goes abroad to experiment with new ways of living, that means, is always only one iPhone snap away from being unmasked, from being returned to the person they used to be. Then there is LinkedIn constantly reminding users of their accrued professional interests. Facebook occasionally sends old pictures into the current feed. So, the attempt to cut away from our own personal information and bend into the rules and practices of a new culture is constantly sabotaged by the threat of who we have been.

Probably, it is easier than ever to travel, but current technologies also make it proportionately more difficult to depart from our own pasts. So, obstacles to nomadism today are:

- Calculation replaces adaptation at the departure
- Personal information traps travelers in places – and as people – they have already been

Personal information and identity today

In 2017, Gizmodo reported on a multiple personality Facebook user. She existed nocturnally as an escort arranging trysts online through a discrete account under an assumed name. At the same time and on the same platform she maintained a

more ordinary, daytime identity associated with her birthname and a long history of posts detailing the kind of user social media companies seek: steady, conventional, predictable.

The split realities kept their distance until her day self and her night clients began appearing in each other's "People You May Know" recommendations. Besides knotting the dual-track lifestyle and triggering nervous Google searches, the crossed wires left behind this lesson. While it may be true that the split identities eventually collapsed together online, it is also certain that the same technology tracking users' data and binding them to their own pasts can be twisted against itself, at least temporarily. Despite the Facebook demand for authenticity, creative users find ways on the platform to become someone they were not supposed to be according to their own prior personal information.

Distinct platforms will be vulnerable to different strategies. Dating applications can be perverted to suggest partners who would never cross our paths in material life. LinkedIn algorithms can be corrupted by adding marginal biographical information. It is always possible to cruise through social media sites trying to provoke offbeat connections and links. With some serendipity, a freelancing programmer may end up on a project that leads to a corporate post in the Danish welfare state. A feminist paralegal could end up purchasing a headscarf and a one-way ticket to an English-teaching job in Saudi Arabia. Regardless, life-jarring opportunities are out there, and the personal information that all of us wield online can be hacked to tilt the algorithms and produce deviant possibilities.

For humanism, the twentieth century was about authenticity. The time belonged to Martin Heidegger and to the phenomenologists and existentialists who emerged from the horrors of two world wars. They proposed that the human condition demanded personal integrity in the literal sense of indivisibility. The project of philosophy was fidelity to ourselves as individuals whose resilient uniqueness endured through time, and was guaranteed by the fact of dying alone: only I can die for myself, and I must always be true to that one who will die. Though he is unaware of it, these thinkers are the reason Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg converted digital technology into ethics: "The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are ending. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."

The existence of digital nomads labors against this sentiment, against the idea that we have only one true self, against the idea that we have an ethical responsibility to be true to that one self, against the philosophy of the twentieth century, and against the social media technology of the early 21st.

Because nomadism today means working against technology from within it, the conflicted reality of traveling life repeats on the level of personal identity. It has never been easier – or harder – to get out of who we are, to disrupt our existences from the bottom up by connecting with and nurturing unfamiliar tastes, urges, and potentials. It has never been easier – or harder – to go somewhere different and become someone else.

What does it mean to be a digital nomad?

Pure nomadism is impossible for digitally mobile workers because it requires going native. As a practical matter, the customs, values, and beliefs discovered in a foreign place cannot consume travelers who are maintaining a regular job back home with set hours and expected behaviors.

But the digitally nomadic *are* on the road, and that duality – at once at home and abroad – explains why digital nomadism is not defined by what someone is, or even by what they do. Instead, it is a *condition*, a tension stretching across the experiences of those who are freed to travel because they are employed in a digital way that simultaneously refuses to allow their departure.

1.

Geographically, the nomadic tension is between calculation and improvisation. No matter where they go, digital nomads need to plan. To begin, time zones need to be calculated since working meetings are going to be required, and if the group sessions correspond with the New York City working day, then one-way tickets to Portugal and Spain will overlap well enough. Istanbul is a stretch. Kuala Lumpur is redzoned.

Obviously worldwide clocks can be managed, but keeping the hours straight is not the problem, the problem is that traveling is *being* managed. Consequently, what makes someone a digital nomad on the geographic level today is life torn between two kinds of departures. One requires accounting, while the other exists precisely because there is no way to know beforehand exactly what needs to be accounted for, or even what planning will be required.

2.

Technologically, the lived tension of digital nomadism involves personal information. On one side, every time the phone lights up or an email sends, ones and zeros flow to platforms and databrokers that crunch the numbers and tighten predictions about where users will be, and what they will be doing, and why. For the digital nomad, hardly a shred of working life escapes this force of information-confinement.

On the other side, today's digital nomads are uniquely positioned to pervert the machines because global digital platforms provide instantaneous exposure to local experiences. It took Isabelle Eberhardt years to locate the cultural mysteries of north Africa, now even the most esoteric practices find their way onto the universal visibility of the web. Then the strategic use of invented personal information allows the creation of alternative identities. Just as Eberhardt cut her hair and switched the gender of her clothing to commune with foreigners, so too today's digital nomads may create online disguises tailored to gain entrance to even the most unfamiliar and obscure communities.

3.

Existentially, the definitive element of the digital nomad is a tension between two ways of conceiving identity. According to the first, I was born a certain kind of person, and therefore I end up going on the road with a computer and working from hostels and rooming houses. Because of how I am defined, I will stay for a time and then move on to another place that could have been predicted to attract me.

On the other side there is the one escaping any prediction because there is no way to know beforehand who it is that will emerge from the trip. This is the person who lives the customs and values of a foreign place, and *by* living them absorbs them, and ultimately incarnates them.

The digital nomad is the one who always answers yes to both sides of this question: Does the traveler do the traveling, or does the traveling do the traveler?