

The escapees travelling the world while working online

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The escapees travelling the world while working online
 you spent the recent weeks fantasising about escaping the cold and the daily grind? Meet the modern-day nomads who have taken the plunge

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 - Vicky Baker The Guardian, Saturday 9 January 2010
 Another day, another dollar ... the right job could mean a very different office. Photograph: Wheatcroft/Getty
 The diving instructors

It's not unusual for disillusioned graduates to pack a bag and hit the road, but what distinguishes dive enthusiasts Ben Stokes, 30, and Sarah Kemsley, 31, is that they kept going. Since meeting in Malaysia in 2003, the couple have worked as diving instructors in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Honduras, Belize and Fiji, clocking up over 5,000 dives between them and leaving their respective studies – in advertising and fashion – far behind.

The couple, who learned to dive while travelling, now have their own bespoke travel company, Dive Safari Asia, which is based in the UK but can be run from wherever they are in the world. They put together unguided package trips (flights, accommodation, diving) for their clients or, for more remote destinations, step in and act as guides. "Being in Asia for so many months of the year allows us to discover new destinations and really connect with the places," says Ben.

Typically stationing themselves in a location for two to four months, their three essential requirements are internet access, phone signal and "very good-quality diving".

"Communication is generally good in Asia, but bad weather and poor connection can make things incredibly frustrating," admits Ben. "What might take half an hour online in the UK could take two hours in Indonesia."

One of their best experiences so far has been diving in Sumatra, Indonesia, where their boat was circled by a 4m manta ray. They are now in Bali, where they plan to base themselves for 12 months, making various trips around the area. "You couldn't cover this area fully in a lifetime," enthuses Ben.

Ben and Sarah, originally from Bristol and Leamington Spa respectively, can imagine continuing their nomadic lifestyle for another five years and then maybe setting up a more long-term base, perhaps in Asia. "We're not so against the 9-to-5 lifestyle or the UK that we'll never go back," says Ben. "In fact, we could only do this with complete confidence, and enjoyment, knowing that the door is always open to return."

Ben's tip "Start by getting rid of all the possessions that are holding you back from becoming location independent. Sell them, give them away or, if you really have to, put them into storage. You'll be surprised by how little you'll need or want on the road."The online consultants

Lea and Jonathan Woodward left the UK in February 2007. Since then, the childhood sweethearts, originally from Nottingham, have lived in Panama, Argentina, Grenada, Canada, Hong Kong, Dubai, Italy and South Africa. Last year, they were joined by a new travel companion, their daughter Mali, now four months old. "We're not quite sure where we're headed next – possibly somewhere else in Asia," says Lea, 32. "And Costa Rica is definitely on our itinerary for some time in 2010."

The Woodwards' calling came when graphic designer Jonathan, 34, was made redundant for the second time in two years. "We decided to make a go of it on our own and set up our own business together," recalls Lea. "The only problem was we had trouble meeting the same living standard – loft apartment, nice car, regular meals out . . . That's when I hit upon the idea of moving somewhere else in the world, where we could enjoy the same standard of living but for far less."

The couple now run a branding and marketing consultancy, Kinetiva, which has clients across the world. They also run an online community, Location Independent, that offers guidance for people looking to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. The couple make money through the site by selling online courses, travel guides and ebooks. "The main aim for our business is not just to cover costs but to make a profit, and living in lower-cost countries enables us to do this even more so than if we were in the UK," says Lea.

The Woodwards live on a typical budget of between £1,000 and £2,000 per month, which gives them a very comfortable standard of living. Travelling with a baby has meant some readjustments, but they are adamant that family life can be compatible with a life on the road. "It's not like we'll go trekking in the wilds of Borneo with a young baby," says Lea, from their current base, a one-bedroom bungalow on the Thai island of Phuket, which costs them £70 per week. "We'll

probably stay a bit longer in places now, so it's not too unsettling. We're really just going to see how it goes and adjust our approach as required."

Their advice to any parents considering this lifestyle is to focus on creating the income stream first, even if it takes a year or two. Lea admits that there can be unsettling periods when you feel "insecure, uncertain and out of sorts". But there have certainly been many more high points along the way. "One of my dreams had always been to experience Caribbean life, and the five months we spent in Grenada were fantastic," she recalls. "Being able to swim in the warm, turquoise sea every single day and realising that this was our life is something I will always remember."

Lea's tip "If you're totally new to the concept, read around to understand how it all works, and get a few insights into the realities of it. You can also connect with people who live the lifestyle through blogs, Facebook or Twitter. Many are happy to answer questions."The DJ

In November 2006, Adam Schofield sold everything he owned – including an inherited house – and bought a flight to San Francisco. Three years on, the 31-year-old from Bolton has travelled down through the Americas, from Canada to Argentina, and enjoyed a stint in the Caribbean. Having made his funds stretch by DJing along the way and finding free accommodation through couchsurfing.com, he's now taking a "break" in Saigon, Vietnam.

"I totally fell in love with this country," he says of Vietnam, where he plans to stay for a year or two before travelling the rest of Asia. "A local Couchsurfer helped get me a job as a teacher and found me an incredible six-storey house to live in which I rent with three other people. I got myself a motorbike to drive around the city and I'm teaching English for 18 hours a week." In between, he still fits in the occasional DJ set and some freelance writing, as well as getting additional money through sponsors and affiliates on his blog, couchsurfingtheworld.com.

Adam estimates that he has spent £20,000 over the past three years. His current cost of living is around £200 a month, £125 of which is rent, and he earns £620 a month through teaching. He invested in stocks when he sold his house and this bumps up his funds. "I had to sit back and wait for the market to improve, but now I'm making money again," he says.

Adam cites his destination highlights as Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba and Brazil, while the most memorable DJ gigs of his trip have been a full-moon party beside the sea in Oaxaca, Mexico and in a club on the 40th floor of a skyscraper in Bogotá, Colombia. "[In Bogotá] I told the boss I would DJ for free as long as Couchsurfers got free entry. He didn't think 260 people would show up!"

Now that he has a temporary base, Adam is hoping his family and friends – whom he hasn't seen for three years – will finally get a chance to visit. He also insists that his couch will be open to anyone. And although he'd love to make a return visit to the UK – making a special pilgrimage to the curry houses in Manchester's Rusholme – he's sure he'd soon be ready to move on again. "I love England," he admits, "but it will always be there, and until I've seen the world I still don't have a home as such."

Adam's tip "You have to be good at trusting people. Building and maintaining a new social circle of friends is pivotal to your overall experience of settling into a new place. Also remember that your intended destination may not be everything you imagined, so have a back-up plan."The home-swappers

In summer 2008, Julie and Martin Gibbons (39 and 42) crossed the "last hurdle to freedom" and removed their 11-year-old son Ruaridh from school. Their line of work – a web business that builds psychometric personality applications – was already location independent, and now the entire family was, too.

The Gibbons travel by keeping a base, a four-bedroom home in West Lothian, Scotland, and swapping it with other homeowners on a short-term basis (between two weeks and four months) through home-exchange websites. So far, they have stayed in seven locations across France and one in Spain, including an apartment in the centre of French spa town, Aix-les-Bains, a renovated farmhouse in a tiny hamlet near La Rochelle on France's Atlantic coast, and a basic mountain house in Spanish Catalonia.

"Our expenses are the same as when we're at home because we continue to pay bills as normal, with only the travel expenses costing extra," says Julie. "Wherever we are the cost of living is generally less than it is in the UK, and because we are paid a fixed salary from our company, we know exactly where we stand from month to month."

Their company, People Maps , was set up with the goal of geographic independence, and employs up to 11 people at any time. ("Some of whom we haven't even met," explains Julie. "But they're hired on the basis of a psychometric test, a telephone call and a test exercise.") They have permanent staff in Calcutta, and have also hired people in France, Ukraine and the Philippines at various times. As Julie explains: "We all work from home – but that 'home' can be anywhere in the world." Meanwhile, Ruaridh appears to be thriving in his new way of life. "At first, he was slightly nervous about spending so much time away from home," says Julie. "But after a year and a half, he's by far and away the best traveller out of all of us. We do home-schooling – both of us teach him – and also count nearly all experiences as 'educational'. Learning a new language has proven one of the most valuable aspects for him."

The family is currently setting up their house-swap for next summer. "We're planning to move on to Spain, but beyond that, it's all a bit of a mystery. One of the things that's so great about home-swapping is that you can start off with one plan, and end up in places you've never heard of, or considered."

Julie's tip "Don't start out with grand plans to emigrate and leave the country forever. It makes it sound less scary, for you and the people around you if you treat it as a 'trip' – even if your 'trip' turns out to be never-ending."The blogger

"Whenever someone asks about my profession, I simply say that I help people quit their day jobs," says 20-year-old Glen Allsopp, from Newcastle upon Tyne. Two years ago, his online work as a blogger and marketer caught the eye of a South African company, which recruited him to work as a social media manager for some Fortune 100 clients. Having also spent time working in Hanoi and Bangkok, he became fully freelance in January 2009 and launched a guide to becoming a digital nomad. Although his online income fluctuates a lot, the monthly figure is now typically above £6,000. "For a college dropout, and given the current economic climate, I'm quite proud of my achievements," he says.

Glen is currently based in Amsterdam, where he has rented an apartment 10 minutes' walk from Leidseplein, one of the main squares, and is planning to spend two months in the city, soaking up local life. He says the so-called "passive income" he gains from having already built a portfolio of websites means he works only three to four hours per week.

Of course, such a lifestyle hasn't come without ample groundwork. Glen showed entrepreneurial flare through his teens and developed an expertise in search engine optimisation (getting websites to rank higher in search engines like Google). He now makes his money by setting up successful blogs, which he uses to promote various affiliate products, sells advertising and, in some cases, sells on the entire site. Much of his income also comes from a self-published ebook and series of tutorial videos for those who want to earn an income online.

For Glen, the main appeal of this type of travel is being able to combine leisurely sightseeing with fitting into everyday life and making local friends. He's particularly enjoyed seeing how the festive season is celebrated in Holland, including SinterKlaas, a traditional Dutch festival on 5 December, where good children are left presents in their shoes.

Glen's next step will be to continue his travels through Europe (Prague, Milan, Paris, Stockholm), before "probably moving back to Asia". Although it can be tough living out of a suitcase and constantly having to say goodbyes, the plus points of not having a boss and being able to travel on mean he wouldn't change his lifestyle for anything. Glen's tip "A lot of people don't believe this kind of lifestyle is possible, so they'll unconsciously try and hold you back. Instead of judging them for it, just accept it and keep moving forward towards your goals."