# Geography of Digital Nomadism – How Digital Nomads Choose Their Destinations and How the Destinations Attract Them

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**Abstract:** *Remote work, which existed even before the Covid-19 pandemic, although as an exotic practice and a distant prospect for the future, suddenly became mainstream in the period 2020-2022. With the withdrawal of lockdown practices, some employees continued with full remote work, some switched to a hybrid way of working, and others switched to remote work, not from their home but from distant destinations, realising that in remote work, location is irrelevant and that they can "tailor" it according to their needs. This type of employees, who are now very present, especially in the creative industries, are called digital nomads, and although research about them is more and more numerous, very little has been discussed about the geographical dimension of digital nomadism, i.e. how they choose destinations for work and life, and how, in a new environment, destinations try to attract them. Digital nomads choose their destinations for life and work according to numerous parameters, such as connectivity, climate, working conditions, vacation conditions, cultural and entertainment events, infrastructure, traffic connections, visa regime, real estate rental prices, the possibility of finding coworking space, connection with other digital nomads, living expenses and travel expenses to the home country or main office country. Destinations quickly realised that, as in tourism, they could become interesting to digital nomads by granting special visas, building coworking spaces, advertising their benefits, etc. because digital nomads bring financial gain to the destination. This paper will try to explain how digital nomads choose destinations and how the destinations try to attract digital nomads.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, after the Covid-19 pandemic, remote work has become largely normalised (Bhatia et al., 2022), at least in the form of hybrid work (partly from home, partly in the office) but it has become, in many cases, completely irrelevant where someone works - from home or from some distant destination to which they have moved, and this form of work began to appear more and more often and called "digital nomads" (Cook, 2023). Admittedly, the term "digital nomad" itself was coined almost 30 years ago in the work of Makimoto and Manners (1997), as a form of a new lifestyle (Hannonen, 2024) in the then-growing atmosphere of digitisation and the dot.com boom. In the past five years, digitisation has gained great momentum and acceleration (Bürgel et al., 2023), which has created a new work dynamic. Therefore, for digital nomads, the location is irrelevant, and they can "tailor" it according to their needs, especially in the creative industries (Milošević & Babić, 2025).

Digital nomads, therefore, travel and work from remote locations, or move to remote locations and permanently reside there, in a voluntary manner (Aroles et al., 2019), performing work for

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clients or companies that are not in their place of residence or their country - thus, permanently or semi-permanently staying in a "traveling" location (Hannonen, 2024).

If this phenomenon has only recently come to the attention of the academic public, it is important to note that most of the works were oriented toward the experiences of digital nomads themselves and their relationship with work, and little has been written about their relationship with the destination, the influence they have on destinations, the influence that destinations have on them and the economic aspects of digital nomadism on local economies, and in this way the topic is complicated, posing new challenges to destination management (Zhou et al., 2024). The so-called "smart destinations", due to the great benefits of attracting digital nomads to their places, have started to behave competitively (Hannonen et al., 2023).

In this sense, digital nomads are employees who choose their work location depending on many diverse factors, including climate, working conditions, coworking centers, residence costs, visa regime, the cost of a flight home or to the central location where the office of the company they work for is located (if there is one, that is, if they do not combine jobs and represent "perfectly independent" digital nomads), connection with other expats and digital nomads (they attract each other, as is the case with Russians in Serbia or Georgia), and even their children's education (Mancinelli, 2020). As they have been choosing destinations for a long time, it was a question of the moment when the process will become two-way, that is, when the destinations will begin to actively participate in the competition for the favor of digital nomads, not only with visa regimes, and not only with the minimum income that is necessary for permanent residence (Planet Nomad, 2024) but also with a whole series of conditions that we have mentioned.

The paper aims to explore the interconnectivity between the destinations and the digital nomads themselves, i.e. to find out how digital nomads choose their destinations and what the destinations (including potential destinations that want to "jump the wagon" and join the "destination market" of digital nomads) do to attract them. The paper claims that the digital nomads are influenced by many factors, both objective (situational) and subjective (personal) ones, and the destinations have become increasingly agile and proactive in their ways to attract them, resulting in many unexpected results (at least for the general public, which is often superficial).

## 2. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Digital nomadism is itself a multi-layered phenomenon, which is often not well understood. Namely, before the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a common opinion that digital nomadism is some kind of "luxury" where young people want to travel but also work during that period - so, more like a form of travel, with which the people work (Richards, 2015). This is far from accurate. The literature was very sparse about them (the first article was published only in 2002 by Sørensen, who links their appearance and very existence to "digital services" (Sørensen, 2002), there were no serious discussions about digital nomadism until sometime in 2016 or 2017 (Hannonen, 2024). Meanwhile, several subtypes of digital nomads have been defined, such as workcation (portmanteau of work + vacation), which coincides with the basic notion of digital nomads from 10 or more years ago (Cook, 2023). Over time, researchers began to single out workcationers of digital nomads and exclude them from the definition, (Pecsek, 2018), and the biggest difference and differentiation factor was the length of their stay at the destination (workcationers stayed for a shorter time, and digital nomads for a longer time), and the level of engagement with the destination (workcationers were less engaged, they were only guests, while digital nomads are already real, although sometimes temporary residents of given destinations) (Bassyiouny & Wilkesmann, 2023).

At first, digital nomadism was understood as a group of Westerners with "good passports" travelling the world for fun and for the climate (Hannonen, 2024), but everything changed with the pandemic and after it, when a huge cohort of creative workers entered the market as digital nomads (Hannonen et al., 2023). This coincided with the cessation of travel or its slowdown, and destinations suddenly had to react by attracting "another type of foreign tourists" - who are not tourists - that is, by inviting foreign experts from the technological sector and creative industries to permanently settle in their destinations (locations) (Buhalis et al., 2023). Destinations quickly realized that they could become interesting to digital nomads by granting special visas, building coworking spaces, advertising their benefits, etc. It is all because digital nomads bring financial gain to the destination, and thus the competition to win their favor began (Li et al., 2023).

If there was any research in the literature on the topic of digital nomads and the destinations where they are located, mostly the research relied on the thoughts of digital nomads, that is, on the so-called "demand side" (Zhou et al., 2024), i.e. on their choices, connected with motivational factors (Adams & Bloch, 2022), but the focus quickly shifted to the destination side, that is, the "supply side" (Zhou et al., 2024). Digital nomadism has therefore revived both traditional destinations and peripheral ones that were not popular before, which gave a huge incentive to all destinations to join the competition for digital nomads (Lacárcel et al., 2024), since the choice of the right destination is a very complex task for digital nomads themselves, and is highly personalized, just like shopping or tourism (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021). Some researchers found that the huge number of options and the lack of precise methods and information made the choices of digital nomads regarding destinations extremely arbitrary and very complex (Hensellek & Puchala, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Digital nomads rely on social networks and social media (Lexhagen & Conti, 2022) and UGC to evaluate their choices and evaluate information about destinations, primarily Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Reddit, but also YouTube (Lacárcel et al., 2024). They seek authentic experiences and authentic testimonies (Willment, 2020), and are constantly in search of evaluating information during the selection process, a trait that makes them inherently similar to Generation Z in their thinking, even though many digital nomads are over 40 or 50 years old. There are also platforms that digital nomads use specifically to share their experiences, such as Nomadlist, NomadX, Nomad Capitalist, and Nomad Embassy (Zhou et al., 2024).

In this sense, destinations must become innovative in their approach, and make an effort to showcase the best of what they have or to invent something new that would make them more competitive in this new market. They must apply destination innovation methods (Hjalager, 2010) to the emerging digital nomad market and identify product or service innovations, the management or marketing innovations, and marketing initiatives "include top-down branding, as destinations have established digital nomad associations, marketing campaigns, and targeted digital nomad events" (Zhou et al., 2024).

## 3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It has also been noticed that digital nomads often have a regional experience of their new destinations, i.e. residences, so the destinations have adapted to it, and started to act following the cross-border view of the world (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019), i.e. the destinations have started to adapt to it despite regional micro-differences and intolerances (for example, the Russians see the "Balkans" as a region, the British "Iberia" (Spain and Portugal) or the "Caribbean" (independently of the territorial unit) as a region, etc. They also first decide on the most visible destinations, i.e.

the traditional ones - thus, as early leaders in the market, Madeira and the Canary Islands, the possessions of Portugal and Spain, were the first to be "launched" as digital nomad destinations as early leaders. Namely, they launched the "Digital Nomad Madeira" and "Nomad City Gran Canaria" projects, but after the initial success, it turned out that there was a decline, since the local industries could not keep up (Almeida & Belezas, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Also, some authors have noticed a clear seasonality in the choice of residence of digital nomads - departure from a destination where there is a rainy and warm season, arrival in the summer or winter period in the Mediterranean or Scandinavia and the like (McKercher, 2023).

In order to include more and more variables, Hannonen et al. (2023) applied stakeholder theory to the case of Spain in 2023, representing them as "new locals" or "new residents", and found that local stakeholders played a large role in the accommodation factor for "new locals", but also that there was a strong correlation between stakeholder specialization and accommodation preferences (Hannonen et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

The visa regime played a major role in the choice of destinations for digital nomads (Kuzey et al., 2019), as well as the mandatory earnings that destinations made official for obtaining a Digital Nomad Visa (Milošević et al., 2024). It appears under different names in different countries but has the same meaning, for example, White Card (Hungary), or Nomad Digital Residence (Antigua and Barbuda) (Hannonen, 2024). Differences in mentality can also be seen here, although all countries loudly promoted their visa policy: for example, Estonia had an "entrepreneurship angle", while the Caribbean islands had a "tourism angle" when setting visa requirements. Namely, Estonia wanted to attract new businesses, and the Caribbean wanted to make up for the lack of tourists that was a consequence of the pandemic, before the era of "revenge tourism" (Hannonen, 2024). Malaysia, for its part, played on the card of accelerated digitization of the state (Bednorz, 2023).

Coworkcation is another thing that plays a big role in the choice of destination, and it is completely on the supply side of the spectrum. States have tried to create as many coworking spaces as possible, so that digital nomads get a sense of community in a kind of "community expat centers", since like-minded people can be found here and the atmosphere is cosmopolitan (Hannonen et al., 2023). Such centers began to withdraw some of the elements of transnational gentrification (Milošević et al., 2024) because, for example, in Novi Sad, Russians created their coworking places in places where pubs used to be closed during the pandemic (example: the former "Izba", which became the "Martin" coworking center). Similar locations appear in other places, very often milk and coffee bars where exotic coffees, teas and cakes are served and where locals rarely go, since the menus are not tailored to their taste - typical examples of the emergence of such coworking spaces are Lisbon or Bali (Busuttil & Hannonen, 2024).

Zhou et al. found in their research that the list of the best countries for digital nomads does not agree with the list of top tourist destinations, but neither with the list of the best countries for "doing business", thus showing that there are many other, hidden decision-making factors in digital nomadism. Namely, Anguilla, Croatia, or Antigua and Barbuda are not among the world's Top 10 most popular tourist destinations, but they are favorites for digital nomads (Zhou et al., 2024). Geographical locations favor Mediterranean countries, while Eastern European countries ranked high due to the cost of living and security (Croatia is a combination of both factors here, so its high position is not surprising). African countries play on low costs and exoticism, which should compensate for reduced security. Some of the "winners" here include destinations in peripheral areas and emerging destinations since they have been involved very seriously as places that are not traditionally attractive, but receive a significant influx of funds through digital nomads (Zerva

et al., 2023). The cost of living played a huge role, and this is where the so-called "geoarbitrage" - since digital nomads choose a location where the money they know they will earn will last longer (Hannonen, 2024; Holleran, 2022; Mancinelli, 2020), avoiding Western countries (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021), and this practice is called "lifestyle hacking" or "geo-hacking" (Cook, 2022). The countries of the Global South play this card when luring digital nomads (Hannonen, 2024), and here again, Croatia proved to be the winner. Also, the idea is to keep money in the country and offer lower taxes: Costa Rica offers only 10-15% tax compared to the usual 30% for locals, Portugal looks to digital nomads to spend at least 183 days in the country and send less than 60% of their income home (or abroad), while Greece gives a 50% tax discount if you stay for at least two years (Zhou et al., 2024).

In their research, Lacárcel et al asserted, analyzing UGC on X (ex-Twitter), that all destination attraction factors can be divided into three groups (positive, neutral and negative), and that there are 11 of them in total, and that 6 of them are positive (employment, retirement, gastronomy, co-working, work motivation, culture), one factor is neutral (customer service), and four negative topics (connectivity, work hours, visa issues, loneliness) (Lacárcel et al., 2024). In both the research of Zhou et al. (2024) and Lacárcel et al. (2024), cultural immersion had a great impact, and social inequalities like in the Caribbean or Africa, or the lack of connectivity had a negative impact on the choice, and these are weak points that destinations must fix. The top 20 countries on the list in the research conducted by Zhou et al. (2024) are: Portugal, Croatia, Mexico, Spain, Colombia, Thailand, Greece, Antigua and Barbuda, Panama and Brazil. Serbia is in a solid 43rd place, but Montenegro is 36th and Albania is 32nd, which means that Serbia can do better (Zhou et al., 2024). Some ski resorts in countries that we would not favor at first glance, such as Bansko in Bulgaria, are winners with innovative policies, coworking spaces and atmosphere, because now there are at least 300 digital nomads there at any given moment, and even a Digital Nomad Fest is regularly held (Gill, 2023).

## 4.    CONCLUSION

Digital nomads are a motley crew: they have wildly varying parameters for choosing their preferred destination. They form a completely new market niche in tourism and business, blending both concepts into one unique form. It is quite a stunning opportunity for destinations to compete and apply an innovative marketing mix and methods to attract this new bunch of often affluent or young people. Some cities and towns, even resorts have flourished recently, like some unexpected leaders in the world of digital nomadism, like Bansko in Bulgaria as a ski resort and town, and Croatia as a whole – which emerged as a digital nomad superpower. Some places in decay even have become trendy and fleshy after they came.

On the flip side, the digital nomads often disrupt the economic process in the destination, creating some new places with high prices and customs not fitting locals, which sometimes leads to so-called transnational gentrification or ghettoization. It was all shown in Serbia when the Russians flooded the country after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, but on the other hand, they brought financial injections to the destinations that were more often hungry for fresh capital.

Destinations fight for digital nomads pretty much the same way they fight for tourists. Digital nomads bring fresh energy and revive the destinations, increasing the number of cultural events, restaurants, pubs, etc., and can be considered a "gift from Heaven" for many destinations in the world, many of them experiencing heavy depopulation trends. However, the choice of destination by digital nomads is highly personalized and almost elusive, and there is much to be done in this

ever-changing field to fully determine the patterns of their choices. On the other hand, destination marketing has a new, dynamic task in front of it to match the demand side with the ever-richer supply side and new benefits for digital nomads.

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