SAMPLE

Nomad Visa

How Remote Workers Became the World's Most Wanted Immigrants — and the Visas Built to Catch Them

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Free sample: Introduction & Chapter 1

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Introduction

In June 2020, with its hotels empty and its economy suffocating under a pandemic that had grounded the world's tourists, the Caribbean island of Barbados did something that had never been done before: it invented a visa for people whose work had nothing to do with the place issuing it. The "Welcome Stamp" offered anyone who could work from a laptop the right to live on the island for a year — not to work in Barbados, but simply to be there while working for someone else, somewhere else. Within weeks, Bermuda had its version. Within months, a dozen countries had followed. Within four years, more than sixty of them — from Estonia to Japan, from Dubai to Cape Verde — had built or were building what the migration industry now calls, as a standardized product category, the digital nomad visa: permission to reside, based on employment you bring with you.

It is worth pausing on how strange that is. For the entire modern history of immigration, visas answered the question: what will you do here? The worker visa assumed a local employer; the investor visa assumed local capital; the family visa assumed a local family. The nomad visa answers a different question entirely: what will you spend here? It is the first major migration category built not around what a newcomer contributes to the economy by participating in it, but around what they bring to it by arriving — income earned elsewhere, taxed somewhere else, spent everywhere they stop.

This book is the story of that invention: where it came from, who built it, how it works, what it costs, who wins, and what it is doing to the places it touches. It is a story of technology enabling a form of life — the location- independent worker — that migration law never anticipated. It is a story of governments learning, mid-pandemic, that the sudden global army of remote workers was the only tourism market still open, and inventing a product to capture it. It is a story of tax treaties colliding with laptop workers who trigger rules written for executives and exiles. And it is a story of backlash: the neighborhoods from Lisbon to Mexico City where the arrival of well-paid, tax-light newcomers collided with local housing markets already strained to breaking.

The nomad visa is small in numbers — most of these visas are issued in the hundreds or low thousands a year, a rounding error beside the world's migration flows. But it is large in significance. It is the first migration product designed by market competition — countries iterating on each other's terms the way airlines iterate on baggage fees — and it is the clearest existing answer to a question every government now faces: if work has detached from place, what is a visa for?

The chapters that follow trace the prehistory of the laptop life, the COVID rupture that created the market, the boom that followed, the economics underneath, the tax labyrinth, the application and its industry, the backlash, the design failures, and the future of the category. The nomad visa is barely five years old. It has already redrawn a corner of the world's migration map, and the forces that created it — remote work, global talent markets, tax competition — are still accelerating. Consider this book the field guide to the newest species of visa, written while the species is still evolving.

Chapter 1: The Prehistory — From Telecommuting to the Laptop Life

The nomad visa arrived in 2020, but the idea it legalizes is half a century old.

The oldest ancestor of the nomad visa is a word: "telecommuting," coined in 1973 by the physicist Jack Nilles, who studied — decades before anyone built the infrastructure for it — the idea that work could travel to the worker instead of the worker traveling to work. Nilles was writing about saving oil, not saving winters on the beach; his telecommuters stayed home, not abroad. But the conceptual break was made: the bond between job and location, assumed by every office, commute, and immigration form since the industrial revolution, was declared to be a matter of engineering rather than essence.

The term "digital nomad" itself is nearly as old. The 1997 book Digital Nomad, by Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners, predicted — with astonishing accuracy, given the dial-up era it was written in — that ubiquitous connectivity would soon let people work from anywhere, and that the result would be a "peripatetic" population whose location no longer determined their labor. The book was a semiconductor industry forecast, not a lifestyle manual. The lifestyle took another decade and a half to become materially possible.

The survey picture of the early nomad population, assembled from the platforms and research firms of the era, is consistent even with its margins of error: youngish — late twenties to late thirties at the median — and skewed male; disproportionately Anglophone; overwhelmingly self- employed or freelance, because employees could not legally or practically work from anywhere in the 2010s; concentrated in a handful of occupations — software, design, writing, marketing, and the then-new online-business genres. Their incomes ranged from the survival budgets of the low-cost-hub circuit to the comfortable salaries of senior freelancers, but the defining economic fact was arbitrage: earning in a strong-currency market while spending in a weak one.

The arbitrage was not incidental; it was the lifestyle's engine and its ethics in miniature — the nomad's standard of living was funded by the gap between two places' prices, and every place they colonized, in the era's own vocabulary, had to stay cheap for the model to work. That dependency — prosperity priced against the host's poverty — is the seed of everything the backlash later said.

What made the prophecy executable was a stack of quietly revolutionary infrastructure, assembled between 2005 and 2015: reliable global Wi-Fi and cheap long-haul flights; cloud software that made a company's tools location-

blind; video calls that stopped being exotic; smartphones; and, in the sharing economy, Airbnb, which solved the nomad's oldest practical problem — how to rent a home somewhere for two months without a local lease, a local bank account, and a local life history. By the early 2010s, a self-employed writer or programmer could genuinely operate from anywhere with decent connectivity, and the first identifiable nomad scenes formed: Chiang Mai in Thailand most famously, with its cheap apartments, thick coffee-shop Wi-Fi, and the first co-working spaces that doubled as social clubs for a small, online-employed diaspora.

The scene was niche, self-selecting, and legally precarious. The nomads of the 2010s lived on tourist visas, technically forbidden from working — a fiction everyone observed, since working on a laptop for a foreign employer was invisible to any border officer who looked. The community built its own institutions: blogs and forums rating cities by cost and connectivity, the data platforms that would later grow into the industry's de facto registries, conferences, co-living houses, and a nascent insurance industry selling "worldwide" health coverage to people whose home coverage stopped at the border. Estimates of the population from the mid-2010s run in the low millions — freelancers, dropshippers, developers, bloggers — and the demographic was caricature-to-true: youngish, self- employed, Anglophone, budget-conscious, and resident, in every legal sense, nowhere in particular.

A reconstruction of the genre's founding scene, from the accounts of its participants: Chiang Mai, around 2014-2016. A rented studio apartment for a few hundred dollars a month. The co-working space that doubles as the community's town square, where a freelancer's month of Wi-Fi costs less than a day of it in San Francisco. Mornings of work on clients in time zones a half-day away; afternoons of visa-run logistics and laptop repair; evenings in which everyone's business is online, and everyone evaluates everyone else's hustle. The economy of the scene is invisible to the Thai state: the money arrives through foreign platforms and ATM withdrawals, the work is performed on tourist permits, and the community's collective legal status is a polite fiction maintained on all sides.

What the scene proved — and why its memory matters to the visa story — was viability at a price point. The 2010s nomads demonstrated that the location-independent life was not a fantasy but a budget: that a modest foreign income could fund a comfortable, productive, indefinitely long residence abroad, and that a self-organizing community would supply every service the state did not. Every nomad visa launched in the 2020s is, at bottom, a government's answer to that proof: we can see you now — here is what we will charge.

The 2010s scene ran on a contradiction that every stakeholder had reasons to ignore. The nomads were, in law, tourists; in fact, they were residents — for months at a time, in the same flats, spending earned- elsewhere money, forming a class of unrecorded, untaxed, permanent temporary residents. The countries hosting them had, mostly, no mechanism to see them, no way to tax them, and no reason to complain about their spending. But the contradiction was structural, and it was waiting for two events to resolve it: a technology shift that would multiply the nomad population by an order of magnitude, and a shock that would make governments desperate enough to finally write the category into law. Both arrived in the same year.

End of free sample. The full book is available at putrabooks.github.io