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The 21st century nomads - A matter of choice or necessity



What comes to mind when you hear the word “nomad”? For me, it tends to have roots in Arabia; a “caravanserai” crossing the desert with horse-riding men dressed in head dresses and flowing robes, negotiating the Silk Road.

Nomads are not necessarily solitary, and frequently travel in groups or families for the purposes of protection.

The World Atlas informs me that “nomadic pastoralism” is most prevalent in developing African and central Asian countries when farmers travel from pastures to feed their animals.

One quarter of the population of Mongolia is currently judged to be nomadic; also for pastoral protection.

In the 13th century, Genghis Khan created one of the biggest empires in history which extended from the Steppes to parts of eastern Europe.

I have heard that one in 7 men in the world can trace their roots to him. Having visited Hungary, I can believe this...

The Mongolian capital, Ulanbataar, now apparently has a drive-in take away restaurant called “Nomadland”, which offers “all the meat you can eat”. There is another branch in Hong Kong in case Mongolia does not yet feature on your holiday destination list.

Nomadland

In 2017, Jessica Bruder, an American writer, picked up on “a new species of nomads” in the

US. Her research led her to publish a book entitled “Nomadland: Surviving America in the 21st Century”.

She realised that, in order to write about it authoritatively, she needed to become a “new nomad” herself, and found a widow called Linda, who was prepared to show her the ropes.

Linda was 64 years old, and as a result of several misfortunes throughout her working life, she lost any opportunity for a settled retirement.

Bruder points out that Americans can describe these people as “hobos”, “itinerants”, “drifters”; all pejorative terms in the second millennium.

But are they just restless souls who have never succeeded in attempts to settle in one place? Is this an existential choice?

Bruder’s immediate reaction to the stories she heard whilst on the road was that in fact, the primary motivation for the majority was economic necessity.

These new nomads fiercely reject the word “homeless” and describe themselves as “houseless”

Many victims of the 2007-8 financial crash found themselves suddenly impoverished, and could not survive on government welfare when they lost their jobs and homes.

They found themselves unable to maintain their settled lives, and became modern nomads.

These new nomads fiercely reject the word “homeless” and describe themselves as “houseless”; they also like to describe themselves as “workampers”.

Linda had reached retirement age and faced the fact that despite having succeeded in

holding down several jobs throughout her life, paid her taxes and delivered on the social contract, she was never financially able to buy a house, and there was no prospect of her fortunes changing.

She was living in a trailer, used her paltry savings to buy a jeep, and hit the road. But not in a Jack Kerouac way.

Linda found a group of people in similar situations to hers, and via them joined an Amazon-sponsored programme called Camperforce, directly targeted at employment for houseless people.

It sounded like a godsend: employment in an Amazon warehouse, scanning and packing products.

But a newspaper investigation soon revealed that the programme was employing thankful employees in dangerous sweatshop environments - 100 degrees' heat, and Amazon even hired freelance paramedics to stretcher out people who unsurprisingly could not withstand the heat or the constant bullying to increase their workload (known as "management by stress").

Amazon finally put paid to the programme and probably replaced them with robots.

From reading this book, I concluded that the new American nomads share a stigma peculiar to Americans: they had failed to fulfil the American Dream.

But Bruder was upbeat on the robustness and determination of the new nomads and Workampers, reporting camaraderie and their experience of life on the road making them reflect and reevaluate their priorities in life. She was frequently asked not to call them "struggling whiners".

But Bruder had a house and financial security to return to.

Does Europe have new nomads?

"Digital nomads" in Europe is a new buzzphrase for adventurous young people attracted to living in stimulating multinational "communes" in various European cities.

They are described as "self-governing neighbourhoods with crypto governance". To me, that sounds like a centimetre away from West Berlin in the Cold War era. But I am old.

The word "nomad" in Europe is more likely to be a euphemism for "illegal" or "economic" migrants.

In recent years, the issue has evolved from being considered a mere political football to a migraine for governments exploited by daily right-wing main stream media press reports on fragile dinghies overfilled with victims of people traffickers, attempting to negotiate hazardous routes over the Mediterranean and the English Channel.

Their destination is generally the wealthier countries of Western Europe, where they have been tricked into believing the streets are paved with gold.

This has become a convenient way of demonising "foreigners", fostering populist sentiments and convincing readers that these people are all immediately housed in 4-star hotels because officials cannot cope with processing their cases.

Perhaps we have lost the plot somewhere here. What could be more natural for a human being to seek a better life than fortune has dealt them? But nothing seems to work.

Has the UK system, multiculturalism, worked effectively? Or is the French system of integration a better solution?

I doubt many people would say either system has been a resounding success. I will stick my neck out and argue that of course there are bad eggs, but we all hang out with people we get on with, and choose to live in communities we feel attracted to. Or live as a hermit in a cave or a tree.

But that is if you have a choice.