

A desk in paradise

This new business trend makes work seem like a walk on the beach.

STORY BY LUCINDA SCHMIDT



IT'S 6.30AM on Koh Lanta, a tropical island in Thailand's south-west, and Joshua Ballard is already at his desk. Dressed in shorts, lounging on an open-air bamboo deck surrounded by palm trees, he's fielding emails from clients in Adelaide, where his digital-marketing agency is based. After Skyping his employees in the Philippines, he'll break for lunch – sharing his papaya salad with the monkeys – then finish the day brainstorming business ideas on the beach over a few Leo beers.

Ballard is part of the “workation” and “co-workation” trend that combines working with travelling to exotic locations. It's not about checking emails in your hotel room before taking a dip in the pool. Nor is it just about the growing tribe of digital nomads who constantly roam the globe, running their businesses anywhere there's high-speed internet and a low cost of living.

The co-workation is typically a one-week to three-month escape from your routine work environment to strategise about a startup, take your business to the next level or perhaps refocus your corporate role. And you're surrounded by like-minded entrepreneurs and professionals who are there to trade tips, collaborate and keep one another motivated.

Integral to the trend are the co-working spaces that have sprung up around the world over the past decade. But what's new is the shift from major cities to holiday destinations, such as Bali, Costa Rica and Majorca, as internet infrastructure has dramatically improved.

“I'm able to work far more effectively on this semirural island of Thailand than in an Australian capital city,” says Ballard, who plans to spend about two months at KoHub, a co-working holiday destination that opened on Koh Lanta in 2014. “It's about \$30 a day to have a roof over my head, two meals and access to internet speeds that make me feel as if Australia is in the developing world.”

The founder of Paradox Marketing, Ballard says sharing insights and skills with other “KoHubbers” is a key part of the experience. He has helped them with marketing and business models and, in turn, enlisted them to help him code. Pub quizzes, communal lunches and beach clean-ups encourage a sense of community. “They make sure we're getting more than just a building to work out of,” he says. Adds KoHub founder James Abbott: “We like people to get involved with the island and the culture and not just be in a tourist bubble.”

Australians have been slightly slower than Americans and Europeans to embrace destination co-working but that's changing. In May, the Sustainable Valley co-working space opened in Byron Bay, on NSW's North Coast. Just minutes from the beach, this plant-filled, open-plan workspace also offers workshops, coaching and monthly meet-ups for professionals. “We want to ensure that people doing great business have a great head on their shoulders,” says founder Chris Magick. “We're really into mental health. It's not just about ‘I kept on top of my emails and came back with a tan.’”

Choose your co-workation

Chef Tom Eadie, co-owner of Sydney artisan bakery Berkelo, recently flew to Byron Bay for Sustainable Valley's one-week Immersion program. "Berkelo has experienced great initial growth since opening 15 months ago," he says. "I wanted something like a vacation yet with the opportunity to reflect on what has happened so far and create a sustainable strategy for the future of my business and for my personal wellbeing."

Eadie began each day with yoga, followed by a business strategy session with an expert in graphic design and brand development, a communal lunch, a personal coaching and mindfulness session in the afternoon and a surf at sunset. "It felt like a holiday with purpose," he says. "Having dedicated time away and the chance to focus on myself helped to clarify what's important. The change in routine and exposure to a new network of high-achieving people, including small-business owners, creative thinkers, professional freelancers, remote workers and other entrepreneurs, allowed me to question the way I'm doing things in business and my personal life."

You can arrange your own workation by finding an office through websites such as Coworker (coworker.com) or Nomad List (nomadlist.com). The latter also calculates the Nomad Cost of a one-month workation with accommodation in a cheap, central hotel, a co-working space and all meals in basic restaurants (about \$3600 in Sydney; \$1330 in Ubud, Bali; \$1080 in Chiang Mai, Thailand).

Alternatively, join an organised trip through groups such as Coworkation, Project Getaway, Hacker Paradise (hackerparadise.org) and Surf Office (thesurfoffice.com). Think of it as summer camp for grown-ups, crossed with an energising corporate retreat, business accelerator and health resort.

Coworkation founder Stuart Jones says guests on the 10 trips he's organised in the past year have mainly been European entrepreneurs, freelancers, creatives and other location-independent professionals. But he believes that getting away has benefits for any businessperson who needs to step back. It's an opportunity to "reflect on things such as restructuring your team or an innovative new project", says Jones, who is relocating from Barcelona to his native Australia in November to focus on domestic and South-East Asian co-workations.

Of course, working in paradise carries the risk that you may never want to return home. Ballard, who had previously taken one-month workations in the United States, Thailand and the Philippines, recently cancelled his flight home and his office lease in Adelaide. He plans to travel to the US from Koh Lanta then to Bali for several months. "I've spent two years building a business that doesn't require my physical presence. Now I'm pretty much planning on working and travelling in perpetuity." ●

(Below) Sydney baker Tom Eadie (right) on a co-workation at Sustainable Valley in Byron Bay



KOHUB

📍 *Koh Lanta, Thailand* 🌐 kohub.org

Features Co-working space, team rooms, fast internet, Skype area, juice bar, restaurant, events and storage lockers.

Cost About \$230 per month; from about \$800 per month with a room in a nearby apartment and two meals per day.

SUSTAINABLE VALLEY

📍 *Byron Bay, Australia* 🌐 sustainablevalley.co

Features Co-working space with communal benches, workstations, stand-up desks, outdoor work area, fast internet and private phone booths.

Cost \$399 per month; \$499 for the one-week Immersion that includes five days of co-working, two hours of business mentoring and two hours of personal coaching. No accommodation packages.

HUBUD

📍 *Ubud, Bali* 🌐 hubud.org

Features Co-working space, meeting rooms, fast internet, Skype booth, raw-food café, workshops and storage lockers.

Cost About \$350 per month; about \$1770 per month with a room in a six-bed villa.

COWORKATION

📍 *Bali, Thailand and Spain* 🌐 coworkation.com

Features Short co-working retreats in South-East Asia and Europe.

Cost Prices vary but a one-week retreat in Bali in October is about \$2100, including co-working space, accommodation, breakfast, excursions, yoga and workshops.

PROJECT GETAWAY

📍 *Kerobokan, Bali* 🌐 projectgetaway.com

Features Annual co-working retreats in Bali for 20 entrepreneurs.

Cost About \$3730 (two weeks), including co-working space, accommodation, all meals, workshops, massages and scooter.