26 September 2024 / Leaving America for work-life balance

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): This month Amazon announced it’s bringing employees back to the office five days a week. And on the *far* other end of the spectrum, there are still a ton of Americans working remotely from exotic locales.

STUART: Let’s move to Europe! Oh my god, you know?

SCORING IN SON SCD LOOPA LOOPA, APM

SEAN: We hit up a digital nomad happy hour in Lisbon to find out why that super remote work-life still hits now that we’re post-pandemic:

ADEE: There's a ton of nomads, which is nice to have a community of other people that made the same decision.

NIKOLA: Here, rents are obviously more affordable and health insurance is <laughs> so much more accessible.

TIM: The weather, the food. I think the laid back culture.

ADEE: And I love the cost of living, the lifestyle. It's a lot more relaxed than New York.

SEAN: On *Today, Explained* we’re trying to figure out how the dust has settled on American work-life balance post pandemic. And we’re gonna start in Portugal.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Do you miss the United States at all?

BRITTANY: Not at all.

[THEME]

JOHN DAVID:. I've compared Lisbon to, like, Paris in the 1920s.

SEAN: Hm! Lisbon in the 2020s is like Paris in the 1920s.

JOHN DAVID: yea. in, like, 40 years, you can be sitting around a table and people are going to lean in and be like, ‘Yeah, but what was it like living in Lisbon in the 20s?’

SEAN: <<chortles>>

SEAN: John David Whelan is the kinda guy you’d expect to up and move to Portugal.

He’s 45. He used to live in Los Angeles. And like so many Angelenos, he was an actor. He was in *First Man* with everyone’s fav, Ryan Gosling. And *Casino Jack* with everyone’s least-fav, Kevin Spacey.

But he wasn’t landing big roles. Didn’t love self-promotion. And he didn’t *have* to act because he was also a landlord.

He definitely wasn’t about to start working a typical 9 to 5.

And then he discovered Portugal.

JOHN DAVID: It was probably the algorithm of Instagram or something?  
SEAN: Mm-hm.  
JOHN DAVID: Because of my searching, showed up D7 Visas, which is what I have, to Portugal. And I looked up the rules. I was like, ‘This is too good to be true.’ Like, where's the shoe going to drop?  
SEAN: Hm.  
JOHN DAVID: And if this is the way it is, it's not going to last forever.

SEAN: John David ditched Los Angeles for Lisbon.

He ditched acting to be a life coach.

And to paint :)

JOHN DAVID: So the work that I do combines like an algorithm with a robot, and…

SEAN: A painting robot?

JOHN DAVID: A painting robot that I kind of modified from a Roomba.  
 SEAN: Wat?!

SEAN: The country has long made it easy for people like him to show up and establish residency. Come here with your own money. Don’t take any of our jobs. We’ll give you a visa and even set you on a path to citizenship. E-U citizenship!

SFX: Ca-ching! Oh la la  
  
SEAN: But then Covid hits and heaps of people see an opportunity to really work an American 9 to 5 from Portugal. People like Gia Lee.

GIA: Graduated in 2020. Class of Covid.   
SEAN: Hell yeah.   
GIA: Shout out to all Class of Covid, folks. That was such a rough time. …

SEAN: We met Gia at a co-working space in Porto. But really it was like a coworking space slash hotel slash music venue with a pool. We were staying there for two nights. But she was living there. It’s the kind of space that started popping up all over Portugal post-pandemic catering to people just like Gia.

GIA: And so I founded a Gen Z marketing agency called NinetyEight, so I've been doing that for the past four years. And yeah, we've collaborated early on with Pepsi when they were planning the launch of Starry. Have you heard of Starry?

SEAN: I haven't yet heard about Starry.

GIA: It's supposed to compete against Sprite because Sprite has no competitor in the market.

SEAN: Huh! What about Squirt?

GIA: Don’t know what Squirt is….

SEAN: Did I make that up?? No.

VICTORIA CHAMBERLIN (*Today, Explained* producer): No, no.

SEAN: Gia’s got her finger on the pulse of Gen Z, so she doesn’t need to be in the United States to market to them. So she’s in Porto for now, and hardly knows where she’ll be in six months’ time.

GIA: Um, I was in Lisbon for a month right before this and I will be working from Munich and Paris after Porto. So a lot of the times I am back home in Manila. I'm also in LA because that's where my business is. I travel kind of everywhere, like Bali, Japan, and whenever I travel, I'm always working while I'm traveling. So it's definitely a work from anywhere situation.

SEAN: I gotta just straight out the gate say I know a lot of people who are like in their 30’s and 40’s and even 50’s who would love to have the life that you have – the work life situation that you have. How did you figure out, so soon out of university, that this was an option?

GIA: I mean, we were kind of forced into this situation. There were no jobs at all in 2020, and so, I mean, traditionally originally I was planning to go into a normal ad agency, a normal corporate trajectory, but just Covid in 2020 kind of put a whole wrench into the situation and we kind of had to adapt, and to figure out…

SEAN: For Gia, working from far flung places as a digital nomad has been a bit of a work-life balance hack.

GIA: So it's hard to kind of, you know, find a balance when you're working remotely in the city that you live in. So I find it's easier when you're traveling because it forces you to kind of get out there and explore the city. And you have to set that boundary of like, okay, I'm not going to work right now because I'm going to explore and I'm going to meet people or I'm going to go to this networking event …  
SEAN: Mm.  
GIA: … which is still somewhat work.

SEAN: Gia is but a few years out of college. We also found people well into their careers who were choosing to work from Portugal.

<<entering Therese’s apartment>>

THERESE: My name's Terese Mascardo and I'm a licensed clinical psychologist and author and a speaker. And we are in my living room in my apartment in Lisbon, Portugal, in the Lapa Estrella district of Lisbon.

SEAN: Therese showed up in Portugal way back in 2018.

SEAN: So you came here before? It was cool.

TERESE: <<laughs>> I may have said that phrase once or twice. Yeah.

TERESE: There's. There was a crew that definitely was here and established long before me, but I think I was part of that older wave of nomads that came here.

SEAN: She still sees patients, but instead of doing it IRL in L.A., she’s doing it remotely from Lisbon.

TERESE: I was a bit burned out of seeing clients. I worked way too many hours. I think full time therapy hours mean seeing 20 to 25 clients and I was seeing 35 to 40 a week.

SEAN: This is back when you were still in California?

TERESE: Yeah. Being a workaholic. And so I… in the time here, I've adjusted my schedule. So now I see clients two and a half days a week. And so I'm usually working Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. And it's it allows me like a much better quality of life, I think, to condense it like that.

SEAN: You only work three days a week.??

TERESE: I see clients three days a week, and then I spend the rest of the time working on my writing or my content creation where I share mental health education videos. So it's it's a nice rhythm. I like it.

SEAN: Do you think you would have reset this way professionally had you stayed in California?

TERESE: Absolutely not. No. I think there's a pressure that you feel as an American and every city has like a different flavor of that pressure. But in L.A., I certainly felt like I needed to work as much as possible, either to make my rent or pay for Whole Foods or everything. And so, no, my my quality of life really suffered there. And one of the biggest things that I was really wanting to get away from was commuter culture. I feel like that really was torture. I'm not joking, sometimes when I would live a normal day in L.A., I would be in my car four plus hours a day, and it was really horrible. So I don't even own a car anymore. Most of my friends live within 15 minutes walk of my house. Or I can take an Uber to the other side of town, which is, you know, at maximum 20, 30 minutes away by car and might be an Uber that costs €10. So like everything is so… it's actually probably more expensive to have a car here and not as convenient.

SEAN: There’s definitely a Los Angeles to Lisbon pipeline. Something about the weather being comparable. John David came from L.A., too.

JOHN DAVID: It's easier because there is, I mean, coming from a city like L.A. or maybe even New York might be this similar. You know, there's less chaff. There's less murk and muck to like sift through. You know, for me, the work life balance is it makes it just easy. I mean, I can go my… Lisbon… I can walk across entirely Lisbon in about 45 minutes to an hour. I have one of the most wonderful little streets in Graça, and it's got these little restaurants and these wine bars, and you get to know people. That's the difference, right? Like this street over here, off Costa de Castello, it's like there's just so many interesting things and it's just this community experience right now.

SEAN: Community is great, but it’s not all port wine and pastel de nata out here in Portugal.

TERESE: Unfortunately, I think sometimes the new wave might have people who could care less about the places there and are invested in that community and feel like they want to contribute and add to that community. They just want to kind of like take what they can get out of it.

SEAN: And did you notice a change in how locals view digital nomads post-pandemic?

TERESE: Unfortunately, yes. And it's it's really sad because I think there's been so much about Portugal in the news that has made it sound well, I mean, it's great. It's so it's made it sound as great as it is. But I think the influx has been very difficult to manage. Prices have skyrocketed for housing, for example, because people show up with their American budgets and just throw their money around. And it's made it so much more difficult for locals to to live in the city. So there's definitely been a lot of tension about that. And then I think there's also like just the the tourist who's coming in is a very different presence in the city than people who have been living here for years. So you've got like your stag parties and hen parties from the U.K., a whole bunch of drunk folks that are just partying. And, you know, you've got people that are here just for a weekend and kind of the locals might say they treat it like their toilet or something like that.   
SEAN: Hmm.   
TERESE: Like it's you know, there can be people who come in and are disrespectful. And so understandably, the locals have been frustrated with the changes that have happened very, very quickly.   
  
SCORING IN – SUNLIT RHODES (BMC)   
  
TERESE: I know for me, I kind of felt like Lisbon was this hidden gem. And now, everybody knows about it. And it's kind of like, ‘Oof. Gosh.’ I wish people wouldn't talk about it so much because it's just feeling like it's it's tough. But at the same time, I'm a hypocrite because when it comes to the people in my life, I'm telling them all like, you should come here. Why are you, you know, still living in L.A. when you could be here?

SEAN: But you're telling the right people.

TERESE: Exactly. The cool people, the people who are going to, like, you know, add to this place in a positive way. But yeah, no, it's I mean, the changes have been significant and sometimes really difficult.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna figure out if Portugal can balance being a hot spot for digital nomads with being a livable place for the Portuguese.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

<rooster>

<<Luis intro tape>>

SEAN: Luis Carvalho is a professor in the School of Economics in Porto, Portugal, which is also where we met. The park where we hung out had a fair number of roosters and peacocks roaming around. But it also has a killer view so … totally worth it for us.

<rooster>

SEAN: Luis focuses on urban development. And we wanted to talk to him about what’s happening in Portugal’s cities. What happens when thousands upon thousands of comparatively wealthy foreigners decide to move into your neighborhood? Is that sustainable?

LUIS: It is to some extent, I think people have more bold opinions here about tourism because perhaps they are more visible. They sit in queues, they occupy a lot of places in the city. And this is kind of what some people say it’s the negative impact, of course there are more we can discuss those later on.  
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
LUIS: But I would say it's not as strongly visible as in Lisbon, of course. Lisbon I'd say it's it's a different story. But here you start to feel some influences as well. But to say that we are not able yet to decompose, what's the impact of tourism itself and the digital nomads, because, you know, many of the dimensions are quite similar to them to some extent. But I would say that over the last decades and the … well, already before Covid, but very much after that, the city has been really growing internationally in many different, many different ways.

SEAN: When you think about these digital nomads coming to Portugal, working here, buying apartments, renting apartments, do you feel like this is a good thing for the country or a bad thing for the country?

LUIS: I tend to have, in the beginning, a very positive opinion about that. You know, because the city, you should know that 20 years ago the city was declining very fast. You know, it was really you know, you saw a lot of criminality. Buildings were falling apart. So it was really kind of a scenario that you don't want to have in your city. And then you start to have all this kind of inflows, you know? People coming in, you know, to do tourism, to work in the international companies. And this is, of course, something very positive.  
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
LUIS: You know, it creates all sorts of new demands. It brings new income to the city. It urges the commerce to modernize itself and it brings talent. You know, of course, in the, in the, in Porto, we needed a lot of economic transformation as well. So, you know, bringing people in with different skills, with higher incomes from an economic perspective is something very, very positive.

SEAN: Do people here generally feel that way, that even if the, the economic development or the urban development is coming from tourist dollars, is coming from remote workers, is that still the kind of economic development people want to see – these economic engines that bring in so many foreigners? Or is it kind of like, ‘Oh, we'll take the good with the bad.’ You know? ‘This is the best we can do.’

LUIS: Well, of course, there are side effects of this. It's always a question of scale. You know, of course, if it doesn't become huge that all city inhabitants become just replaced by tourists and digital nomads. Of course, that would be a very bad scenario. Some people argue, and I’ve argued that before, that this is getting somehow a bit out of control, namely when it comes to tourism. Of course, if you say that's the big thing in the news everywhere, well, they raise prices of houses. That's true. They create some commercial gentrification. This is also true. Are they really embedded within the community? I don't know. We don't have yet studies really to identify the extent to which they really mingle up and create all this kind of cultural benefits to the city. Of course, if you speak about housing prices, well, we did a study in my school recently when we were we were kind of trying to estimate how much does it represent in house price increases and all these kind of housing affordability issues. And the fact is that we found that the foreign residents in the city, they mean residents that come with a lot of income, which is, of course, much higher than the Portuguese average income, they do raise house prices quite significantly. We estimated an impact, which is about 8.5%.

SEAN: How do you see the Portuguese government, be it federally or even more locally, trying to adapt to this influx of foreigners, of digital nomads, in the country?

LUIS: I would say we are kind of waking up a bit to the negative effects. I would say that in the recent past we were putting in place all sorts of strategies and policies actually to attract. And I think in the specific point in time when we put those those policies in place, they really made sense. They were really important because, you know, we had we were coming out of the Great Recession, you know, cities were declining. So really bringing this kind of inflows in was really important. I would say, now we are entering a new stage in which we have kind of to to balance a bit more this these dynamics here. For example, something that is very controversial in the country now is whether we should keep or just scrap the this temporary residence permits.   
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
LUIS: You know, this this specific incentive was really important to bring a lot of people in because they get all sorts of tax benefits and residence benefits. But as I said, we studied that this really adds all sorts of impacts.

SEAN: And but what is the current viewpoint of, let's say, the federal government that, that is in charge of these policies that dictate how easy it is for a digital nomad to enter the country and and how much money they're bringing into this economy and how long they need to stay before they can get citizenship. Because as far as I know, Portugal is still making it easier for digital nomads to become European citizens than Spain or Germany.

LUIS: Yeah, I think policy changed a little bit over the last years when people started to realize that indeed some side effects are becoming very visible. National government started to tamper this down and even some incentives were scrapped   
  
SEAN: Mm-hm.   
  
LUIS: Of course, there were resistance to that. You know, of course, many sectors in the economy say that this is not a good policy because then you are preventing brains to come into the country. And a lot of bright people came in the past precisely because of these incentives. So be aware, this is not just about tourism, but it's about a lot of, you know, skills and technology that, that come in. So as I mentioned, some things were removed. Now, the current government, I would say it's trying to bring back some of these previous policies.

SEAN: We are staying at a hotel that is also a co-working space – that seems … everything's in English.   
  
LUIS: Yeah.   
  
SEAN: And I went to a coffee shop and I said, “Hola, bom dia.” And she said, “Hello.”  
  
 <SEAN + LUIS LAUGH>  
  
SEAN: Are you at all worried that your your city is changing too fast or are you, are you happy to see it? Because the hotel was brand new. The coffee shop looked like it was one week old.

LUIS: Yeah, I mean, this these are the the key issues that everybody's trying to see and addressing. Maybe I gave you a very positive image and a very positive feeling about digital nomads, because I like to see people, cities with different people. I think that's actually one of the biggest advantages of internationalization, all this kind of flows. I think you cannot have a decent city without economic growth and without people coming in with skills and talent and so on. So I see policymakers very much as cooks who are trying to combine different ingredients, but the recipe is not there. So sometimes you have to create the recipe yourself.

SEAN: And sometimes the dish tastes bad.

LUIS: Sometimes the dish tastes bad. You have to you have to do a lot of experimentation as well. And sometimes experiments go wrong, but you have to, you know, muddle through a bit to find the right combination.

SCORING IN – FEVER DREAM (BMC)

SEAN: Professor Luis Carvalho took time away from his children on a beautiful Saturday in Porto to speak with us. Thank you, sir!

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Remember Gia Lee? The other person we spoke to in Porto?

GIA: Graduated in 2020. Class of Covid.

SEAN: Well, a funny thing came up when we were talking to her.

SEAN: Do you know anyone who is a hundo p remote and wishes they could be in an office a couple of days a week?

GIA: Me.

SEAN: Really? What a twist! What?  
GIA: <laughs> Okay.   
SEAN: You're like, in Germany. And then maybe, what is it? France? Spain?

GIA: Paris.. London…Porto, Lisbon.

SEAN: You want an office?

GIA: I don't know. So … Hmmm … How do I put this? I am, like, such an extrovert …  
SEAN: Uh-huh  
GIA: … that, like, I need face time with people.   
SEAN: Yeah.  
GIA: Like, I need that social interaction and, like, being fully remote for me, personally, is a struggle, because every meeting that you have with people is so intentional and is so work focused, and you lose that, like, camaraderie that you build just like passing someone's desk.

SEAN: Tomorrow on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna hear from people who agree with Gia. People who want a little bit of office in their lives. We’re off to Miami …

*WILL SMITH: Miami.*

SEAN: … where employers and employees have returned to the office in greater numbers than most American cities. We’re gonna try and find out why.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Our program today was produced by Victoria Chamberlin. We were edited by Jolie Myers, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd. Thanks to Miranda Kennedy for her help, too!

I’m Sean Rameswaram. More tomorrow on *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]