

Flexible working**The rise of the rural remote worker**

Secluded towns and villages are taking advantage of post-pandemic working patterns to attract professionals

Oliver Balch YESTERDAY

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With headphones clamped on, participating in a five-way video call with colleagues, Andreia Proença looks every bit the modern-day remote worker. But unlike many highly skilled graduates, the 27-year-old industrial engineer has eschewed the bright lights of the big city for village life in Portugal's mountainous interior.

"I was living alone in a rented room in Porto when Covid hit, and it struck me that my quality of life would be infinitely better back in the countryside with my family," explains Proença, who left Portugal's second city two years ago. Access to nature, cheaper rent, less time in traffic and a lower carbon footprint are just some of the reasons she gives for making the move.

Proença's decision runs in the face of a decades-long exodus of young workers from Portugal's countryside, leaving empty villages and a stagnant rural economy in their wake. In an attempt to reverse the trend, the country's [recently re-elected](#) Socialist party government is offering up to €4,800 (\$5,280) to persuade workers to relocate to the countryside.

"The idea is to attract young people back to these areas that have been suffering from a gradual loss of population," says labour minister Ana Mendes Godinho.

About 3,000 Portuguese workers have so far taken advantage of the [MAIS rural employment](#) grant, which was introduced in March 2020. Many of the initial recipients are Portuguese citizens who worked overseas but decided to return home at the outset of the Covid-19 outbreak, explains Godinho. As part of a wider effort to attract foreign workers, meanwhile, Portugal recently extended the scheme to [all EU workers](#) and anyone holding a valid work visa, she adds.

“After the pandemic, people are looking for calmer and more sustainable ways of life close to nature [and] with today’s new modes of working, being in a rural area is no longer a disadvantage,” says Godinho.

The money is sufficient to cover the annual rent of a small house in most Portuguese villages. Some local councils are also establishing co-working spaces for grant recipients. In Proença’s village of Videmonte, for example, residents recently agreed to convert a public building on the main square into an office for remote workers. In addition to an open-plan work area, the refurbished space boasts kitchen facilities, showers and two guest bedrooms.



The Portuguese village of Videmonte has set up co-working spaces to attract professionals © Rita Franca

“Right now, we have three co-working spaces in different villages, with another five coming on stream soon,” says Célia Gonçalves, co-ordinator of the region’s Aldeias da Montanha, a government-led rural regeneration initiative.

Portugal is not the first country to try luring professionals into rural areas. Local authorities in Italy, Ireland, Switzerland, Spain, Greece, Croatia and the US are among those to have offered cash incentives over recent years.

One recent beneficiary of such a scheme is 32-year-old Zeljko Premec, a machine operator for a window manufacturer in the small Croatian town of Legrad.

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Ana Mendes Godinho, labour minister

In December 2021, Premec used a €3,500 grant to make a downpayment on a house in a village about 15km outside Legrad. While he commutes, his wife, a project manager, works remotely. A city house of a similar size would have cost around three times as much, he says. "It's also much less stressful living here. You can step out of the door and immediately walk by the river or go for a bike ride."

Most relocation grants are relatively small. The government of Vermont in the US offers a maximum of \$7,500 to new residents who work for employers in the state. Claire Polfus,

a project director, used the money to upgrade her home technology and pay for a co-working space.

"It definitely opened opportunities that I would have questioned paying for out of pocket," says Polfus, who recently moved to Sheffield, a rural town in north Vermont with just under 700 residents.

It's a similar story for James McKeown, who used a \$2,500 grant from the local government of Greater Bemidji in Minnesota to kit out his home office and cover his fast-speed internet bill. Born and bred in the area, McKeown had left home for university and found a job elsewhere. But the combination of starting a young family and working remotely during Covid made him quit his adopted city of Miami.

"The grant helped with my set-up expenses but no, I wouldn't say it's going to drag people here," he says.

Exceptions exist. In 2017, the Swiss village of Albinen sparked a flurry of excitement when it offered SFr25,000 (\$26,700) to anyone willing to move there. The deal included a cash bonus for families with children.



The Swiss mountain village of Albinen offered to pay people SFr25,000 to move there — but there are strings attached © Alamy Stock Photo

All relocation deals come with strings attached, though. In Albinen, for example, candidates had to agree to stay 10 years and invest a minimum of SFr200,000 in property. In Portugal, the only condition is to stay for a minimum of 12 months, says Godinho.

Rural living can also come with its downsides. McKeown jokes about having to learn to live without “Lyft and Grubhub”, for example. Sub-zero temperatures for four months or more a year also takes some readjustment.

Jay Koski, an art director and fellow grant recipient in Bemidji, admits to a similar nostalgia for the faster pace of city life. To scratch that itch, he and his wife make the six-hour drive back to their former home in Rochester once a month or so.

“It was painful to leave at first, but it hasn’t been as bad as I thought it’d be,” he reflects.

Meanwhile, tax and labour laws can present hurdles. McKeown’s decision to give up his Florida address presented “lots of red tape” for his Miami-based employer, he says. His change of residency also landed him with a 6.8 per cent tax on earnings compared with zero income tax in Florida. The rise, he says, is more than offset by the lower cost of living in rural Minnesota.

Patchy internet access can be another deal-breaker. Bemidji has good enough 5G coverage to allow McKeown to work from his “fish-house” on the lake when the mood takes him. For the millions of rural Americans still without stable broadband, however, it’s a different story.

And, most importantly, employers have to be on board. While the pandemic has done much to normalise homeworking, many companies are not ready to [give up on office life](#) completely. Some 88 per cent of US employers plan to keep their offices open in 2022, according to a recent study by workplace analytics platform Density.

Back in Videmonte, the only black mark on Proença’s bucolic existence is the regular face-to-face meetings she has with work colleagues. The obligation sees her making a 390km round trip to Porto at least once a fortnight.

Rural relocation programmes are not just about the employee, however. Funded through the public purse, backers expect that high-earning digital workers will generate fresh demand for basic goods and services, creating a knock-on boost for the local economy.

With four local builders, five holiday lets, three cafés, one small shop and its first restaurant on the way, Videmonte is ready and waiting for whoever might choose to join their small community. “Everyone here is a very hard worker,” says Afonso Proença, president of the village council (and a relative of Andreia’s). “If people come, we’ll help them with whatever they need to get set up, no problem.”

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