

By Allison Perrigo

The road less traveled

I peered sidelong into my laptop's keyboard. If I was careless with the mangosteen and papaya in my little tropical island bungalow, the ants were sure to invade—and end up squashed among the keys as I pushed out the morning's emails. I would often end up singing “the ants go marching one by one” while trying to reroute them out the door with sticky trails of decoy papaya juice. (“Hurrah! Hurrah!”) This was not a problem I expected to encounter as part of running my scientific editing business. But it was the price—a small one—of my life as a digital nomad.

I've always been a travel junkie. Vacations never cut it, so during my Ph.D. and postdoc in biogeography, I traveled for work anytime I could. But eventually, even the rare desk days became too much. After a visit to the Paris herbarium, where I was sorting through 150-year-old dried tree ferns for my postdoc research, I decided it was time. I needed to be somewhere lush and green, among living ferns.

Just a week later, a professor in my department insisted on paying me for my work editing his manuscripts. I had helped many colleagues and friends with this type of work over the years. I enjoyed writing and helping out. But the professor's offer triggered a realization: I could make a living with this work. Even better, all

I would need was a computer and an internet connection fast enough to email Word documents and support the occasional Skype call. The adventurer in me saw an opportunity. My postdoc ended 6 months later, and many of my colleagues said they would consider hiring me to edit their manuscripts or books. I was ready to take the leap.

Work was slow at first. When I emailed my network to let people know I was officially in business, many expressed interest but didn't have projects ready for me. I had expected this, so—despite fleeting doubts about the course I had chosen—I remained patient. Every day the work emails failed to show up was another chance to explore and find my nomadic rhythm. I trained to be a divemaster in the fast-moving waters between the islands of Bali and Lombok, the famous division that separates Asian and Australian faunas. I loved diving at Bali's Manta Point, where reef manta rays twice my size glided around me. I watched the sun rise over pagodas in Myanmar, saw ash spewing from Volcán de Fuego in Guatemala, ate schnitzel in the Austrian Alps, and felt the earth shake in New Zealand. When people



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ment I never found during my years of research.

After two and a half years working and exploring in 18 different countries, I had just finished a major book project and felt that I could call my business a success. However, the now long hours meant I could no longer explore as much as I once had. When I found out that a colleague back in Sweden was creating a biodiversity center, I couldn't help but get excited about working to start it up. The job would involve some travel, which I embraced. I would get work-free vacations, too—a luxury I had come to miss. The time felt right to have a hint of stability again.

But I haven't forgotten my time of adventure. Every now and then, I come across early-career researchers thinking of trying a nontraditional path. I'm happy to give them a push away from routine and into the deep end. After all, there might be mantas down there. ■

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