

# **Las Islas Remotas: Mobile Working as an opportunity for Canary Islands**

**What does New Work have to do with tourism? The answer seems obvious: terms like work & travel, mobile working, digital nomadism and, more recently, workation point to a great deal of overlap. But should we simply view remote working so uncritically as a new way of tourism?**

**The Canary Islands now have the opportunity to embark on a new path that is under the sign of sustainability and social peace. This article provides food for thought.**

## **Fear is on the rise: Overtourism is back!**

The mood is already changing again in many metropolises after the corona-induced lull: Overtourism and Airbnbisation are returning, having already permanently changed the face of attractive cities before the pandemic.

We remember: In many places, residents had to make way for tourist housing - rarely in a legal way. Small shops for daily needs were displaced by cosmopolitan cafés, the usual restaurant chains and, at worst, by souvenir shops.

Even the german poet and author Hans Magnus Enzensberger recognised in his wisdom: "*The tourist destroys what he seeks by finding it*".

Many locals hoped that this development had been stopped by the pandemic, or at least that a rethink had been initiated by the forced break.

Now, however, an old problem in a new guise is threatening in many places: the boom in remote working could fuel the conflict again.

Especially with the beginning of the winter season, a flight movement of the digital working class from Northern- and Central Europe towards the South begins, in order to find pleasant working conditions in a heating-free climate. Coworking- and co-living spaces are proliferating everywhere where remote workers think it is particularly nice. Booking portals and hotel companies have recognised the trend and are already courting the new clientele.

Not all locals are happy about this development. Again, fears are back concerning displacement and rising of rents and real estate prices.

## **Welcome to the Canary Islands**

The mood is supposedly quite different in the Canary Islands. The local Minister of Tourism, Yaiza Castilla assures: "*There is no problem with tourism phobia in the Canaries. If there is one thing the Canarios are known for, it is the friendliness with which we welcome tourists*". The minister also explicitly includes remote workers and the group of "*silver long-term tourists*" in the 55+ age group as well as sports tourists in her definition.

Confidently, Yaiza Castilla emphasises: "*We have awakened the desire to travel after months of confinement and have positioned ourselves well with the promise of safe and*

*reliable holidays on European islands full of attractions and activities in the best climate in the world".*

Even on the Canary Islands they have finally realised that mass tourism alone is no longer a viable model for the future.

### **New target group: *Teletrabajadores***

On the archipelago in the Atlantic, tourism is now diversifying in different directions, the minister explains.

They are now concentrating on three important target groups. Generous financial resources are being used to promote the Canaries to remote workers (*Teletrabajadores*) as well as long-term- and sports tourists.

The public agency *Turismo de Islas Canarias* has been given a budget of EUR 2 million by the Canary Islands government for 2022 to promote the islands to these target groups. EUR 600,000 is to be made available for the recruitment of remote workers exclusively.

The taxpayers' money seems to be well spent, considering that, according to the Canary Islands government, more than 35,000 digital workers are expected to come to the islands in the first half of 2022. The average per capita expenditure within this target group is allegedly around three times higher than in the comparison group of classic package tourists.

Interesting in this context: According to the Canary Islands government, remote workers now come more often with their partners or even the whole family; the average age is also rising.

This suggests that the digital nomads are increasingly being replaced by employees in mobile working relationships.

This development goes far beyond expectations, Yaiza Castilla emphasises. At the beginning of the 2020s, the goal was to bring about 30,000 remote workers to the islands annually by 2025. This target has been significantly exceeded after only two years.

The minister explains this rapid increase by saying that the Canary Islands have succeeded in positioning themselves as the "*office with the best climate in the world*". In particular, four islands of the archipelago are very popular with remote workers: Gran Canaria, Tenerife, Fuerteventura and Lanzarote.

### ***Nomad List* likes Gran Canaria**

The *Nomad List* portal has chosen Gran Canaria as the ranking winner within Spain, followed by Fuerteventura and Tenerife. Only then do spots on the mainland follow.

In the worldwide ranking, the island of Gran Canaria is currently in 9th place (as of 8.11.22).

However, one should take a closer look at the data used for the ranking on the portal: The incorrect population figure, which is far too low, indicates that for *Nomad List* the island consists only of its capital Las Palmas. Around half of the islanders live there, which roughly corresponds to the figure published by *Nomad List*.

Even though Las Palmas has long been high on the list of digital nomads, there are other interesting spots on the island for remote workers.

The coworking concepts of hotels and private co-living initiatives in the subtropical south of the island are worth highlighting. The *Pueblos Remotos* project, which aims to enable mobile working in rural areas, also seems interesting.

Right now, there is a spirit of optimism at the private level, unchecked by bureaucracy. A lot is happening to adapt to the new development without interference from the government. Also, a subculture characterised by digital nomads has been developing in Las Palmas on Gran Canaria for many years; long before this development was registered in politics.

### **Optimistic forecasts**

The forecasts that *Nomad List* publishes for the Canary Islands can hardly be surpassed in optimism. According to them, demand for remote workers is expected to increase by around 90 % in 2023 compared to 2021.

In absolute figures: Instead of the 46,224 *teletrabajadores* counted in 2021, around 87,000 of them are expected to come to the islands in 2023.

The majority of remote workers come from Europe: the UK (33%), France (15%), Germany (14%), mainland Spain (9%) and Italy (7%).

The Canary Islands Minister of Tourism, Yaiza Castilla, is not satisfied with this. She announced that there would be a direct flight connection to the USA from the summer of 2022. Now the islands have access to the world's largest market for mobile work and competes with the previous destinations of US remote workers in Mexico, Costa Rica and Colombia.

### **Workation: Tourism 2.0 or rather a new lifestyle?**

A question arises: could the sharp increase in numbers, which according to the *Nomad List* significantly exceed the island government's forecasts, lead to overtourism after all, or even to gentrification and social discord in attractive quarters of Canary towns?

What are the minister's appeasements really worth in light of this data?

Remote working allows us to stay longer in a beautiful place because we have our workplace in our luggage. This new way of life has got a name already: *Workation* (=Work + Vacation).

This is exactly the opposite of the mass tourism of the past decades. We are not talking about a comfortable journey and a choice of recreation or action, relaxation or intoxication, but rather about a new lifestyle, a new way of life!

While tourists always remain a foreign body in their isolated system, remote workers have to adapt their daily work routine to the new conditions and get involved in local life by staying longer on site.

Those who stay longer may even pay local taxes and social security contributions, learn the language and begin to integrate to some extent for the duration of their stay.

An important ranking factor on *Nomad List*'s portal is the cost of living, a point the majority of remote workers pay attention to. This is rather the opposite of the carefree life by the pool or beach with an all-inclusive mentality.

It is precisely this fact that makes the majority of remote workers as long-term tenants unattractive for Airbnb speculators. Only re-styled properties with daily prices instead of monthly rents bring dream returns.

Coworkers and digital nomads are into broadening horizons instead of recreation, because they are more likely to share the concerns of the locals or at least be interested in them. In the best case, there is an exchange and enrichment for both sides: for remote workers and for locals alike.

If the new way of life of *New Work* can be described as a type of tourism at all, then it is a very gentle, sustainable one.

### **New Work can avoid overtourism if ...**

... the decision-makers were aware that the wishes and needs of remote workers differ considerably from those of tourists.

The course is set wrongly when those responsible in politics equate this new way of life with tourism. This is what the government of the Canary Islands is doing by uncritically and exclusively assigning the *New Work* movement to the area of responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism.

A great opportunity would be lost if the political decision-makers repeated the mistakes of the past. Instead of industrialising and standardising everything again to create legal- and planning security for large investors, they should individualise and leave room for private initiative to develop.

In other words: instead of tolerating people being driven out of their familiar surroundings by Airbnbisation, instead of creating more and more space for an artificial tourist world, locals should be involved in the development.

Why not Bed&Breakfast around the corner or the shared room at the neighbour's as an alternative to the beautiful but ultimately unproductive glitzy world of hotels?

The majority of digital nomads and remote workers like it authentic, colourful and individual. These people have their workplace in the luggage, which makes them free and independent.

***So consider this: they can leave the supposed paradise as quickly as they entered it.***