

The Nomadic Mindset Wanna Be a Digital Nomad?



TNM_Podcast Episode #009:

Leighton Prabhu

with Kevin Cottam

Transcription



Kevin Cottam 0:04

Welcome to the nomadic mindset season one. My name is Kevin called him a global

Kevin Cottam 0:09

Nomad and the author of the leadership book, the nomadic mindset never settle for too long.

Kevin Cottam 0:14

Over the season, we will go on a journey to discover what is the nomadic mindset

Kevin Cottam 0:19

and how you can tap into that. For this I will be interviewing of a diverse group of cross cultural thought leaders from all walks of life. So let's get on with it. Let's go nomadic together.

Kevin Cottam 0:37

Welcome back to the nomadic mindset and if you are tuning in for the first time today, welcome and enjoy the journeys we go on in each episode. In this episode, the nomadic mindset meets the digital nomad, Leighton Prabhu. Recently I was in Singapore sitting at the lounge of the Jen hotel and orchard gateway. And I noticed this man at the end of the table, working around way on his computer, I struck up a conversation and met a fellow Canadian and Nomad, Leighton Prabhu. I was taken aback by his many years of travel globally as what is commonly known today as the digital nomad. Layton has been working and moving around the world living out of hotels and now Airbnb is working on his computer helping entrepreneurs to scale their businesses by e commerce for over the past 20 years. Let's find out more about the digital nomad. Well Layton It's wonderful to have you on the show today. The nomadic mindset is you the nomadic mindset is you as I say, because you are a digital nomad on many, many fronts. So I'm curious about your life and how on the road and what it's all about. So are you ready late? Absolutely. Great. So Layton, tell me a little bit about who you are?

Leighton Prabhu 2:00

Wow, that's a very good question. I think, well, we can we can start with where I'm from. I grew up in Ottawa, Canada. I went to University in Montreal, I did my my first bit of work in Toronto. And then I went to graduate school in the UK in at Cambridge University. And since then I've kind of been working internationally first, as a as an investment banker in JP Morgan, and then bank America, between Hong Kong and Singapore. And then I moved on to New York for a number of years, I worked as a consultant to Citibank. Then I kind of got the itch again to get into emerging markets. I took a position at PwC in in Moscow for a couple of years as a consultant, and then I enjoyed us so much, I decided to stay on a bit longer and kind of started a business that was helping foreign companies come to the Russian market, which was oriented towards e commerce. So I've got to get involved with some interesting companies that's kind of morphed into consulting of various different kinds of companies in different markets and our, our clients are no longer coming to Russia, but they're based in around the world now. And major markets include the US, UK, Canada, we have some Asian clients as well. So that kind of lets me travel around to meet clients and develop new business as well as the the general area of e commerce I find a lot more dynamic than what I was doing in finance.

Kevin Cottam 3:35

Wow. I mean, that's quite a that's quite a life and and this has allowed you to have this what one would call today that digital nomads lifestyle of being around the world and still being wherever there is a computer you're able to log in and to do your work. And have you found that there are some challenges about that or is it just been totally exciting all the time.

Leighton Prabhu 4:00

Well there I mean, there are pluses and minuses of course, on the on the very low level there's it's not always the same technology and access to strong Wi Fi everywhere. But I think a lot of my businesses, it doesn't have to be always on the computer what I find the benefit of travelling and meeting people is just actually understanding their businesses and having a discussion in person. So it is, it is a lot better that you get to kind of make your own timings and where you want to be for for example, I'd rather avoid the Canadian winters. So this time of year, we're speaking now.

What month is

Kevin Cottam 4:39

February?

Leighton Prabhu 4:41

February, it was speaking in February is one of the coldest months in Canada in Ottawa, where I'm from so I'm delighted to be away and

in Asia, meeting different clients and also doing my work
to catch up.

Kevin Cottam 4:57

Can you just tell me a little bit about This whole thing? I mean, how long have you been on the road then?

Leighton Prabhu 5:07

Oh, well, it depends on how you counted. I've been on the road for a number of years, I think the last time I had a more or less permanent address was in Moscow some years ago, when I was working in the accounting firm. Since then, it's I've always had a business that's been registered abroad so that that isn't a barrier. And I just tend to go where where the clients are. So our projects kind of started with referrals. And we have a cluster of clients in Scandinavia, Iceland, Denmark. Then we also have connections in Singapore, I since my Asian days, no people there and I've kept up my contacts over the years. I also have a good pocket of clients there. And then just referral business. So people that like our service, referring this bus to other business contexts, and it's kind of built from there. So we have also no cluster in the UK as well.

Kevin Cottam 6:04

Hmm. a referral business I think I would imagine that's a very good scenario with regards to being a digital nomad it is getting referrals because you're on the road. So how does the referral work? In your business?

Leighton Prabhu 6:18

Most of it is because come about organically that people are satisfied with the service we provide. And they are, you know, they have connections with other local businesses. So they introduce us to their friends and business colleagues. The other way that's come about initially, when I was building the business, I was doing different guest blogs and other kind of outreach and presentations have also some presentations on SlideShare, which is not part of LinkedIn. So I'll get some connections that way and people can contact me through my blog, but I'm not so active in that anymore as as we become more established. It's more a question now of picking the right clients, rather than Then trying to market all things to all people.

Kevin Cottam 7:04

Okay. So there are ways different ways of getting referrals in that sense. And when you you talk about we and how many are we and is there a location for we are ahead how often so to speak,

Leighton Prabhu 7:18

what we have a legal operations. Initially it was in Singapore and Russia. Now I'm kind of repatriating to Canada, so I started a new company in Canada. But all it is, is the staff from more or less stable, we have five people that are engaged in the company, but we also have a network of technical specialists depending on the type of work we're doing. So we bring them in at the right time for each project.

Kevin Cottam 7:49

Okay, now, you talked about repatriation to Canada. Did you think that getting off the road is really getting off the road? Or do you think that you'll still continue to travel, it's just shifting your little Location is a base.

Leighton Prabhu 8:01

Yeah, it's more the latter. I think of all the places I've been in this, I think it's nearly 80 countries. It's not just travelling, but actually living there for some time and making connections, I still think that Canada has the best balance of quality of life. Now the environment. Just it's just a young optimistic country. So I do I do miss it on I come back regularly. And I think I want to be based there for the next few years. But my business is international, as you know, and there's no way I could just be in one place the entire year. So I'll keep myself flexible but still have Canada as a new foundation once again.

Kevin Cottam 8:45

I have tried to repatriate myself to Canada on an ongoing basis and I have found it very difficult to repatriate myself. And I think that's for a variety of reasons and once a person told me that I worked within Brussels that when she came back to Canada, that she had a hard time

getting a position because they didn't. She had too much European experience. And that wasn't really relevant to Canada. And I found that so very narrow thinking that there wasn't sort of quality and possibilities and all sorts of knowledge that cross cultural can actually bring. So, and I've heard that I've recent again, to me that I might have more of a challenge because everything is very transactional in North America and Canada. And we, I don't know if you found this way is that it's more about relationship building in Asia and also in Europe to a certain degree, but a lot in Asia is about really developing that relationship. Not necessarily so in North America. So can you speak to that and what you think about it?

Leighton Prabhu 9:58

Yeah, I mean, this is something that It's not just hasn't come all of a sudden the the idea of repatriated to Canada. So I've tried to build up connections over the last five to 10 years, going back regularly and I have a connection to my undergrad University McGill, as well as mentoring certain students in my area is doing international business. So that's on one hand, I have those kind of connections, but I think I can see it from the Canadian business point of view is what can you offer to us right now and having such a diverse background? I don't, I don't know that all that many Canadian companies are as international as their, say, European or American multinationals and they were able to take advantage of people with skills. There are a few I think, speaking of my hometown of Ottawa, I think Shopify is one of the major success stories that's, I think the next plank for the growth is definitely International. But other than that, the you know, the texts sector let's say in Canada, I think the major market is the US and companies are looking to grow mainly through people who have connections with potential customers and less or have a good knowledge of that market. The emerging markets of Asia something that I think would be a secondary consideration for for those small those kind of companies are those size of companies.

Kevin Cottam 11:22

hmm

Kevin Cottam 11:23

yeah, it's a

Kevin Cottam 11:25

it's staying local still and not spreading and it is an interesting thought process. So in this case, getting back to your digital nomad and what would you say are some of the things that in actual fact are limitations for you? We'll get back to the positive things but the limitations as an digital nomad because I'm sure there are many people that I know and come across in you do is they ask, they say, Oh, my God, how do you do that? I couldn't do that. But I would like to do that.

Leighton Prabhu 11:57

Yeah, I think it's, I think what it's hard to do. Started into the lifestyle because especially people who have an established career, they're used to that regular paycheck and they're used to going to a certain place and coming home to certain environments. And I, you know, it's really hard to get started. Part of what I miss, I guess, it's that sense of community and reliability with the

internet today, and you know, we have messengers and Skype and you know, video conferencing, it brings you into closer contact with people from different parts of the world in different parts of your lives. This kind of lifestyle, I think, wouldn't have been so easy like 10 years ago, because it was just mainly email and you did feel a sense of disconnect with your own life and your friends. But I don't feel that at this point that it's, it's actually that much of a barrier. I think, in fact that you know, being able to travel in and see friends in all parts of the world if you thought that personal connections is a great benefit of Be flexible in your career.

Kevin Cottam 13:04

Does this take a certain mindset then? Because this is a nomadic mindset and talking about that, too, I would imagine being a digital nomad do there is a mindset involved. And so can you just say what you think about that? And would it be the nomadic mindset? It's definitely probably not the settler mindset of just being settled in one place. But you do settle in one place. So from time to time, but I mean, the whole overarching mindset that drives you to do this, what would that be? What would you say to that? Well, I go

Leighton Prabhu 13:33

back to when I was working full time, especially in banking, and those were very intensive hours of work, you would go go in the morning and come back, just basically asleep, take a shower and go back first thing, and I can remember that the best part of my year was those two weeks I head off, and I was based in Asia. One of the vacations was challenging in the jungles of Borneo, and just so from scratch and trying to find out places where people have never been before we we've penetrated deep into the jungles into long houses where they haven't seen foreigners ever. So that I mean, compared to my experience in working was a lot more enriching. And I just wanted want to do more of that and less of the office type of work. So I want to find something that that can combine the two you don't have any sort of business that that keeps things going. But the the ultimate objective is not to make the most money as quickly as possible is to create and gain the most experience of the world and, and actually experience different cultures and different ways of thinking that I think that's the essence of the nomadic mindset. And it's something that you're not not the test word early on. I guess people don't really identify with this mindset.

Kevin Cottam 14:49

Mm hmm. And is there a way for people to gain the nomadic mindset or is it just something that happens? Do you think I mean, I think that's a question that it's Come up for me as people ask me Well, how do you get that nomadic mindset? And

Leighton Prabhu 15:05

so what would you say? I think it's a lot easier these days because when when I was going through university, you had this preset career path that you would join some larger organisation once you graduate and you would be with that organisation for a number of years fighting to move up the ladder. But But these days with, you know, the emergence of e commerce and facilitation of business and access to capital, you really don't need to go through that before you can get out on your own and try and establish your own business. And I think this is kind

of the essence of being a nomad and on one level, because it's a way of going around the system and testing the right ideas. If you also add on to that the geographic flexibility of honour businesses, especially businesses, I don't see why you would choose to stay in one location. When you have all this opportunity to meet different people and even build your business in other markets, it's really, you know, if you're if you're anchored to a certain place with your immediate family and community, that would be one of the compelling reasons to have children, for example, but before that, I don't see any downside to that. I think, you know, from a Canadian point of view, it's also beneficial in the long run towards building up those international connections and skills to raise the game for Canadian businesses.

Kevin Cottam 16:32

That's really true is how you can go out as sort of the Explorer really, and then come back with all the information of what was out there they experience and that's really important as long as they sort of the the organisations take that as its information for their growth and report. And yeah, and that's cool. I know. I understand that you were an accountant. Now this is often a very unusual place to be as an accountant and then an accountant gone nomadic. So something must have, because it's a very sort of almost a settled mindset in many ways. But obviously there was something within you that just sort of said no.

Leighton Prabhu 17:21

Yeah. And it's actually my plan was initially when I graduated undergrad was qualify as an accountant and then do an MBA in the US school and get into banking on some level. What happened in the meantime, I buy to Cambridge University that had a one year programme at the time and still do. And that kind of opened my eyes towards international connection because I was in a college where almost half the students were from abroad and from really funky places Sub Saharan Africa, countries, in Asia, in South America places and explosive That I didn't have before and just realised how rich of an experience it was. And I wanted more of that. So going back from there into banking or finance in Sydney, even the city as interesting as New York, it just didn't have as much appeal to me as moving forward with the international exposure. And again, like when if you're if you're working in an intense job, you really don't get to enjoy the city where you're in doesn't matter really. You can be in New York, Singapore, London, Hong Kong, but you're spending 20 hours a day at work.

Kevin Cottam 18:36

Yeah, all that long time. I love the word that you use earlier and that is experience and experience is so important, right and people. The value of internet I found I have found from my case, is the value of meeting and experience of different cultures have you as you've said, going into Borneo and for myself with with regards to this book, Meeting nomads in, in Mongolia and in also Kenya with the Messiah in the southern Morocco. And just everything. Not just that but all the other experiences you get from people and introducing to people it has really enriched my life and expanded my vision and in many ways given me more of an understanding of the world. And what how's it been for you in that sense?

Leighton Prabhu 19:27

Yeah, I think at this stage I had the confidence that almost anybody I encounter I can find some level of commonality to have a conversation or say yeah, I've had this kind of experience similar to yours in the past. And that's, that's a great feeling. To to know that you can kind of land anywhere and find people have kind of some commonality with people. I think that's beneficial in any any walk of life. So what right now if I go back to Canada, but I am going back to Canada and I looked at myself as a Being in a single position, I think I can add value in different areas and I want to do a number of different projects where my international experience would be helpful.

Kevin Cottam 20:11

Hmm, that's excellent. I mean, that we're kind of the explorers and adventurers and come home and, and share all that. And I think that that's really important. I remember a long time ago when I was first travelling, that I met a woman in Israel, and she said she was an American woman. She was a Baptist missionary that had been in the Philippines. And she said to me, she says, you know, when you go home, you'll find that nobody is going to be that interested in what you're saying. They listen for a moment and they'll they'll move on. And it was so strange because I remember having conversations with friends. I was so excited about what had happened to know my experiences and it was true. And eventually I just stopped sharing them. I think that has shifted in the world now. that people are enjoying more. And I know that through Facebook and all these things that people love to watch the travel, do you find that as well?

Leighton Prabhu 21:08

Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, younger younger people in Canada or elsewhere. I think one of the top priorities in their lives are to travel and explore the world. Well, while they're still Yeah. And it's, it goes back to how how you can start something from abroad now from from your computer and get going without having to get into the rat race before you're ready force before people had a certain set of vision of their lives, and now it's opened up medically,

Kevin Cottam 21:42

that wonderful that openness is great. I mean, there's an increasing number of people that end that are digital nomads, but also remote working. And apparently that is going to just continue to increase and so organisations are having to shift the way they look at things because people want to have This adventure and, and go elsewhere. Are you finding that as well when you go into organisations or when you consult, are you finding that this?

Leighton Prabhu 22:09

Well are not in our organisations, our clients tend to be owner managed businesses or legacy offline retailers who want to get into the e commerce business, or help help external leads that we had to provide that expertise were more or less their ongoing digital marketing arm. And from their point of view, yeah, they would we have calls, they're always asking anywhere where in the world am I today? And there's a certain level of ending but most of them are with families and they're tied down to the community. They just need to go to school. So they're not in the same position that they can be as flexible location place.

Kevin Cottam 22:50

Yeah, and they're living through your eyes in some ways.

Kevin Cottam 22:56

Yeah, it's cool.

Kevin Cottam 22:59

Do you feel that Your education prepared you for this or do you think it was your mindset and your desire which was inside of you?

Leighton Prabhu 23:06

Yeah, most more the latter. I think my education is not unique. And most of my classmates have gone on to more traditional careers. I've Like I said, I think it's a it's something inside you when I was younger, I started all kinds of different businesses. When I was a kid, I was, I was having one of the first computers in my class was offering word processing services to my fellow students, I was selling chocolate cigarettes side when I was a kid, I was selling newspapers, or magazines door to door so I've always had this in me. And I think it's just you know, you want to accomplish something with credentials in university and then the CA qualification as well, but that that kind of never really left me and when I had the opportunity to do something of my own, it just feels a lot better when you're when you're working and helping people out on a one to one basis. So what I'm doing right now can see that I've transformed our clients businesses from you know, x y. Whereas if you're working in a large organisation, people aren't coming to you because your personal expertise, we're coming to the institution. So I'm working in JPMorgan, they're looking for financing from JPMorgan. I can I can be anybody, anybody can occupy my position in exactly the same thing. So the work is much more rewarding what I'm doing now. And I really wouldn't want to go back into a large organisation where I didn't have that direct connection with with someone else's success.

Kevin Cottam 24:34

Hmm. I would I hear you saying that it is rewarding to have your voice lived in many ways as what you might say in certain parts of the industry that I'm in is is living your voice speaking your voice and you're taking control and I love the whole other word that you use is it gives you confidence, which I think is fantastic. There is one thing that I would you know, there is this piece around the geopolitical situation, which is hunkering down into populism and an anti migration and all of this. And I mean, obviously, I'm certainly not for that particular thing of anti migration, because I am Migrator on an ongoing basis. And you are, what are your thoughts around this and why this might be happening? Is this a mindset or what's driving this?

Leighton Prabhu 25:22

Well, I think there is a bifurcation in society now, people who haven't had those experiences and international connections, feel threatened by people who have had the, you know, the talents and kind of rising in society. So it's more reflection of, of fear, I think, than anything else, people who haven't been able to, to get into that segment of society. It's It's a shame and I think I don't know what the solution to it is because you're seeing in a place like Canada, when

I was growing up in my class, I was probably one of one, maybe one or two That were non white. Whereas now if you go into any major city in Canada, you probably see, I mean, 30%, sometimes 40% in major cities who are, who are non white. And that kind of has shifted the the balance of the Canadian mindset. There was a time when maybe, you know, you're going from 10 to 20. And there was a lot of backlash against that. And I've lived through that as well. I think in the West, it's similar that these pressures are far more pronounced there. And it's a real shame. And you see this as well in Europe.

Kevin Cottam 26:37

Yeah.

Kevin Cottam 26:38

And it's strange, because we're all migrants at some point in North America. Right. And

Leighton Prabhu 26:45

yeah, I mean, they're these are really young countries. Yeah.

Kevin Cottam 26:48

Your family migrated from India, I would imagine do they are?

Leighton Prabhu 26:52

Yeah, yeah. My father, first to the UK, then to USA and finally to Canada. So I was born in Saskatoon. I I don't know other country, but since I've become an adult that I've done a lot of travelling and, and and you spend more time in India now there's my my my younger brothers they were actually been to India. So these are these are our ancestral homes but right now, I would say our our reality real Canadians hmm

Kevin Cottam 27:21

yeah, I know I'm British heritage and I still have family there however, I did enjoy having a Brit Brexit I mean a British passport but now with Brexit I'm not so interested in it because it was more about having the leverage throughout Europe of being there. So I would like to get a more European passport again, this for more possibilities, but I believe there are no boundaries. And I think that's the thing about this is that there aren't any boundaries, whether you're working, do you know around the geography of the world or if you are Just within your business, there should be no boundaries. And that is really the metaphor for the nomadic mindset is taking that Leighton and it's it's been really wonderful having you here on the show and I would love to ask you one more question. And that is, if somebody was wanting to get into being a digital nomad, what are three things that you would say that they need to have? And around the mindset and also anything practical?

Leighton Prabhu 28:28

Yeah, I mean, first of all, it comes from within that you need to, to understand that there's going to be uncertainty, and you have to be comfortable with uncertainty that comes from I think, in your background, not just taking the first leap, but taking a series of events in your

own city, maybe trying new things or getting into different activities or new activities, and developing the flexible way of thinking. I think also, you need to be comfortable travelling and And being in places where you're not physically comfortable all the time. That is unknown whenever you're travelling and especially in emerging markets. So if you really desire those those kinds of things, you should think twice about getting into the nomadic lifestyle.

Leighton Prabhu 29:19

And then I think the I mean, finally,

Leighton Prabhu 29:22

the I mean look around you and see what kind of relationships you have, and the diversity of people in your lifestyle and whether you're looking for more of that or whether you're comfortable in in your little little bit, you know, in comfortable in your current environment in your current relationships, because they will be strained when you're not physically there. And you need to find make extra efforts to keep up those relationships. And you know, if you want to come back eventually like I'm coming back to Canada. I'm not starting from scratch again because I have put in the time and and resources to You keep up with people in my prior life.

Kevin Cottam 30:03

You have been smart, then

Kevin Cottam 30:07

by setting it up for your return, which is very good. You're thinking ahead of the curve, which is fantastic. So yeah, I mean, I want to thank you very much. I mean, these have been great three things comfortable with where you are need to deal with uncertainty, understand that and the desire and also relationships. Yeah, it's about relationships, not only with yourself, but others as well. And I really want to thank you very much for being here with me and helping others to understand a little bit more about being a digital nomad and what it can be and it's also the joy of what it can be. So thank you very much like

Leighton Prabhu 30:48

Thank you, Kevin. It was a pleasure to speak with you and look forward to staying in touch.

Kevin Cottam 30:51

Great.

Kevin Cottam 30:55

You've been listening to the nomadic mindset season one My name is Kevin cotton. invite you to find out more about the nomadic mindset at the [nomadic mindset.com](http://nomadicmindset.com). Until next time, make it a point to go nomadic and start discovering your nomadic mindset.



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