

Words on the water

Emma Gledhill takes the digital nomad lifestyle one step further – from life on the road to life on water. She outlines some of the daily challenges



Emma Gledhill MITI has been translating from German, Swiss German, Dutch and French since 1993. After many years living near Zurich, she now lives up a Swiss alp in a Romansch-speaking village and is enjoying learning the local minority language. Emma is a professional RYA/MCA Yachtmaster Offshore skipper and sailing instructor and, with a degree in German and Music, plays saxophone in a big band.

With the ubiquity of technology, I think many translators now take it for granted that we can work anywhere there is an internet connection. At the moment for many of us that means confinement to one space. In 'normal' life, it can sometimes mean a hotel room, holiday apartment or co-working space. But for me, in summer, it means being out at sea around western Greece.

I have the immense privilege of living and working in two of the most beautiful places in the world. My home base is a ski resort in the Swiss alps, but come summer, I spend weeks at a time on the water on a yacht in the Ionian islands because I'm also a professional skipper and sailing instructor. When we have guests enjoying an island-hopping holiday or taking sail training with us, it's a chance to get properly physical and take a break from the laptop; during the quiet weeks I am able to continue translating for clients.

It seems a world away at the moment. But if you are dreaming of taking even more advantage of the opportunities for mobile working when that's finally possible, what tools will you need and what constraints should you consider?

The right connections

The most obvious thing you require is an internet connection. Of course, you need it to send and receive work and emails, do research and consult terminologies. But mobile working can also make you a heavy user of cloud-based services for universal file access and backup in order to keep all your data with you: for invoicing, admin and so much more. And in a marine environment, it's essential to

have the security of knowing data isn't going to be destroyed if a delicate electronic device has a disagreement with water.

By and large, connectivity on a boat means mobile data for tethering via your smartphone or a dongle. Yet only five to 10 years ago, sailing just a handful of miles offshore could mean no mobile signal for days on end – still the case if you are over 40 nautical miles offshore, when your only option would be expensive satellite communications. Thankfully, however, with the advent of 4G, and soon 5G, coverage in coastal areas is massively better than it used to be.

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However, that then leaves you with a juggling act in terms of data allowances. Choosing the right mobile plan at home and comparing it with local offerings (especially if you change countries frequently) is critical. I'm fortunate that, as of 2019, my home provider offers unlimited everything (including data) throughout Europe, so although the plan is quite expensive, it removes a lot of headaches.

You can also look at local SIM cards and MiFi boxes (for those who don't know, this is a Wi-Fi access point that connects to the mobile network). However in Greece, for

instance, it can be difficult to find a plan that includes more than 20 gigabytes of data a month, which may be completely inadequate for mobile working; I've never yet found a straightforward way of judging how much data I'm using for rationing purposes. The better offerings might also require you to be formally resident in the country, which is often not the case for those who are very mobile.

Another option is to make friends with your local bars and restaurants (or in my case with pontoons or occasionally a marina). Most offer free Wi-Fi, but the connections are potentially insecure, often overloaded (making them very unreliable) and/or beyond comfortable range. And the more remote you are, and especially in areas susceptible to frequent seismic activity, the more likely you are to be left wondering if the local telecommunications network is made up of a paper cup and a piece of string. Of course, this then means you can end up planning your route around good internet connections, so access to local knowledge is very useful.

The problem of power

For most people in the western world, the only time we notice that the electricity is unavailable is when there's a power cut. But on a 45-foot yacht, when your power source is four 12V car batteries, it's rather different, and power management is crucial. Do you know how much power your fridge consumes? Charging your smartphone? A kettle? Your interior lighting? And – crucially – your laptop? How long does your laptop battery last? In standby and in constant use? Will you drain it faster than it can charge? Do you have spare battery packs? And how will you recharge it when it is flat? In a marina or on a managed pontoon, there is usually a shore power connection, so it is possible to use electricity as you would at home. But it's not unusual for an entire village to lose power for half a day at no notice. Some town quays have power pillars, but will there be a



Not a customary translating environment, but a perfectly feasible one

spare socket available? Will the chap who sells the cards (a bit like the old phonecards) come along while you are on board, or will you miss him? Will the local butcher have had a batch of meter fobs delivered from the mainland today? Most people don't usually have to think about these things...

In short, access to mains power can never be taken for granted. And that means you depend on your 'house' batteries for all your needs, so you need some way to keep *those* always topped up. Like the batteries in your car, they are charged whenever the engine is on – and can die beyond recharging capability if they are drained too low. But it is rather against the spirit of communing with nature (not to mention being noisy, polluting, unneighbourly and expensive) to run your engine for hours on end just because you have 2,000 words to translate today. Some boats opt for

diesel generators on board (with similar drawbacks to the engine). Others fit a wind generator (basically a miniature wind turbine; still noisy but more environmentally friendly). As we are in Greece, we chose solar panels, which have transformed our power management and made us almost completely self-sufficient. And they are sustainable and free to run!

Keeping things in balance

We all should have our workstations in our offices set up to minimise the

Will the chap who sells the electricity cards come along while you are on board, or will you miss him?

physical strain on our bodies associated with sitting at a desk and typing all day long, at least if we want to last any time in this profession. But to state the obvious, a boat is not a normal office space.

On a yacht, space is at a premium, so a permanent set-up is a non-starter. What's more, all the seats are fixed to the floor. This means they don't slide around and cause a hazard or injury while under sail, but also that you may not be able to position your seat perfectly in relation to your laptop position. There is certainly nothing like the luxury of a height-adjustable desk – maybe, if you're lucky, a height-adjustable stool at the chart table if you are in a position to spend over half a million of a major currency on a boat. Temperature is also an issue; Greek summers can get very hot indeed, and on a yacht, you are much closer to the elements at all times than you might be used to on land – if not actually always directly exposed to them. So what can you do?

The most important thing is to be aware of the ergonomic hazards and be conscious of your posture and arm height in relation to your keyboard and mouse. Don't be seduced into a twisted or hunched position because it feels fine for a few minutes – a couple of hours later you'll really regret it. Taking breaks to walk around and stretch is more important than ever. Cushions are a great way of adjusting your sitting height in relation to your laptop. Try to have an external keyboard and mouse (and use them at home too so your body's adjusted to them wherever you are). Electric fans are a great way to keep cool (though bear that power consumption in mind). Make sure you have a way to screen or shade direct sunlight from falling on your screen, and be careful of your eyesight; sunglasses can be a critical item of protective equipment, and if you usually wear glasses anyway, prescription sunglasses can be well worth their cost.

Workload management

We've all experienced things going wrong with translation jobs that are beyond our control – scope creep, changing requirements, and new versions materialising mid-job, to name but a few. Mobility can create

its own additional pressures. In my situation, for instance, I ask myself: What happens if the power goes off and/or my laptop is flat? What happens if a storm comes through and I'm up all night to prevent serious damage (after all, as skipper I'm legally liable for the safety of other people) and get no sleep as a result? What happens if we can't find anywhere to moor or anchor in the port we have chosen for its good internet connectivity, and then have to spend three hours we hadn't bargained for on making for a safe haven that doesn't have an internet connection? What happens if conditions are too bad to sit typing or to concentrate?

So don't make things worse for yourself: remember it's essential to make plenty of contingency plans. Build in extra time, such as by negotiating longer deadlines or only accepting jobs where the time management is either less critical or more manageable. Or conversely, be willing to change your plans to ensure, no matter what, you can deliver. The bottom line is that your clients rely on you to deliver good-quality work when you say you will, irrespective of your circumstances. It is your responsibility to make sure you are able to do so.

So as we teach in sailing, take account of the weather forecast (both literal and figurative), imagine what could go wrong, and have a plan B...and plans C, D and E if necessary. Be prepared to expect the unexpected. Good clients will appreciate you all the more for it. But these are all minor niggles compared with the health benefits of



living on a permanently unstable surface, getting the physical exercise involved in sailing, and being exposed to all that fresh air, in addition to the benefits to your soul of exploring the world using the power of nature, and knowing you can have a clear conscience about

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living a more sustainable life (we used a total of EUR 174 of diesel in the entire 2019 season). It feels wonderful to sit in the open air, working at the cockpit table, surrounded by a constantly changing environment – just make sure you've slapped on the factor 50!

Four points for flexibility

Not everyone wants to base themselves on a yacht, but we are fortunate to work in a profession that has few intrinsic geographic constraints – or at least it has under normal circumstances. So when we do all become more mobile, if you do want to take advantage of your freedom to roam, here are a few fundamental principles:

1. Ideally opt for a good mobile phone plan with as much data roaming as possible.
2. Don't take electricity for granted – do make proper plans for power management, especially if you are in an area or situation that is not as reliable as at home.
3. Give yourself more contingency than you might otherwise. If need be, turn down jobs with deadlines that don't allow for things to go wrong, or be flexible enough to change your plans accordingly.
4. Look after yourself. You are your own best asset – and if *you* break down, so does your income. Happy travelling!

On the one hand you need to plan – and remember the factor 50. On the other...



The basics: technology

Critical: laptop and smartphone

At the risk of stating the obvious, a laptop is the be-all and end-all if you want a mobile life. A decent one can replace your desktop machine at home and means you only pay for one licence for your translation memory system (although a backup, or at least a tablet, can also be a wise move if you will be working in a remote location far from repair or replacement services). And much of the time you will be using your mobile phone for internet access and tethering your laptop to it.

Ideal: external keyboard and mouse/trackpad

Laptops are not really the most ergonomic devices, so for heavy users like translators, it's important to make your life as easy as possible. Some recent models even compromise on keyboard location to accommodate oversized trackpads, which makes external peripherals even more useful – and indeed more necessary.

If necessary: Wi-Fi booster, Wi-Fi dongle

A Wi-Fi booster can be a useful piece of equipment to consider if you can't find a suitable mobile data plan. In the unlikely event that your computer doesn't have built-in Wi-Fi or a Wi-Fi card, you will need a way to access wireless networks.

Optional: external monitor, laptop docking station, upright laptop stand

An external monitor gives much improved screen real estate. I use a single widescreen 34-inch monitor at home, which replaces two normal-sized screens. Obviously this is less portable, but it's worth making your home desk as usable as possible. It's also worth keeping an eye on developments that will support other devices: the latest Mac operating system, OSX Catalina, enables an iPad to be used as a second monitor. A docking station and/or an upright laptop stand will save desk space too.