

TRAVEL

# DIGITAL NOMADS FLOUTING THE LAW

**Weak enforcement in Bali allows tourists to get away with breaking Indonesian visa and labour regulations, but this could soon change**

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A digital nomad from Australia enters Bali on a business visa, despite having no intention of doing business while in Indonesia. It allows her to stay on the island for up to six months.

"It cost me US\$580 – the paperwork was a joke," she says, requesting anonymity. "Getting permission to leave Australia was 100 times harder."

She makes no bones about what she has done. "The visa system in Indonesia is absolutely corrupt and I acknowledge I am part of that."

A Canadian woman tells a similar story. "I was pregnant at the time and my boyfriend works in Bali. He found a visa agent who had contacts," she says. This woman paid US\$2,133. "I know I got ripped off but I was really desperate. I did not want to give birth alone."

Authorities are aware of wide-scale breaches by tourists of labour laws in Bali but lack the resources to take action, says Philo Dellano, a managing partner of the PNB Immigration Law Firm in Jakarta.

"There are only 10 immigration investigators working in Bali. They cannot possibly police so many people," Dellano says.

They did catch a couple of people recently, however, and deported them – making headlines around the world.

**The visa system in Indonesia is corrupt and I acknowledge I am part of that**

DIGITAL NOMAD FROM AUSTRALIA

Last week, an American tourist was deported, along with her partner, from Bali after sparking outrage among Indonesians with comments she posted on Twitter about how to get around the country's temporary entry ban for tourists, implemented to stem the spread of the coronavirus, and how to work there illegally.

Kristen Gray, who had been living on the Indonesian holiday island for a year, boasted about her inexpensive luxury lifestyle there and described Bali as "queer-friendly".

She also promoted an e-book in which she shares tips on how to live and work online in Indonesia as a digital nomad – a term for remote workers and freelancers, predominantly from the West, who can earn a living from anywhere with a fast and reliable internet connection.

After an eight-hour interrogation at the Denpasar Immigration Office, Gray was charged with having "disseminated information disturbing to the public", although she claims she is being scapegoated for her sexual orientation.

"I put out a statement about LGBT and I am being deported because of LGBT," she told reporters.

It seems more likely that Gray's exposing of two open secrets known to – and exploited by – tens of thousands of digital nomads living in Bali proved much more problematic for the authorities.

"We decided to deport them for sharing misleading information and illegal methods to gain

entry to Bali during Covid-19 on her Twitter account," said Jamaruli Manihuruk, head of the Bali Regional Office of the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, hinting at the wider issues.

The day after Gray's story broke, Sergei Kosenko, a Russian Instagram star with 5 million followers, also received a deportation order. In December, Kosenko had posted a video of himself riding a scooter without a helmet off a jetty into the sea. Activists accused him of polluting the ocean, but he was targeted for having worked illegally, because of the money that high-profile Instagrammers such as Kosenko earn from product placement, and staging a hotel party in breach of health regulations.

The first secret Gray exposed concerns tourists working online illegally in Bali. The American claims she is innocent despite selling her e-book, *Our Bali Life is Yours*, for US\$30 while living on the island – because she did not get paid in Indonesian rupiah.

However, Dellano, at the PNB Immigration Law Firm, disagrees. "If [digital nomads] are working for foreign companies or individuals and doing all their research online or just talking with people overseas, then that's OK," he says. "But if they are gaining benefit from activities with businesses in Indonesia – it's illegal if they do that on a tourist visa. That means anyone who is a blogger or travel writer."

The second, more egregious secret Gray exposed explains how tens of thousands have circumvented the temporary ban on tourists entering Indonesia. The most recent data from Statistics Indonesia shows that 154,000 tourists arrived in Indonesia in October, followed by 175,000 in November.

Those who have managed to circumvent the ban include American former world champion surfer Kelly Slater, who spent a month travelling around Indonesia catching waves late last year.

Gray knew the loopholes, and was selling the information in her e-book, as well as through online consultations at US\$50 per hour. "We include direct links to our visa agents and how to go about getting into Indonesia during Covid," she promised in a tweet that has since been deleted.

Bali's central immigration office refused to comment for this article, saying visa applications were processed by the ministry in Jakarta, which did not respond to inquiries. But Gray's actions may have ruffled feathers. Although the Ministry of Law and Human Rights has records of 162 foreigners having been deported from Bali in 2020 and 2021 – most for visa violations – it appears immigration authorities are starting to crack down further on offenders.

Last week, a two-strikes-and-you're-out deportation protocol for foreigners caught in public without face masks was announced by the Badung Regency, the administrative region in the island's south that encompasses the most popular tourist haunts.

In September, to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia, the Southeast Asian country worst affected by the pandemic, it was announced that anyone caught not wearing a mask in public would be liable to a 100,000 rupiah (HK\$55) fine.

The amount is equal to the average daily wage in Indonesia, but is not a sufficient deterrent for tourists who work online or who hold savings in foreign bank accounts.

ART



Ernest Chang with two of his works which are part of an exhibition that will open at The Stallery gallery in Wan Chai on February 20. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Handout

## Artists draw fine distinction over borrowed work

**Artworks 'appropriating, not plagiarising', popular culture characters**

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A professor at one of the mainland's top fine-art academies wanted to get people interested in contemporary art with his latest exhibition, and they did.

Chinese internet users were filled with outrage, accusing Feng Feng of plagiarising Miffy, the world-famous cartoon rabbit created by a Dutch artist. But the Chinese artist refuses to apologise for his "Rabbitduck" series – pictures of Miffy with a duck's beak.

"Plagiarism and appropriation represent two different attitudes. Those who plagiarise often try to hide the original by making changes to it, and they target works that are not so famous because they are afraid to be discovered," the professor at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts says.

His Rabbitducks are not plagiarism, but appropriations, he says.

Coincidentally, a Hong Kong-based artist is also about to show



Wake Me Up When It's Over (2020), by Ernest Chang.

**I am trying to use the characters as a tool that adds to the whole piece**

ERNEST CHANG, ARTIST

works that incorporate familiar characters from popular culture. Ernest Chang's "Bling Dynasty" puts characters from *Peanuts*, *South Park* and other cartoons into paintings, embroideries and sculptures that use traditional Chinese art techniques.

The US-born artist takes Feng's side. Use these cultural icons well and they can make people think about important issues, he says. It is a far better option than making art that the audience does not connect with.

Feng's exhibition hit a nerve in China because people increasingly see the country's notorious disregard for intellectual property as a matter of national shame. The artist, who is well known on the international contemporary art circuit and has exhibited widely, says all he is trying to do is to present new issues by tapping into his audiences' collective memory.

"Those who appropriate tend to use the best known images for fear that people cannot recognise the references. The art is a failure if people cannot recognise the original," he says.

Miffy was created by Dick Bruna in 1955, and the children's book character has remained popular across the world, partly because the image has been sold for use in many commercial products. Global Brands Group Asia, which represents the interests of Bruna and his work in China, has posted on Weibo that it is aware of the amount of interest in Feng's works but has not expressed any concern over them.

In a post on Weibo, Feng said he was thankful for the wide-spread discussion his works have prompted.

"I'm very grateful that so many people have shown interest in art, which means art is playing an increasingly important role in our life," he wrote.

Chang also has a serious point to make with his "Bling Dynasty", which will be on show at The Stallery gallery in Wan Chai from February 20.

The exhibition room will be made to look like the interior of a typical mainland home, he says, in a comment on how consumerism has been exported from the West to the East, with luxury brands seeing China as their most important market.

Visitors will spot a lot of familiar faces and luxury brand logos. For example, Lucy from *Peanuts* is seen wearing a Chinese silk dress with the name Versace on it, and holding an off-white paper fan, while standing in a Chinese rock garden.

He picks characters that people have grown up with because, these days, children in China are bombarded with luxury icons as much as cartoon characters.

"I think that it is a paradox. You're telling children to stay young and pure, but at the same time, you're mixing them up with consumerist values," he says.

He has not reached out to brands for permission but he does not believe his art constitutes trademark infringement, he says. "These artworks draw from popular logos and symbols from pop culture but are recontextualised to generate my own original meaning that is very different from their original application."

"I am trying to use the characters as a tool that ultimately adds to the whole piece. The piece itself does not necessarily just mean Eric Cartman (from *South Park*) or just mean Balenciaga... When it's all together, add it up," he says.

ENTERTAINMENT

## Indian YouTube comedian's star continues to rise

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Growing up, 27-year-old Prajakta Koli never thought she was a class clown or the funniest person in the room, but this did not stop the cheerful, petite Indian YouTuber from creating the popular comedy channel *MostlySane*.

"I always got a good response from the audience whenever I performed on stage. Every time I was doing theatre, hosting a programme or a mock radio show during college days, I felt very true to myself and people said they found me witty and fun to listen to," she says.

Koli's dream since middle school was to become a radio DJ, and she worked towards her goal diligently. While she did get a radio job and even hosted her own midnight show, *Call Centre*, it flopped and she quit.

Then, in a twist of fate, she was encouraged by a friend to start a YouTube channel, and *MostlySane* launched in February 2015.

"Nearly five months after I started, my video called '10 Hilarious Words Delhi People Use' went viral and it brought my channel to a new audience across the country. I started earning proper money from the channel only after a year of creating content," Koli says.

*MostlySane* contains comedy and funny role-playing videos in

Hindi, and the content is relatable to Indian audiences as the ideas are taken from mundane situations in everyday life.

Koli does not use slang or swear words, but this appeals to her fan base of more than 6 million subscribers.

Her videos, such as "Types of Fighters", "Telephone Call with Relatives", "Types of Girlfriends" or "The Night Before an Exam" have left Indians in stitches. "I love observing people and always look at how I can dramatise a mundane situation," Koli says.

"I take notes in a little notebook or on my phone, which makes it easier while brainstorming for content ideas. I'm a very dramatic person in a dramatic way," she laughs.

While Koli scripted all her videos for the first five years, she now has a small, talented and reliable team to support her and keep her grounded.

Although Koli's comedy videos are fairly tame, she admits she still receives negative comments. "That's one side of the internet now – hate comments don't even depend on what the content is about. I don't get affected by it any more and I am fortunate to be guarded by my supportive team, family members, friends and viewers," she says.

Apart from her comedy, Koli has tried to drive change through a number of youth-centric social initiatives to shift perceptions



Prajakta Koli uses comedy to tackle social issues. Photo: Handouts

around body shaming, online bullying and girl's education. "My experience with body insecurity was internal. I was never shamed or bullied by anyone, but I grew up thinking that I was too skinny," Koli says.

On World Mental Health Day in 2016, she casually asked her YouTube viewers if they wanted to talk to her about anything in particular.

"I received around 8,000 emails back then, and realised that feeling insecure and self-conscious about how we look is a very common insecurity among both boys and girls," Koli says.

"This overwhelming response made me do the song *Shameless*.

I wanted to make it sound fun, powerful but not preachy," she says.

In 2018, Koli created another song, called *No Offence*, against hate speech, homophobia, sexism and internet trolls. YouTube officials noticed her video and she was invited to present her project at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

"It was on the International Day of Tolerance, and my favourite moment was holding the Indian tricolour, and that memory still gives me a mind-blowing feeling," she says.

As a part of YouTube's Creators for Change programme last year, Koli was selected for an initiative

on girl's education alongside two other content creators – Liza Koshy in the United States and Thembe Mahlaba in South Africa.

Koli has also acted in a short film, *Khayali Pulao*, and her role here is not a humorous one. She plays the role of Asha, a teenage schoolgirl from rural India who's stubbornly eager to play handball despite not being able to qualify for the team and being told to stop trying.

The popular romcom Hindi drama series *Mismatched* marked Koli's debut on Netflix late last year. She plays Dimple Ahuja, a girl who wants to be a big tech wizard.

In a country that is crazy about Bollywood and film stars, Koli will now star in a Bollywood film. She is appearing in *Jug Jugg Jeeyo*, a big-budget romantic drama film alongside popular Indian film stars including Anil Kapoor, Varun Dhawan, Kiara Advani and Neetu Kapoor.

"The selection and finalisation was a quick process, and although I was very nervous, everyone on the set was so warm that I had a wonderful time during shoots," Koli says.

Meeting and interacting with her fans in person is a favourite part of Koli's life as a YouTuber.

"I have really missed running into and hugging my viewers during the pandemic. It's a warm feeling when you see viewers as people and not just as usernames," Koli says.



American tourist Kristen Gray was deported last week. Photo: Reuters