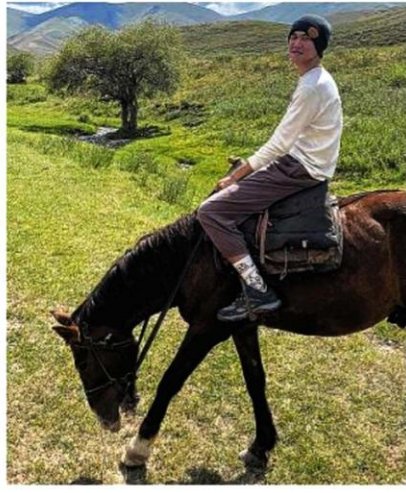


Mr Justin Ong (right and far right), pictured in Kyrgyzstan, says that though one can never fully unplug from work while quiet vacationing in wild places, he has learnt to embrace the chaos that comes with it. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JUSTIN ONG



# Go on a holiday without telling your boss?

Quiet vacations, where staff secretly work from abroad, are taking off



Teo Kai Xiang

In today's increasingly remote workplace, a discreet new trend is emerging: quiet vacationing.

This practice, where employees travel and work overseas without telling their bosses, is gaining momentum with workers who crave more leave and flexibility, but fear the judgment of their bosses and colleagues.

Though the trend has drawn comparisons with "quiet quitting" – doing the bare minimum at work – workers tell The Sunday Times that the real driver behind keeping their travel plans secret is the growing acceptance of remote work. This is further fuelled by discomfort in discussing work-life balance with their bosses.

However, experts caution that if companies do not make space for open conversations about the realities of flexible work, they may find themselves blindsided by a workforce that is already halfway across the globe.

One such worker is Mr Justin Ong, 27, who works for a multinational human resources firm, and has taken 10 quiet vacations since the start of 2023 – mostly to destinations in Asia such as Japan, Taiwan and Vietnam.

As the sole member of his department based in Singapore, Mr Ong works across many time zones, making remote work at uneven hours a norm for him.

Despite this, he keeps his travels secret due to what he perceives as a heavy stigma against working on the go.

On a recent trip spanning India, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Mr Ong used a combination of leave days and public holidays to cover two weeks of his absence, but extended his stay, working outside Singapore – without his workplace knowing – for an additional week.

"There are many times in my travels when I think, 'This place is awesome. Why am I here only for a couple of days?' There are so many places in the world that deserve a few weeks," says Mr Ong, who gets 15 days of leave a year.

He puts in extra hours during some weeks to free up more time down the line, so he can be less tied to his computer and sightsee on the road.

"It didn't start out this way, but once I saw how good I was with it, I started pushing myself to see how far I could go and what I can get away with," he says. "What kind of crazy places can I travel to, where I can still have Wi-Fi and answer my e-mails? What kind of trips can I do without taking time off?"

However, working while travelling is not without challenges.

Flight delays and unstable Wi-Fi can disrupt the best-laid plans, and Mr Ong recalls having to take meetings from the airport on multiple occasions.

"There are always these nerve-racking moments, the unease in the air, so you never really feel like you can drop everything, which is the purpose of having a vacation," he says. "But if you do it enough, you kind of get used to it."

Mr Ong is not alone in quiet vacationing.

Experts tell ST that the trend is closely tied to pandemic-driven changes. Remote work has become the norm in many sectors, blurring the lines between professional and personal lives.

An April survey of adults in the United States by market research firm The Harris Poll found that 28 per cent of 1,170 workers surveyed have taken time off without informing their employers.

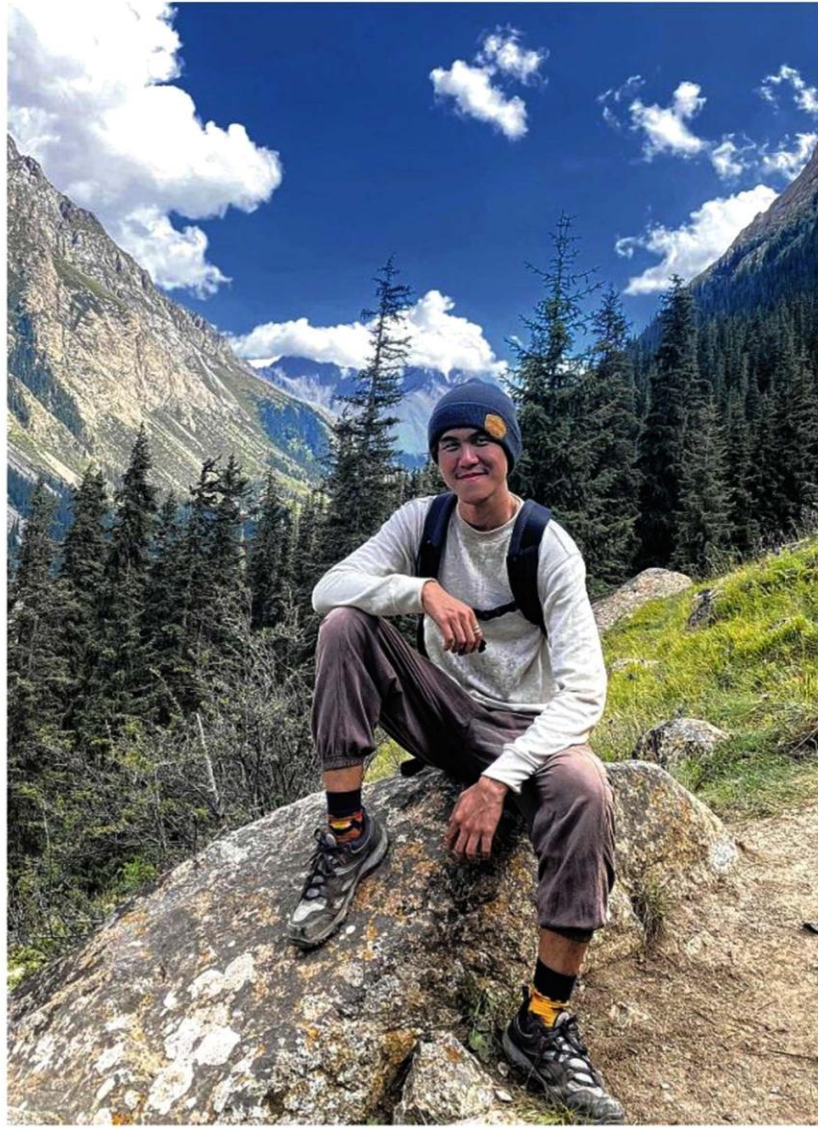
Netizens discussing the trend have amassed thousands of views on TikTok.

One video by TikTok user managermethod – which has garnered over three million views on the platform since it was posted in May – states: "If you're an employer that chooses to give employees five or 10 days of vacation a year, then they're likely going to choose to take more any way they can."

Dr Sriram Iyer, adjunct lecturer at the National University of Singapore Business School, attributes the rise of quiet vacationing to workers facing greater job insecurity while desiring more control over their time.



Public relations worker N. Ong says that destinations like Bali (pictured) offer a more relaxed vibe than his home office. PHOTO: N. ONG



"Employees are working longer hours in an increasingly competitive job market, while also feeling the urge to fulfil pent-up travel desires post-pandemic," he says. "This leads to a trend where individuals combine work and leisure, by taking vacations while still attending to work obligations."

## SECRET HOLIDAY

For one worker, the pandemic was the catalyst that led to him embracing quiet vacationing.

Mr Jacob, 31, a business development professional who declined to share his full name, started quiet vacationing during the pandemic in 2021, when he left Singapore to work remotely in Britain without informing his bosses.

Before the pandemic, he had visited Britain twice a year.

To avoid the hassle of navigating Singapore's quarantine restrictions multiple times, he decided it would be more practical to stay in Britain for six months instead. "I had to adjust my life around the time zone differences, so I was largely nocturnal for six months," he recalls.

He spent this period working out of Airbnb accommodations. To keep costs low, he would sometimes negotiate directly with hosts for cheaper rates.

Mr Jacob kept his location quiet as he believes his colleagues would have disapproved and seen his time there only as a holiday, even though he was still meeting deadlines.

Despite the challenges in keeping his time abroad under wraps, he says the experience is one he does not regret, as it meant being able to reconnect and spend time with close friends in Britain.

For others, working from the beach in Bali strikes the right balance between work and leisure.

For public relations executive N. Ong, who also declined to share his full name, quiet vacationing is driven by a desire to optimise his limited leave days – he gets 20 a year – and working from more appealing environments than his home in Singapore.

His quiet vacations have taken him to Bali and Johor, and typically involves extending a long weekend with a few days of discreet remote work. "I do the Johor thing every other week – I wouldn't even call it quiet vacationing because it's so near," says the 25-year-old.

The relaxed vibe in these destinations is a step up from his home office, he adds.

"I go with the attitude that as long as my quality of work stays the same, there's no need for anyone to know where I'm working from."

Mr N. Ong worries that working from Bali might give traditional-minded bosses and colleagues the impression that he is not serious

about his job. He insists that his performance has remained consistent while quiet vacationing.

## DESIRE FOR FLEXIBLE WORK

Dr Paul Lim, a senior lecturer at the Singapore Management University, says quiet vacationing is a complex trend to unpack because of the myriad reasons behind why a worker might travel covertly.

These include employees not wanting to use up their leave days, the fear of asking for time off and a belief that one can maintain one's productivity levels even while working outside the country.

He acknowledges that self-motivated employees can successfully balance their personal and

professional lives without compromising the quality of their work.

"Think of digital nomads who are living in traditional holiday destinations like Phuket and Bali, but still running businesses or working remotely," he says.

However, Dr Lim cautions that the lack of accountability and transparency inherent in remote work could also be exploited by some employees.

And even with the rise of remote work, not all employees are comfortable with the concept of a discreet getaway.

Mr Krishna, a media worker who declined to give his first name, says his only brush with the trend was when he received a free set of air tickets to Kuala Lumpur. As such,

he decided to combine a short holiday to the Malaysian capital – on company time – with remote work.

"It was my first time doing something like this and I don't know if I'll ever have the guts to do something like that again," he says.

For him, without approval from work, the benefits of combining work and travel were overshadowed by the fear of being discovered or, worse, being summoned back to the office while abroad.

Still, Dr Iyer notes that the introduction of the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) Requests in April marks a recognition of the desire for flexible work that is fuelling the quiet vacationing trend.

These guidelines require employers to have a process in place for workers to make formal requests for flexible work arrangements.

"Employers will need to consider such employee requests and be ready for 'quiet vacationing' to turn into 'loud vacationing,'" he says.

Although these guidelines will come into effect only in December, companies elsewhere have already embraced more permissive approaches to flexible work.

Since 2021, Google's work-from-anywhere policy allows staff to work for up to four weeks a year from a location other than their main office. Meanwhile, companies like Airbnb and Dropbox have embraced fully remote work cultures, advertising it as a key benefit to prospective hires.

To address concerns about the potential challenges of FWAs, Dr Iyer suggests implementing a few key strategies. These include ensuring fair and equitable access to FWAs for all employees and implementing virtual private networks (VPNs) to protect company data.

As flexible work becomes increasingly common, Dr Iyer emphasises the importance of shifting away from focusing on where employees are, and towards outcome-based evaluations which assess workers on their results.

Ms Fatim Jumabhoy, head of law firm Herbert Smith Freehills' employment, pensions and incentives practice in Asia, believes that having an avenue for formal requests for FWAs can foster open discussions between employees and employers about the reasons that one might quiet vacation.

"In a healthy work environment, these discussions can be had openly, and appropriate compromises that balance the employee's and employer's needs can be achieved," she says.

"If, however, employees feel that their employers aren't open to such conversations – or have blanket rules about working from the office – they are taking matters into their own hands and achieving the same end, without their employers knowing."

kaixiang@sph.com.sg