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Home alone

More and more people around the world are living alone. Have they embraced the 'dolce vita' – or merely succumbed to the dreary routines of late capitalism?

By Suraj Yengde | 04/07/2026 | Reading time: 6 minutes

More and more people live on their own – is that a good thing? Foto: Hannah Yoon

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I couldn't bring myself to write a piece on solo living without being in the situation first. Just yesterday, my last visitors left and I am slowly settling down in my new apartment in Philadelphia. It's now that the gravity of living alone is becoming clear to me. You need to adjust yourself to its limitless possibilities — and its limitations.

Living alone is very different from how I grew up in Nanded, a city in west-central India. We had a one-room house that was inherited from my grandfather. That box measuring 6 x 6 metres offered my parents and their three children shelter, but the bare minimum besides. The roof leaked and the cold pierced right through the corrugated sheets. In the dry summers of the Marathwada region, going into that room was like being in an oven, at times I felt like a rotisserie chicken.

It was home, but also a place I wanted to escape. And I am not the only one who equates living alone with freedom. Internationally, the share of one-person households has nearly tripled since the early 20th century.

> ***"There's a Hindi and Marathi saying: Loneliness eats you up"***

These days, across OECD countries, single-person households make up on average more than a quarter of all households. This statistic varies by region. One-person homes are more common in the United States and northern Europe, and less so in Italy or Romania. In a 2025 Statista survey, just four percent of respondents in India said they lived alone, compared with a third of Swedes. Even when people can afford to live alone, Indian cultural commentator Anurag Minus Verma was doubtful that would change fast in India. "The Indian lifestyle is generally chaotic in nature and people prefer it like that," he asserted, echoing the sentiment of the common Hindi and Marathi phrase: अकेलापन kha jaata hai! "Loneliness eats you up".

As a young man, I moved from my cramped home to student accommodation in Birmingham, supported by a Maharashtra state scholarship for Dalit students. Living in the UK, I no longer had to barter or bargain for my space. I had housemates and a tiny room of my own with just enough space.

But while my European housemates seemed aware of the lifestyle that was expected of them, I had to get used to the idea that we were not automatically friends. I never quite learned this. I had been desperate to leave the cramped life in Nanded behind but the silence, grey clouds, and forced isolation of the West was also something I wanted to escape.

Growing up I was always in the company of others. That was my life. As an adolescent I craved privacy for my secrets, urges and coming-of-age desires but had to share a bed with a brother, or the floor made of cobblestones where I slept most of my life with other siblings or parents.

When I left for South Africa to pursue my first doctorate, it was all exciting until my fellow dorm students went away for the Christmas holidays. The dorm was on campus and the colonial era buildings had a strange eeriness. I was in the company of ghosts, whose shadowy thoughts struck fear into me.

I discovered that when civilisation departs, non-human life finds its way in. There is space to see birds with the eye of an ornithologist or survey the vegetation that was growing day by day.

Yet living alone does not necessarily make us independent. We may be self-sufficient, but we yearn for company. That company, if not satisfied by a human, could come in the form of furry beings, or entertainment or even libation. So what then is the attraction of solo living?

> ***"Yet living alone does not necessarily make us independent"***

Maybe it is the lure of having personal, private space that no one has the agency to question, except your landlord or the mortgage company. Or perhaps the chance to call something your own? Or perhaps we are seeking solace and silence amidst the tumult and cacophony that has now crossed the urban towers through our cell phone updates and raucous social media briefs.

Solo living came with its own challenges for me, but also with a supposed sense of newfound freedom. But, I asked myself, do we really need freedom?

Meanwhile, back at my apartment in Philadelphia, I am yet to fully immerse myself into the bliss of living alone. Having a bigger apartment with a guestroom is new to me. But at present, my movement around the spacious apartment is limited, reflecting how little space one person needs.

And it turns out that living solo is viewed as an intimidating feat by my cousins, who left me a week ago. Their awkward departing message was to urge me to “take care” while being alone in the apartment. Another cousin who lives in New York City said he would feel “morbid” if he were in my place, living alone. And he has a point. Societies that value individualism have also inadvertently created a loneliness crisis in the advanced economies. Here, Japan is a prime example. The government established Office for Policy on Loneliness and Isolation in 2021 and appointed a minister to tackle the problem.

And there are things you miss out on when you live solo: who do you share food with, or who restocks the pantry when you have forgotten something, or who do you have a spontaneous chat with? And what happens when there is a health emergency? Even having a roommate, a living body in your reach, helps calm the anxiety of what happens if you face the unthinkable.

This has been seen in China, where living alone is also on the rise. More than ten million people have already downloaded a new check-in app named Are You Dead? By pressing a button daily, they can notify their friends and family that they are alive and not getting buried in the hubris of high towers.

In the end, it comes down to a decision: Either you need to sacrifice solitary life for company, or sacrifice company for meditative solitude.

In the Buddhist forest tradition, being alone is the preferred option. Renouncing the world is an age-old mantra of the ascetic traditions, it is the essence of Dhamma, the unvarnished, direct truth. And living alone means we have to scratch the surface of that fear and ask the existential questions—what is it that you are trying to escape?

Indeed, loneliness provides ample opportunities for self-investigation. Your inner self is mirrored without anyone’s interference. Our roaming thoughts and ghosts may be unwelcome because we are not trained to appreciate the subtlety of the mind. We are always with people: our parents, a significant other, children, ageing elders, relatives, friends, or barracks men. In the monastic life too, you are not in solitary confinement. You meet, interact and engage with people, but with a defined purpose. Once that is achieved, you resume the work of taming the mind in solitude.

There was a time when I sought a solitary life and I fought for it. These days, I still enjoy it, but at the same time I do not shy from the possibility of living with someone, a person, family member — someone within reach without crossing the boundaries of personal space. There is no easy answer to the living alone conundrum: living with someone can spark boredom or make you long for solitude. For now, as I unpack my boxes in Philadelphia, I'll stick to an imagined friend or even a digital app that is saving millions in China.

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