

Tips From a World Traveler

PC World

Thursday, March 13, 2008; 12:08 AM

You think a three- or four-day business trip is challenging? How about a four-month journey to eight countries--using 14 different plane tickets?



Randy Ross, a former PC World executive editor, recently took that journey. From August 30 until December 20, 2007, Ross ventured solo to Venezuela, Greece, South Africa, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Australia, and New Zealand.

While many don't have the opportunity to travel so extensively, I figured we could all learn something from Ross's travels. So I asked for his tips on making the best use of technology when far away from home for an extended period.

Some Web sites make it easier to plan an international, multicountry itinerary and get estimates of ticket fares. But you'll still need a travel agent to get exact costs for your travel, Ross says.

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The sites Ross used for research, along with his comments, include:

To prepare for the trip, Ross scanned essential documents--including his passport, prescriptions, immunization records, and driver's license--and stored the digital files on a USB flash-memory drive. That way, if he lost the paper documents, he still had digital copies. The USB drive was password-protected and included EditPad Lite, a free text editor.

"Every Web cafe I visited had a PC that used a USB drive," Ross says.

In addition, Ross uploaded the documents to a password-protected, free Yahoo Groups account as an additional backup. Though he didn't need the digital documents, they might have come in handy: Somewhere in South Africa, Ross lost his

USB thumb drive.

"I couldn't bring a notebook," Ross says, because it would be too heavy and fragile. "Anything that was really valuable had to fit in my money belt. There was always a chance my backpack could get stolen from a bus baggage rack or from a hotel room, or that I could get robbed."

Instead, Ross relied primarily on public computers at Internet cafes.

"Stopping into a hostel or guest house and asking to use their Web terminal is a good option when you can't find an Internet cafe," he adds.

Like many world travelers, Ross kept family and friends up-to-date via a blog. His is called Randy's Travel Diary. (Warning: The site contains occasional adult language and situations.) He recommends writing your blog posts in a word processing document and saving the files to your USB drive, then copying and pasting the text into your blog. The reason? Sudden power outages in some countries and inadvertent keystrokes made on foreign keyboards could wipe out everything you've typed into a new blog posting.

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If you blog, Ross suggests adding an RSS feed option (which many blogging services offer). RSS enables those following your blog to automatically receive updates via e-mail and as a feed to their browser.



Ross used Yahoo Web-based e-mail during his travels. Most of the time, it worked without a hitch. But in Cape Town, South Africa, Ross fired off multiple messages--and no one received them. Yahoo customer support couldn't explain their disappearance. For important messages, Ross recommends asking recipients to respond back to you, so you'll know if they received the e-mail.

Ross took a several-years-old Cingular 2125 smart phone on the trip. For \$200 he had it unlocked for international use and purchased a SIM card that included \$100 worth of international calling.

Unfortunately, his phone only worked in a few places.

"Even though it didn't work much, I had to carry it around along with the charger and all the power outlet adapters for different countries," Ross says. (He had borrowed those items, so he couldn't simply pitch them along the way.)

The phone was primarily for making local calls within each country and for emergencies. "I saw a lot of people using Skype [to call home] at public terminals," says Ross. "I relied on e-mail and my blog to stay in touch with people at home."

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In hindsight, Ross says he'd rather have taken a digital camera than a cell phone, and it would have been better to buy a SIM card specific to a country while he was there.

Before embarking on his adventure, Ross prepaid his utilities for five months and set up automatic payments via credit card for other bills. He also set up monthly automatic payments of his credit card bills from his checking account. And it's a good thing: In several places, such as Karpathos, Greece, Ross was unable to access his bank accounts online.

To prevent fraud, credit card companies sometimes block access to your account after unexpected charges from foreign countries are received. So Ross recommends telling your bank and credit card companies in advance that you'll

be overseas.

On a related note: Recently, when traveling to Canada, I mistakenly tried to use my Charles Schwab VISA card in a Toronto airport ATM. I attempted this two to three times before realizing the card I was using was not my Schwab ATM card. By the time I reached my hotel, Schwab representatives had called my home and cell phone numbers to alert me to the unusual activity. I've been a Schwab customer for just a few months, but so far I have nothing but praise for the company.

As much as he enjoyed his trip, Ross says, "I was never so happy to be home," which is Boston. "I won't be repeating this kind of trip anytime soon."

Ross hopes to write a book about his adventures. His working title: **Rats in the Lobby, Snakes in the Wine.**

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Ultimately, his adventure showed Ross he was tougher than he thought.

"I spent a lot of the trip obsessing about bathrooms, sleeping accommodations, drinking water, dysentery, and dengue fever," he says. "I was bitten up by mosquitoes in malarial and dengue fever areas.

"Beyond a couple of colds I caught in Western countries," he adds, "I never got sick."

This is the first in an occasional series of columns about seasoned travelers. Do you spend more time on the go than in the office? Have anecdotes and tips to offer others from your many travels? Specifically, how has technology made your travels safer, easier, more productive, or more enjoyable?

If you're interested in being profiled in this column, please send me an e-mail. Tell me a little about yourself as a traveler and share your best travel/tech tips. The more specific your tips are, the better.

? In some cases, yes, as we found in our recent roundup of five portables under \$1000. For example, consider HP's Pavilion dv2660se. Our \$899 evaluation unit earned a PCW score of 84 (Very Good). We liked the laptop's 6.3-hour battery life (with an extended-life battery); the included set of [Microsoft Works](#) applications, which is unusual for budget laptops; and decent performance for a laptop in this price category.

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You can now accessorize your Asus Eee PC, the wildly popular, low-cost Linux-based laptop. Among the new options is Expansys USA's ORA Essential Accessories Pack (\$128), which includes a travel adaptor, auto power charger, screen protector and black leather case.

Lenovo has formally announced the much-anticipated, ultra-thin ThinkPad X300. The portable's weight starts at just 2.93 pounds, and it includes three USB ports and an optional ultrathin DVD burner (which brings the laptop's weight to 3.13 pounds). The ThinkPad X300 measures 0.73 inches at its thinnest point and 0.92 inches at its thickest, compared to the MacBook Air's 0.16 inches and 0.76 inches. You'll pay more, though: Prices for the X300--which has a number of other features the MacBook Air lacks, such as the ability to expand memory up to 4GB and built-in

ethernet connectivity--begin at \$2799 (compared to \$1800 for the MacBook Air.)

Contributing Editor James A. Martin offers tools, tips, and product recommendations to help you make the most of computing on the go. Martin is also author of the [Traveler 2.0](#) blog. Sign up to have the [Mobile Computing Newsletter](#) e-mailed to you each week.

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