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# The electronic traveller

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*Life in the internet age has brought us new kinds of travellers' aides, intimately linked with our omnipresent mobile technology. Phones, tablets, ATMs and wi-fi hotspots have transformed the experience of travel and tourism in the 21st century. This article highlights some basics, and a few tips and tricks, for the use of technology while travelling.*

## INTRODUCTION

For as long as there have been travellers, there have been travel guides. First-century Greeks and Arabs could already purchase guide books for their maritime and terrestrial journeys. Both Marco Polo and the pseudonymous Sir John de Mandeville wrote their guides to exotic places as much for would-be travellers as for interested homebodies. For 19th century Germans, the Baedeker family began a series of guides and maps that continue to the present day.<sup>1</sup> The fictional Sherlock Holmes relied heavily for his journeys on the real timetables and guide books published by his contemporary George Bradshaw.<sup>2</sup>

But the arrival of mobile technology, widespread internet access and cloud storage has broadened the scope of travel information, and made everything – potentially at least – much easier. Like snails, we can carry electronic “homes” around with us, and travel the world without leaving our comfort zones. This article takes a look at some of the benefits, and a few of the disadvantages. For convenience, I have grouped my observations under four headings: Preparation, Money, Hardware and Software.

I have generally cited software links for the Android platform, but iPad/iPhone and Windows users will be able to find the same or similar apps for their own systems.

## PREPARATION

Purchase your travelling equipment, set up your subscriptions and install your software well in advance. Make your preparations from home on a fully-equipped PC with a broadband connection, rather than while travelling, perhaps on a tablet with a failing battery and intermittent wi-fi. Travel insurance, accommodation, plane tickets, travel passes and even individual train and bus journeys can all be booked online. A Google search will identify sites, and searching for “[*name of site*] review” will often lead you to useful comparisons and caveats.

Where physical documents such as overseas rail tickets are required, make sure you leave time for their delivery to you by post. SIM cards (see below) for some countries can be ordered online, but it is generally safer and cheaper to buy them on arrival at an airport or rail/bus station, where the provider can install them for you and check they are working.

Scan or photograph your passports and travel documents, and upload them to a cloud storage site, so that you can always view and print copies if necessary. Make sure your travelling companions and next-of-kin at home have access to the site too.

New software and hardware can take a while to learn, so trial it first by navigating around your own neighbourhood, planning imaginary journeys, travelling to an unfamiliar suburb and tracking down a post office, an ATM, a supermarket and a bus stop or railway station, and so on. Any hardware or software which fails you at the trial stage can be modified, repaired or replaced.

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\* Jon Jermey is an indexer, computer trainer and writer. All websites viewed February 2015.

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, *List of Baedeker Guides*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Baedeker\\_Guides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Baedeker_Guides).

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, *Bradshaw's Guide*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradshaw%27s\\_Guide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradshaw%27s_Guide).

## MONEY

Different countries operate under different financial rules, so you should find out the specifics for your trip in advance, but generally speaking, any credit or debit card that works in an ATM in Australia should work with the same PIN or password in ATMs around the world. Note that some overseas ATMs show numbers only, not numbers and letters, so letter-based mnemonics will not work.

As an alternative, or a spare in case of loss, damage or theft, various kinds of “cash passports” or similar PIN-protected cards<sup>3</sup> are available from Australian banks and post offices. These can be pre-loaded with cash in one or more currencies of your choice, and work in overseas ATMs in a similar way to debit cards.

Most Australian financial institutions now supply apps you can load on your mobile device to let you keep track of your account balance or credit card spending.

## HARDWARE

### Devices

The minimum current requirement for well-informed travel is a device with a legible screen, GPS access, a SIM card slot, wi-fi capability and room for some travel apps. These may be combined in a single device like a smart phone, or spread across several special-purpose devices. Bigger tablets add weight, but make it easier to read maps and write emails. Prolific writers should carry a light keyboarded device such as a Chromebook,<sup>4</sup> or buy a portable USB keyboard and the necessary connector for their device. If you are travelling in a group, consider taking a device each, so some can be charging while the others are in use. Short battery life is still a problem, so even a single traveller may find it necessary to carry multiple devices.

### GPS

GPS connects to the same global satellite navigation system used in cars and planes. It generally only works outdoors or in small vehicles, but it can pinpoint your position on a map and work with various apps to calculate distance, track your route and provide directions. It does not need access to mobile phone systems. GPS capability adds \$AU20-\$AU30 to the price of a mobile device, but it is well worth it.

### SIM card

This is your access point to the mobile phone network throughout your destination country. SIM cards come in two types: data and voice. Travellers will find a data card more useful, since it usually includes a voice call allowance. A SIM card connection also transmits geographic information, and can substitute for a GPS receiver in areas that have good coverage. Smart phones, SIM card-equipped tablets and hybrid “phablet” devices all function in the same way, and run equivalent software.

You generally need a data SIM card for each country on your itinerary, although some companies now offer multi-nation cards; see Cellhire<sup>5</sup> and WorldSIM<sup>6</sup> for examples. You can use an appropriate Australian SIM card for calls or data overseas, provided you have turned on the roaming option, but heavy use may incur steep charges. Keep it for emergencies only.

A SIM card slot currently adds around \$AU30 to the price of a mobile device. Some devices have two SIM card slots, allowing you to retain your Australian card in the device while adding a local one. You can switch between them in the software settings.

A local SIM card (data or voice) will provide you with a local phone number. Prices and capabilities vary, but a prepaid 1GB data card -- sufficient for a month or more when supplemented

<sup>3</sup> MasterCard International, *Multi Currency Cash Passport, Prepaid Travel Money Card*, <http://www.cashpassport.com.au>.

<sup>4</sup> Google, *HP Chromebook 11 G3*, <https://www.google.com.au/chrome/devices/chromebooks.html#hp-chromebook-11-g3>.

<sup>5</sup> Cellhire, *International Data SIM Card*, <http://www.cellhire.com/international-data-sim-card>.

<sup>6</sup> WorldSIM, *Get Roaming with the WorldSIM International / Other WorldSIM Travel Accessories*, <https://www.worldsim.com>.

with wi-fi -- should cost somewhere between \$AU20 and \$AU50. A local supplier will generally install and test it for you. They can be found at airports and large railway stations, as well as in major shopping districts.

To call an Australian mobile phone which is roaming overseas, drop the leading zero and replace it with a plus followed by the destination code – for example, to call a traveller in Italy (code 39) with the mobile number 0444 123456, you would call +39 444 123 456.

## Wi-fi

This is now standard on all mobile devices, and provides a relatively fast and cheap connection to the internet via a local access point. Many cities and other tourist destinations provide free wi-fi points, as do cafes and restaurant chains like Starbucks and McDonalds, but these can be painfully slow. Your best option is to make sure your accommodation has a wi-fi option; free if possible, paid if necessary. You can then use this for downloading maps and apps and uploading images, and reserve your SIM card allowance for email and any vital information you need in transit.

Note that wi-fi and SIM card use draws power. If battery life is critical, look into installing apps like DU Battery Saver<sup>7</sup> that can turn these connections off when they are not in use.

If you have multiple devices, but only one has an internet connection, you may be able to set it up as a “hotspot” for the others to access the internet via wi-fi. Devices vary in their hotspot capabilities, so if you plan to do this, test it before leaving home.

Do remember to install, update and run (manually or automatically) appropriate security software on your device/s, given the common risks in using “free” wi-fi.

## Portable keyboards

There will be times when you need to write more than is comfortable to type using a device’s on-screen keypad.<sup>8</sup> A great variety of portable keyboards are available on eBay and from electronics stores. They may be built into a protective tablet case and stand, or made in a flexible material which can be rolled up. They normally come with standard USB connectors – but as mobile devices usually have micro-USB ports,<sup>9</sup> you will require an adaptor. Users of proprietary hardware like the iPad will need a keyboard for that specific device.

## Power

Battery performance on mobile devices is slowly improving, but any device undergoing heavy use will require recharging at least once per day. This in turn requires a connector that can be plugged into a local power supply. Modern devices will happily adjust to different voltages, but the hardware for connecting to mains power outlets still varies from place to place. A traveller has three options:

1. Take an Australian charger for each device, and buy one or more mains adaptors (overseas-to-Australian or multipurpose) for your destination. This is the simplest alternative when you have only one or two devices.
2. Carry USB cables. Most devices can now be recharged from the trickle current provided by the USB ports in computers and some entertainment devices. All this requires is a USB cable for each type of device – and, of course, a USB socket at your destination to plug it into.
3. To ensure that USB sockets are available, you can buy a USB charger with two or more sockets<sup>10</sup> which will plug into the local mains. These can be hard to find in shops, so are best bought online. Some come with interchangeable mains plugs for different electrical systems. You should explain to the seller that you want, say, a European mains plug, even if you are buying it from Australia.

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<sup>7</sup> Google Play, *Android Apps -- DU Battery Saver/Power Doctor*, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dianxinos.dxs&hl=en>.

<sup>8</sup> Google, Search for “portable computer keyboard”, <https://www.google.com.au/search?q=portable+computer+keyboard&safe=off&biw=1534&bih=755&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=PYqkVKj4HJPY8gWl0oK4Dg&ved=0CE0QsAQ>.

<sup>9</sup> PCMagazine Encyclopedia, *Definition of: micro USB*, <http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/62117/micro-usb>.

<sup>10</sup> Google, Search for “usb multiport charger”, <https://www.google.com.au/search?q=usb+multiport+charger&safe=off&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=wYykVJKPHMrX8gXPq4HYAw&ved=0CD0QsAQ&biw=1534&bih=755>.

Another useful device is an inexpensive portable battery pack<sup>11</sup> or “power brick”. This can be charged overnight and carried around during the day. When a tablet or mobile phone runs out of power, it can be plugged into the battery pack with a USB cable and recharged on the go. A pocket-sized battery pack can typically recharge two mobile devices before running out itself. Because large lithium batteries are potentially explosive, there are limitations on carrying power packs on aircraft. If you want to use one overseas, you may have to buy it there and leave it behind when you return.

You can purchase mains adaptors, battery packs and USB chargers and cables at major airports, via eBay and in electronics shops. Do be aware of too-cheap devices, after recent incidents of injury caused by malfunctioning “knock-off” equipment.

## SOFTWARE: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Most apps for portable devices assume you have access to a permanent internet connection. How true that is will depend on your destination, but remember even developed nations have many mobile/cell phone “dead spots”. Any essential software should be capable of working offline if necessary. If this involves downloading large amounts of data, make sure you do this beforehand.

An example is the offline map application OsmAnd,<sup>12</sup> which, like Google Maps,<sup>13</sup> provides access to street maps for locations all over the world. Unlike Google Maps, however, OsmAnd maps for an entire region or country can be downloaded in advance, and used for planning trips and finding locations while on the plane, or anywhere else without internet access.

## Communications

Gmail<sup>14</sup> is by far the most widely used communications software, but most other email platforms support apps which allow for mobile use. If you normally download your messages to a PC, you may want to change your email settings and postpone downloads until your return, so they remain in the cloud and accessible to you.

All mobile devices come with some web browsing software. I recommend Opera Mini,<sup>15</sup> (for Android devices) which is reasonably fast and supports multiple tabs. Versions of Chrome and Firefox are also available, along with various others.

If you are out of mobile phone range, or you want to avoid steep roaming charges, but have access to internet via wi-fi, you can install a prepaid messaging app. This can take your messages and convert them to SMS format for delivery to mobile phones in Australia or elsewhere. Skype<sup>16</sup> will do this, and if the bandwidth is sufficient you can also use it for voice or video calls. Some simpler, but more limited, ways to achieve this are listed at wikiHow<sup>17</sup> “How to text message online”.

## Language software

Google Translate<sup>18</sup> is free, easy to use, and can handle words and phrases in a range of languages from Afrikaans to Zulu. From my limited knowledge of languages, it appears to be fairly accurate and intuitive. It requires an internet connection, however, so users may want to back it up with one or

<sup>11</sup> Top 10 Reviews, *External Battery Packs Review 2014*, <http://external-battery-pack-review.toptenreviews.com>.

<sup>12</sup> OsmAnd, *Offline Mobile Maps and Navigation*, <http://osmand.net>.

<sup>13</sup> Google Play, *Android Apps – Google Maps*, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.apps.maps&hl=en>.

<sup>14</sup> Google, *Gmail*, <https://www.google.com/intl/en-au/mail/help/about.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Apple iTunes, *Opera Mini web browser*, <https://itunes.apple.com/au/app/opera-mini-web-browser/id363729560?mt=8>.

<sup>16</sup> Skype, *Send Texts*, <http://www.skype.com/en/features/sms>.

<sup>17</sup> wikiHow, *How to Text Message Online*, <http://www.wikihow.com/Text-Message-Online>.

<sup>18</sup> Google Play, *Android Apps – Translate*, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.apps.translate&hl=en>.

more offline dictionaries in the languages of their choice. These should include options for speaking words or phrases aloud. The “BestDict” series<sup>19</sup> for Android is an example, covering many languages and getting generally good reviews.

Duolingo<sup>20</sup> is a popular free web-based language teaching system. It comes with a mobile app, so that users can keep up their practice while travelling.

## Regional and city guides

Many online apps provide information about regions and cities for the tourist and traveller. These typically include transport information, maps, details of local attractions and lists of eating places. They may also supply accommodation options, transport timetables, and suggested itineraries. Used on a device with location capabilities, the app should be able to show your current location and provide directions to your destination.

The TripAdvisor<sup>21</sup> guide series, for instance, covers most major tourist destinations. For smaller places, simple online guides are sometimes provided by the local chamber of commerce, or individuals with special knowledge.

## Transport timetables

Timetable apps are available for many large urban and interurban transport systems, though not all are officially sanctioned or up-to-date. In their simplest form they may be nothing more than a paper timetable scanned and made available for download, while more sophisticated ones can act as complete journey planners, with costs, routes, times, prices and links to your current location. Some include online booking facilities.

Google Maps provides some information about public transport locations and times, but it may not always know about local buses or trams.

## Navigation

Those of us who travelled before the online age can sum up the prevailing experience in one word – “lost”. Finding towns, roads, stations, food – every excursion was a challenge to your navigational skills. But for modern travellers, as long as their batteries hold out, getting lost is (hopefully) a thing of the past. Mapping applications like Google Maps, OsmAnd or City Maps 2Go<sup>22</sup> can show you where you are, where you want to be, how to get there, how long it will take, how fast you are going, and the location of ATMs, laundromats, toilets, coffee bars and supermarkets along the way.

OsmAnd and City Maps 2Go both use open-source maps which can be downloaded in advance, so you can plan an entire trip down to the street level if you need to. Travellers can also use the Street View option on Google Earth<sup>23</sup> or Google Maps to get a preview of what their destination looks like from ground level.

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<sup>19</sup> BestDict.mobi, *BestDict – The Best Dictionary For Mobile*, <http://bestdict.mobi>.

<sup>20</sup> Duolingo, *Learn a Language for Free. Forever*, <https://www.duolingo.com>.

<sup>21</sup> tripadvisor, *Plan and Book Your Perfect Trip*, <http://www.tripadvisor.com.au>.

<sup>22</sup> Google Play, *Android Apps – City Maps 2Go Offline Maps*, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ulmon.android.citymaps2go>.

<sup>23</sup> Google Play, *Android Apps – Google Earth*, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.earth>.

## Accommodation

Online accommodation booking websites like Wotif<sup>24</sup> and Hotels.com<sup>25</sup> were one of the internet's earliest successes, and rightly so. Booking all your accommodation from one central site beats struggling by phone or email with a hotel clerk whose first language may not be yours. Recently the accommodation game has been taken to a new level by the arrival of the global private accommodation service Airbnb.<sup>26</sup>

Airbnb exists to put people with rooms, apartments or houses to let in touch with people who want to rent them. It handles the bookings and the financial transactions, displays photos and maps for each accommodation, lists the facilities provided in a standard way, and provides reviews for both hosts and guests. While media coverage has focussed on stories of occasional misbehaviour by guests or hosts, Airbnb has been quietly expanding to the point where it poses real competition for more traditional accommodation services. On a recent family trip to Italy, for instance, Airbnb allowed me to book apartments for three, with full kitchen facilities, for the same price as a double room in an average hotel.

The strength of Airbnb is its openness. Prices are made clear upfront in your own currency; there's no haggling over specials or surcharges. You see the same set of comprehensive information for each room or apartment, making comparisons easy. A location map is part of the package. Every transaction and communication you make goes through the site and is recorded. The review system makes it possible to catch out unsuitable hosts (or guests). Unlike many hotel websites, the Airbnb website and the corresponding app are well-designed and easy to use. The steady expansion of Airbnb makes it possible to find accommodation in interesting or remote places, where hotels may be prohibitively expensive or non-existent.

Airbnb is not yet perfect. One big drawback is the need to meet someone who can give you a key to the accommodation. Despite all the resources of modern communications, this still caused some frustration on our Italy trip. One host solved the problem by keeping her keys in a locked safe outside the door, and simply sending guests the combination when they registered. With a bit of creative thinking like this, there's no reason why Airbnb can't compete with hotels on convenience as well as price.

## CONCLUSION

Are there drawbacks, as well as benefits, to being an electronically-equipped road warrior? Yes, if you're a traveller who cherishes moments of personal contact with the locals. These invariably occur more often if you're lost, confused, exhausted and panicking than when you're quietly and calmly finding your way to where you want to be. But if you can manage to live without these – or find some other way to initiate them – then there's a big plus to travelling like an electronic snail.

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<sup>24</sup> Wotif.com, *wotif – Australia's Favourite Travel Destination*, <http://www.wotif.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Hotels.com Australia, *Hotels.com – Find Your Perfect Place \ Hotel Search*, <http://au.hotels.com>.

<sup>26</sup> Airbnb Australia, *Welcome Home – Airbnb Australia*, <https://www.airbnb.com.au>.