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You CAN Take It With You: 13 Essential Travel Gadgets

By David Haskin

Courtesy of [InformationWeek](#)

Once upon a time, business travel seemed so glamorous. In this long-outdated fantasy, you'd jet off to exotic locales, do important business, see amazing things, then return, on time, to the loving arms of family and friends.

That fantasy seems particularly quaint in these days of endless security lines, shrinking coach cabin space, almost-predictable delays, and ever-rising prices. Because travel can be such a trial, it's more important than ever to be properly equipped.

To make your on-the-go life easier, we've assembled our top picks for the well-appointed traveler's toolkit. This baker's dozen of travel tools will help you get to where you're going easily, communicate clearly, and stay organized, efficient, secure and entertained. Some of these items are gadgets, while some are services. Some you attach to your notebook or cell phone, while others can be stowed away and forgotten until you need them in an emergency. We've even included a state-of-the-art carry-on bag.

To make this list, tools must be both essential and elegant. In other words, these aren't nice-to-have items, but are well-designed must-haves that are worth the trouble of buying and carrying with you.

No, these products won't make the airlines run on time, provide more space in coach class, or solve the myriad other frustrations of business travel. But they'll help you travel with more peace of mind, simplicity, and, yes, flair.

Getting There

The first task in traveling is getting there. These two travel essentials are gracefully designed to help you breeze through airports and get to your destination with a minimum of fuss.

The Little "Everything" Bag: Targus Overnighter Notebook Case

For seasoned business travelers, a well-designed travel bag is as essential as, say, a cell phone or a laptop. That's particularly true on short trips when you need to travel light, and want to bring a single carry-on for your computer, clothes, and other travel accessories.

Targus' [Overnighter Notebook Case](#) is that one bag designed specifically for short trips. This compact "rollie" is, essentially, two cases in one — a notebook and gadget case with a compartment for clothing and other personal items. It also has a side pocket for fast access to items like boarding passes. It comes in two versions, one for notebooks with screens as large as 15.4 inches and another for 17-inch notebooks.

The area for electronics has pockets for everything you are likely to carry, from your power cords to PDAs and media players. The area for clothing and personal items is discreetly compartmentalized so that when you open the case to take out your laptop in that important meeting, your jammies won't fall out. With judicious packing, there is plenty of room for two days' belongings.

This particular bag is black, making it (depending on your personal preferences) either boring or perfect for business meetings. In either case, bags such as this one from Targus help you stay light on your feet for those quick, intense trips.

[Targus Travel Overnighter Notebook Case](#); street price: [\\$80-\\$105](#)

Your Trusty Guide: Garmin nüvi 350/360

You get to a new city, rent a car, and then try to figure out how to get to your final destination. Or you cab to your hotel but can't find the location of your meeting, which is supposedly within walking distance. GPS is an oft-used solution to these problems, and Garmin's recently released [nüvi 350](#) is one of the most elegant options.

The nüvi 350 is a diminutive (2.8 by 2.1 inches, 5.1 ounces) color device that combines spoken turn-by-turn directions anywhere in North America or Europe with the ability to play MP3 music and audio books as well as view images — it has 700 MB of internal storage for media files. It's small enough to hold

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Courtesy of Targus.
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comfortably in your hand, or you can plug it in to a car's cigarette lighter with the included adapter. It comes with a suction-cup mount for cars.

The [nüvi 360](#) adds Bluetooth, which enables it to act as a hands-free control center for your Bluetooth-enabled phone. After pairing the nüvi with your phone, you can dial numbers from your contact list and answer calls by tapping buttons on the nüvi's screen, speaking directly into the device's built-in microphone.

Oh, there are downsides, most notably the \$964 retail price for the nüvi 360 and the fact that, while the nüvi 350 already is available, the 360 won't be available until this summer. But if you want top-of-the-line GPS, a nüvi 350 or 360 is a must-have.



Courtesy of Garmin.
Click image to enlarge.

[Garmin nüvi 350](#); street price: ~~\$673~~-\$899

Getting And Staying Connected

Pay phones were once sufficient for staying in touch from the road. Then cell phones became de rigueur. These days, we also require constant and easy access to e-mail and other essential data — while keeping that data private. These key travel items make it easy to get and stay connected securely when you're on the road.

One Device, Many Functions: BlackBerry 8700c

There was an almost palpable sigh of relief throughout the business and government sector of the Western world when Research In Motion, maker of the BlackBerry, recently [settled its patent suit](#). BlackBerry's once cult-like following has long since broadened to mainstream professionals, and the [BlackBerry 8700c](#) exemplifies why.

The color-screen 8700c is what [one reviewer called](#) "a full step closer to the perfect single device." It enables you to not only check your e-mail from anywhere, the skill that first made the BlackBerry famous, but also talk on the phone and manage your personal information. The 8700c performs these functions so elegantly, it's hard to keep your hands off of it.

If there's a shortcoming, it's that the device doesn't yet support [3G](#) cellular data systems such as [EV-DO](#) from Verizon Wireless and Sprint or [HSDPA](#) from Cingular. But for basic functions such as e-mail, the additional speed of 3G doesn't add much, particularly since small devices like this will never be used regularly for Web browsing and other heavy-duty connectivity tasks.



Courtesy of Research In Motion. Click image to enlarge.

Another deservedly popular option is Palm's [Treo](#). However, the BlackBerry 8700c gets top billing both for sentimental reasons after its brush with patent purgatory and because the Windows Mobile-based Treo 700w has shown some memory and stability issues (see [Second Thoughts: Palm Treo 700w](#)). Still, the Treo is elegantly designed and new versions are coming this year, starting with a newly updated version based on the Palm OS later this spring.

[Research In Motion BlackBerry 8700c](#); \$299-\$550, depending on cellular service plan

Anywhere Connection: 3G Service

When you are away from home and office, you can connect via Wi-Fi hotspots commonly found in coffee shops, airports, hotels, and other public venues. But hotspots are not everywhere you need them. Plus, each hotspot service imposes different log-on and billing procedures, and even though the technology exists to make them secure, many users don't avail themselves of that technology.

3G cellular data service, like cellular voice, offers comparatively secure connect-anywhere simplicity, albeit at a price. For about 60 bucks a month with a two-year contract, plus either a PC Card for your laptop or a compatible mobile device, you simply log on and connect in seconds, no matter where you are in your cellular operator's service area.

Speeds are typically in the 500Kbps range, which is slow compared to hotspots but fast enough for virtually all common applications. This service is already available in more than 100 U.S. metropolitan areas and continues to expand as Verizon Wireless, Sprint, and the still-lagging Cingular make the service available in mid-sized cities.

Two warnings: For now, the [carriers are not keen](#) on allowing you to use your 3G-capable cell phone as a modem for your laptop, although they claim that will change over time. Until it does, if you want 3G access on both your laptop and your phone you'll need two separate subscriptions. Second, while the carriers often use terms like "unlimited access," 3G isn't a substitute for regular broadband service if you need a lot of bandwidth. The cellular carriers maintain [the right to cut you off](#) if you use the service too much.

But if price is not a problem and you can live with the cellular operators' limits, 3G comes closest to letting you connect from anywhere.

[Cingular Broadband Connect](#); [Sprint Mobile Broadband](#); [Verizon Wireless BroadbandAccess](#); all are about \$60 a month with a two-year contract

Safe Wireless: WiTopia personalVPN

If you don't want to pay the stiff price demanded by the cellcos for 3G, Wi-Fi hotspots remain a solid option. But hotspots are notoriously insecure. If you don't take security precautions such as the use of a [virtual private network](#) (VPN), your sensitive data will fly around in the open, available for anybody to read.

For those who don't have a corporate VPN, the solution is a for-hire service such as WiTopia's [personalVPN](#). For about \$40 a year, it encrypts all data that leaves your laptop via a wireless network such as a hotspot. Your data stays encrypted until it leaves servers run by WiTopia. After that, your data travels over the open Internet unprotected, just as it does now when using a home broadband connection or, for that matter, most enterprise connections. In other words, a for-hire VPN doesn't provide

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the end-to-end security of a corporate VPN, but it protects your data when it is most vulnerable.

PersonalVPN is easy to set up, requiring only a few steps such as downloading and installing software and adding encryption keys. It very slightly decreases network speed, which won't be noticeable with fast connections but could become noticeable with slower ones. I also tried a competitor, [HotspotVPN](#), which worked equally well. (For a head-to-head comparison of the two services, see [Safe Hotspotting With For-Hire VPNs](#).)

About the only drawback to these services is that you have to remember to use them every time you log on to a wireless network. Still, it's comforting to know that, when you stop for a latte and e-mail check, you are secure.

[WiTopia personalVPN](#); \$39.95 per year

Instant Hotspot: Linksys Wireless-G Travel Router

You're in a conference room with a single Ethernet connection and five other meeting attendees, all of whom need to be connected. Or you and some colleagues are working in a hotel room with a single Ethernet connection. How do you get everybody connected?

The easiest answer is a travel router, such as the Linksys [Wireless-G Travel Router](#). This small, easily transportable router has all the basic elements of larger routers used at home and in small offices. You plug it in to a wall socket, then plug the Ethernet cable into the back of the unit, and you've created an instant hotspot to which all Wi-Fi-capable laptops can connect. The Linksys unit supports WEP, which isn't too secure, and WPA, which is more secure. It also has a built-in firewall.

You won't need this travel gadget often, but when you do need it, it's invaluable. Since it takes little space, just put it in your travel bag and forget about it — until you need an instant hotspot.

[Linksys Wireless-G Travel Router](#); street price: \$80-\$97

Staying Organized And Efficient

Without the right tools, it's easy to waste trip time fumbling around inefficiently. These handy travel tools will keep you working smoothly.

Pointer For Success: Kensington PilotMouse Laser Wireless Mini

Even the best built-in laptop pointing devices can be clumsy and tiring to use for long periods. That explains the popularity of petite travel mice, which are small enough to stow in your travel bag and greatly simplify the act of using your notebook PC.

There is no shortage of travel mice available, but the one I've been using lately is the wireless Kensington [PilotMouse Laser Mini](#). This mouse comes with a dongle that you attach to the USB port of your laptop. After plugging in the dongle, Windows automatically detects the mouse, which then can work from up to 30 feet away. That means you can use it for presentations when you can't be right next to your laptop.

The lack of a cord makes this mouse easy to store and use in cramped conditions, and the precision of its movement is quite satisfying. However, since a mouse must feel comfortable in your hand, you might want to go to a retailer and see which one feels best to you. Whichever travel mouse you end up with, you'll work longer and more comfortably if you don't depend on the touchpad and buttons on your laptop.

[Kensington PilotMouse Laser Wireless Mini](#); street price: \$40-\$49

System On A Stick: SanDisk Cruzer Micro

A basic USB flash drive is an excellent tool for backing up important files while you're on the go. But a more powerful and useful tool is a USB flash drive with [U3](#) technology, which enables you to carry personalized applications that you can access from any USB-equipped PC.

I've been using a 512KB version of SanDisk's [Cruzer Micro](#), although similar products with capacities as high as 4GB are also available from vendors such as [Kingston Technology](#), [Verbatim](#), and [Memorex](#). Besides using the drive as a handy storage device, you can install U3-compliant applications and customize them according to your specific needs. Then, whenever you plug the drive into a USB port, those applications are ready to use.

For instance, you could borrow a friend's computer, plug in the Cruzer, and have instant access to the Web — and all your own bookmarks — via Mozilla Firefox, as well as your personal e-mail account via Mozilla Thunderbird. For security, the system leaves no trace behind after you pull the drive out of the USB port.

The drive comes with a few basic applications, and you can download more U3-complaint software from the Web (some are free, some not). The downside is that many widely used applications, such as Microsoft Office, are not yet U3-compatible, although the OpenOffice suite is.

If your computing needs are modest and you have access to other computers in your travels, system-on-a-key-drive approach means you may not need to take your laptop on some trips. Even if you do carry a laptop, you still can use the Cruzer Micro and similar products to back up your files and for emergency access. This is cool stuff.

[SanDisk Cruzer Micro \(512MB\)](#); street price: \$32-\$43



Courtesy of Linksys.
Click image to enlarge.



Courtesy of Kensington.
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Courtesy of SanDisk.
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Cord Cutter: iGo everywhere 130

When you're running through an airport, your bags can start feeling like they're loaded with bricks. In fact, that's often literally true: The bricks are the power adapters that come with laptops and other electronic devices. And the power cords for each device can turn your bag into a tangled mess.

The new [iGo everywhere 130](#) cuts down significantly on bricks and cords. It is a single universal power adapter and cord that works with larger devices like laptops and smaller devices like cell phones and MP3 players. It can power and charge your laptop and one other device at the same time, either from a standard wall outlet or from the power source in cars and airplanes.

I used the everywhere 130 to charge and run my Dell X1 laptop and my LG VX6100 cell phone at the same time, and it worked perfectly. When the phone was fully charged, I plugged in my MP3 player. It even comes with a bag in which to carry brick, cord, and adapter tips, so cord tangle becomes just a bad memory.

The inevitable caveat for items that power multiple devices is that every device requires a different adapter tip. The everywhere 130 comes with a variety of tips for popular products, including one that worked with the Dell laptop, but it didn't include a tip that matched a Lenovo T60p I'd been testing. However, iGo sells adapter tips on its site.

At a retail price of about \$140, this brick is expensive, but it can greatly lighten your load and increase your power options on long car and plane trips, making it a must-have for frequent travelers.

[iGo everywhere 130](#); street price: [\\$106-\\$137](#)

Blackout Prevention: Cellboost

It's every businessperson's nightmare: You're on the phone with your most important client and...your cell phone runs out of juice.

One way to prevent that from happening is to carry an emergency power supply such as Compact Power Systems' [Cellboost](#). These disposable power supplies are small, light, inexpensive, and easy to use. When your phone is about to run out of power, simply plug in Cellboost. Voilà! — an emergency power supply that its maker claims typically provides 60 minutes of talk time and 60 hours of standby.

Note: Make sure you order a Cellboost (or other emergency power supply) designed for your phone, since it must fit properly into your phone's specific plug-in. Cellboost is also available for MP3 players and portable game devices.

Like several other items in this roundup, Cellboost is the sort of product that you won't need often, but when you do need it, you really, really need it. Fortunately, Cellboost is cheap and unobtrusive, so you can just store it in your travel bag, where it can collect dust until you hear the dreaded low-battery beep on that crucial call.

[Compact Power Systems Cellboost](#); street price: [\\$2.20-\\$16](#)

Staying Entertained

All work and no play make for an exhausting and potentially ineffective business trip. These tools will keep you entertained and refreshed.

A Bigger Small Screen: Archos AV 500

For many people, the [video iPod](#) is the go-to device for listening to music and watching videos. But that device's tiny screen isn't ideal for moving pictures, a shortcoming shared by iPod competitors such as Creative's [Zen Vision:M](#).

For now, the best compromise between screen size and portability is the Archos [AV 500](#). This device is pricey, but it's not much larger than the iPod or Vision:M, has a larger screen, and, like those devices, plays digital music and has a 30GB hard drive for storage. At nine ounces and the same length and width as a 3x5 index card, the Archos AV 500 is quite carryable.

What sets the AV 500 apart is its 4-inch display, which makes watching movies easy on the eyes. It also comes with a docking pod for recording television. And it is [PlaysForSure](#)-compatible, so you can use it with music download services such as [Rhapsody](#) and [Napster](#). This combination of small size, (relatively) large screen, and carryability make the AV500 the best choice if you want to watch video as well as listen to music on the road — at least until the long-rumored big-screen iPod is released.

[Archos AV 500](#); street price: [\\$393-\\$499](#)

Two-In-One Listening: Plantronics Pulsar 590A Headset

If you carry a portable media player while you travel, you'll also need a good set of headphones to replace the notoriously mediocre ones that typically come with these devices. For convenience, those headphones should also work with your cell phone.

Several vendors offer dual-use headsets, but my favorite wireless unit is the Plantronics [Pulsar 590A](#). This Bluetooth headset delivers highly satisfying sound from my MP3 player and, with the push of a button, switches to cell phone mode when a call comes in over a Bluetooth-compliant phone. A small speaking tube is unobtrusively attached to the right headphone. The stellar



Courtesy of iGo.
Click image to enlarge.



Courtesy of Compact Power Systems.
Click image to enlarge.



Courtesy of Archos.
Click image to enlarge.

sound of these headsets is, frankly, a surprise, since Plantronics is best known for its mundane office telephone headsets.

Besides sounding good, the battery holds a serious charge — I've used them nonstop for more than seven hours without running out of juice. For some, a downside is that these are full-sized stereo headphones, and they don't fold up conveniently. Also, since they cover both ears, you can't use them while driving in many states.

If you simply want travel-worthy corded headphones that don't work with your phone, my longtime favorite is the [Sennheiser PX 100](#), which is inexpensive, folds up nicely, and provides the bright, complete sound typically found on far more expensive units. For in-flight use, Bose's [QuietComfort noise-canceling headphones](#) have long been the gold standard. But for wireless headphones that deliver excellent sound from both your MP3 player and phone, the Pulsar 590a is a delight.

[Plantronics Pulsar 590A](#); street price: [\\$108-\\$174](#)

Movies To Go: Vongo

It's easy to get music to your media player or laptop, but your choices are limited if you want to watch full-length feature films while you're on the go. The most common answer is to play a DVD on your laptop, but that will drain your laptop's battery on a long flight, which is hardly an ideal solution. And if your trip lasts more than a day or two, you'll probably find yourself with several DVDs to lug around and shuffle through during the trip.

However, just as iTunes and music subscription services changed how we listen to music while mobile, services like [Vongo](#) are starting to change how we watch movies ([read review here](#)). Offered by the cable movie channel [Starz](#), this is basically Starz-to-go. Vongo enables you to download movies from the Starz catalog to your Windows XP laptop and watch them in your hotel room or on those long plane rides. That doesn't solve the battery drain problem, but the company is saying it will make movies playable on personal media players before long.

Vongo is unique because, for ten bucks a month, you can download as many movies as you want and watch them at your leisure; at this writing, about 1,500 movies are available. Of course, cable movie channels like Starz and HBO don't offer the most recent movies, but up-to-date movies are starting to become available from other services. In particular, [Movieline](#) and [CinemaNow](#) just announced they will start selling downloadable movies as soon as they are available on DVD. You'll pay about \$20 a movie, or you can rent them on a pay-per-view basis.

Downloadable movies are just starting to be available and many developments in this area are anticipated in the next year — [Netflix](#) and [Blockbuster](#), for example, are widely expected to jump into this business before long. For now, Vongo and its inexpensive, all-you-can-download approach gets our nod.

[Vongo](#); \$9.99 per month



Courtesy of Plantronics. [Click image to enlarge.](#)

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