

(Approx. 975 words)

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Traveling with Technology

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So, you have a trip coming up, maybe you will be doing planes, trains, and automobiles. Or maybe you are going on a cruise (lucky you!) and you are wondering if you should take your computer, iPad, or iPhone with you. Well, the answer is yes, and don't forget the power charging cords, adapters, and earphones too. So what can you expect about using these devices when you travel? Let's start with the iPhone or "smart phone".

SMART PHONES use the cellular phone network to make phone calls AND they use a wireless connection to the internet too. (The wireless internet connection is called Wi-Fi). In order for you to make and receive cellular phone calls you have to be in an area where there is a strong enough signal to use it. Turn on your phone and you should be able to see a certain number of "bars" or "dots" at the top of the window which indicates your signal strength. My iPhone uses the AT&T cellular network and at the top left of my phone screen I see a row of five "dots" next to "AT&T". Naturally a strong signal is four or five dots and a weak signal is one or two. The dreaded "no service available" message means you are out of luck. Sometimes your phone will not work in an area of weak service (i.e. one or two bars or dots) but it seems that using your phone for texting in those weak areas may work.

Your smart phone also uses a wireless (Wi-Fi) connection for the internet. On my phone, also at the top of the screen, is a series of "arches" (a small dot with one or two arches over it, sort of like tiny eyebrows). This shows the signal strength of the Wi-Fi network. If both arches are there above the dot you have a strong signal, if just the dot with no arches, your signal is weak and may not work for the internet.

Remember, wireless Wi-Fi connections to the internet are almost all FREE (but may require you to enter a password to use), but using the cellular phone network is NOT free, and you pay monthly charges to use it.

iPADs and TABLET COMPUTERS are smaller than laptops and much easier to take with you on a trip. iPads come in two different types – one type can use EITHER the cellular network OR a Wi-Fi network to connect to the internet. The other iPad (usually lower-priced) can ONLY use a Wi-Fi network. You do not usually use an iPad to make cellular phone calls, although you CAN use it to run Skype or other "apps" that use the internet to communicate.

LAPTOP COMPUTERS connect to the internet on a Wi-Fi network, not using the cellular phone network. (However, you can use your laptop AND a smart phone to

connect your laptop to the internet using the cellular phone network. But let's not talk about that kind of hookup here). Your laptop will show you the signal strength of the Wi-Fi network you are using in the lower right of the screen (on my Windows 7 computer) or, on some computers, on the top bar on the screen. Look for an icon that looks like a small bar chart. Click on it with your mouse and it will open a window with your network connection information. If you are not connected to the internet at all, it will tell you and show you the Wi-Fi networks available to you, the strongest signal network first. Click on the one you want to join (when you are at a restaurant, library, or hotel) and you may have to enter a password to connect.

So are you confused yet? Let's see if I can summarize things up and give you the big picture. Basically what you need to know is "Am I connected to the internet?" and "How am I connected to the internet?" As an easy example, let's say I am traveling with my I-Pad. There are many "apps" (applications or programs) I already have installed on my I-Pad many of which are games or books I want to enjoy on my vacation. These apps are available to me whether I am connected to the internet or not. So, if I want to play a game like checkers (against the computer) or read my book, these are already on my I-pad and I can play them anywhere anytime, even on an airplane. However, if I want to play checkers against a real opponent via the internet, or if I want to download a new book to my I-pad, I need an internet connection to do that. Any Wi-Fi connection will let me do it. If, however, I am in an area with NO Wi-Fi available, AND if I have an I-pad with cellular network capability, AND if I am paying for cellular connection with my I-pad, then my I-pad will use the cellular network to connect to the internet. This will result in charges (could be significant) for using the cellular network.

So no matter what device you want to take with you on your travels, you should understand how to find out on your device IF you are connected to the internet and HOW. There is really no reason to use the cellular network to connect to the internet if you can find a Wi-Fi spot that is free.

Whatever device you use I know you will be glad that you brought it along. Just using a free Wi-Fi connection provides you with the whole internet of entertainment and fun for you whenever you want -- and you won't feel "disconnected".