

President's Corner

Tech Trek - Traveling with Technology

Part 1 - Planning and Booking

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We all use a lot of technology in our everyday lives - various devices and services that make our lives better. They help us communicate, keep us safe and well, inform us, get us where we want to go, get us the things we need and entertain us. When we travel, we usually want to take all those benefits along with us.

There are many travel-related capabilities in the technology currently available to us. The travel industry, from transportation and lodging to hospitality and entertainment, has embraced the internet and mobile devices to make the traveler's life easier. There are lots of new ways to protect ourselves while traveling and protect the home and stuff we left behind. There are a lot of devices we can take with us to enhance our traveling experience and even save us money. All these added capabilities carry a price, however, in added equipment to take, costs to buy and use, additional restrictions to follow and additional risks in loss.

Technology has become important in all aspects of travel, occurring before, during and after the trip. Selecting a destination, planning a trip, comparing costs and bookings components of the trip are all made easier by the internet and all the web-related travel resources now available. It may not have decreased travel times any as compared to ten years ago, but travel is now on average more fuel-efficient, reliable, safer and easier to arrange, and in some cases lower in cost, all due to technology.

While motor vehicle average passenger and cargo spaces have decreased, and airline average passenger seat space and free baggage allowances have decreased, the tech stuff we want to bring along on our trips has only increased. Smartphones may be small and provide a lot of capabilities, but it seldom stops there for most travelers. When you add in laptops, tablets or e-readers, digital cameras, music players, noise-canceling headphones, GPS devices and all the extra memory cards, batteries and chargers to support them, you've typically got a big bag of heavy tech gear to cart around, get through TSA screening and protect against theft or loss.

I really like to travel, though I don't get the opportunity to do so all that often. For various reasons, it had been more than a year since our previous overnight trip when my wife and I took a week-long anniversary vacation trip this last month. I've always been a tech user and tech traveler but was surprised at how much more dependent on it we had become since our last trip.

As expected, we relied heavily on the internet for our pre-trip planning and arranging. In the old days, one might consult with a travel agent to select a destination, price the

arrangements and book the travel and lodgings. Now the commissions that paid for the agent's time have been reduced or eliminated, and most companies prefer to sell on the web directly to consumers. We did all our planning and made all our arrangements on the web, with (almost) no human interactions, and believe we got a very good deal on our trip.

The internet can be of great benefit for travel planning, as it is easy to do price comparisons to come up with the lowest-cost options. Comparing other factors can be done, but you can wind up spending a lot of time on the web researching. Our first plan for an October trip was to visit our nephew and see the fall colors (leaves turning color) in New England. Our nephew had just started school at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, and the photos my sister forwarded when they dropped him off there looked inviting. I figured we could also visit Niagara Falls, which is somewhat nearby. When my wife determined that the optimal place to see the fall colors was in Stowe, Vermont, the trip became more complicated than my week of vacation could accommodate. To hit all three locations would require flying in and out of two destination cities, one-way car rental and a rapid pace. It would also be a bit expensive from San Diego.

Our second plan was to go to New Orleans, a place we'd both wanted to go to and would have earlier this year, were it not for other issues. I was concerned about going at this time of year, however, so we abandoned that plan.

Our third and final plan came courtesy of a Southwest Airlines sales email, which advertised \$49 one-way non-stop flights to select cities. From San Diego, these included mostly Northern California, Nevada, and Arizona destinations. We considered the Bay Area, but one of our last trips was to Napa. I was interested in going to Sacramento, to see the California State Railroad Museum, as well as destinations related to the gold rush. My wife was more interested in going to South Lake Tahoe, and I thought that would be OK as well. When I compared flight prices, however, I found you could fly about once an hour all day to Sacramento for \$49 with this sale, but the lowest price to fly to Reno/Tahoe was \$112 one way, with that price good only a couple of flights per day. I'd already compared days and found the lowest costs and greatest availability were for flying mid-week, so I was targeting flying out on a Wednesday and returning on the following Tuesday.

Frustrated with the large price difference between going to Sacramento and Reno, I looked at the map of where Southwest flies in order to get other ideas and noticed that the distance between the two cities was not that great. With only a 2.5 hour drive to get from Sacramento to Reno, it made more economic sense to fly to Sacramento, rent a car and then drive to Reno (or South Lake Tahoe). I even found that renting a car at the Sacramento airport was less expensive than from the Reno airport. I didn't shop around much for rental cars as I'd found over many trips that Costco Travel always seems to offer the best prices on rental cars. Thus the combination trip concept was born, where we would fly to and from Sacramento, but stay three nights there and three nights in South Lake Tahoe. This allowed each of us to get what we wanted, at a very low price.

Once I'd booked our flights on the Southwest web site and the car on the Costco Travel site, it was time to make our hotel selections, as well as decide which city we would stay in first. Once again, the internet provided an easy way to locate and price prospective hotels. This process can be quick, but to get the best pricing, many iterations and a fair amount of time searching are necessary. My wife got to choose where we stayed in South Lake Tahoe, and for Sacramento, I looked to a hotel chain we have used frequently, as I determined we could get one night free there through redeeming our accumulated points.

Through web pricing comparisons, I found both of our prospective hotels were less expensive for the first half of our trip (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights) and more expensive for the second half (Saturday, Sunday and Monday nights). This was not too surprising. What was a surprise was that the Sacramento hotel was only about 20% more in the second half of our trip, while for South Lake Tahoe the price doubled. Thus the internet showed it would save us money to stay in South Lake Tahoe first, and then in Sacramento for the last three nights (which is what I thought would be best anyway). After looking at the South Lake Tahoe hotel my wife liked on a number of travel sites, I booked it on Hotels.com, as it was as low there as anywhere else, and I could earn hotel points on the site for free future stays.

There were still pricing games to be played with the Sacramento hotel. I had previously checked the hotel chain's web site to determine I had enough points for one free night there, and it required the same number of points regardless of the day of the week. For the two nights I would be paying for, it did matter, as the cost could be different for each day of the week. I found our Saturday night stay would cost the most if purchased, so I made the points redemption reservation online for that night, and the paid nights (Sunday and Monday) were made on a separate online reservation. Up to this point I'd made all of our travel arrangements online, but now I had to break down and call someone at the hotel to make sure I had selected the same room type in the two reservations (for points stay and paid stay) to be able to get the same room and not have to vacate between reservations. I didn't trust that this would work out if all I did was send them an online message.

Before making the final hotel reservations, I did look a bit at the hotel reviews online, to make sure there were no problems mentioned repeatedly, or a lot of unsatisfied guests. I also went on Google Maps and used Street View to look at the area around the hotels to make sure they looked to be in safe neighborhoods. I learned this trick when booking hotels for the night of my wife's company Christmas party. She works for a company based in Los Angeles but works remotely on her own in San Diego. She is always invited to the company party, which is held in a nice restaurant in the LA area. Since I don't know the restaurants or the area very well, we have to be cautious when looking for a hotel to stay at so we don't have to drive back that night. You can't tell much from the Google Maps satellite view, but street view will reveal if the building next to the prospective hotel is covered in gang graffiti, or the hotel has fortress-like barricades around it. Those are the ones I avoid.

We researched and booked a few things to do on our trip through the web, like a boat ride on Lake Tahoe and bike rentals so we could ride the river trails in Sacramento. That completed all our travel arrangements. Now all that was left to do before we traveled was to figure out which tech devices to take along, and what needed to be set up at home to protect our stuff and make it look like we never left.