

President's Corner

Tech Trek - Traveling with Technology

Part 2 - The Tech You Leave Behind

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December 2019 issue, Drive Light

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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.

Many of the tech devices and services we use every day are the “don’t leave home without them” kind you will insist on taking on your trips. Smartphones, laptops, tablets or e-readers, digital cameras, music players, noise-canceling headphones and GPS devices are all devices that can enhance your travels when you bring them along. Technology has revolutionized travel planning and arranging, with the Internet the main way most people now research and book transport, lodgings and entertainment for their trips. With the arrangements covered and the devices packed, many forget that technology can also help protect the home, possessions, resources and loved ones you may be leaving behind. The tech you take on your travels is important, but also important is the tech you leave behind.

The more you have, the more you have to protect while away. There are plenty of tech products and services to help keep your stuff safe and allow you to have peace of mind while traveling. Your home is often your biggest asset; no one wants to return from vacation to losses from theft or damage. Your resources and data need to be protected and possibly accessed safely while away. You may need to leave pets, elderly relatives or others behind, perhaps under someone’s care, while traveling. Knowing that everything back home is fine can help you have a more enjoyable trip.

Just as with trip planning, making arrangements to protect your assets while away must be done well in advance. There are lots of ways technology can help, but few benefits can come when planning starts the night before. Fortunately, the same things that can help protect your stuff while on a monthlong cruise can also be of benefit when you are just away for the weekend, or simply at work or out to the store.

Your local police can provide plenty of tips to help reduce the chances of your house being broken into while away on a trip. Things like making sure your doors and windows are closed and locked and ensuring your house looks occupied are just common sense. Having lights come on and off, making sure the landscaping looks maintained and not all dried up and preventing packages, newspapers, and mail from piling up out front are important in discouraging burglars from picking your home as a target. Technology can help with all of these.

A home alarm is one important tech item to leave behind when you travel. No matter how simple or complex, whether externally monitored by a company or only by the homeowner, any security system is better than no security system. While you can contract with a security company like ADT to install a system in your home and monitor it, there are also many good systems available for self-installation. Technology has made home security more capable and available at a low enough price point for everyone to have some protection.

I know a lot of folks that have the SimpliSafe system; it has come to define the moderate-cost self-installed security system. Amazon's Ring Alarm Security System and Google's Nest Secure are among others competing in this same space. These systems start in the \$200 to \$400 range for basic setups, but more sensors, cameras, and accessories can always be added. They can be self-monitored or professionally monitored for \$10 to \$20 per month. Most can be part of larger smart home setups with other products, including voice-activated assistants.

Network home monitoring cameras are also useful ways to provide home security, with or without an alarm system. They can be set to inform you of unexpected activity or noise, like an alarm system. They are also useful for periodic checks on pets or family members left behind. They are typically Wi-Fi cameras and can be battery or line-powered, with prices ranging from \$40 to \$300. With apps for setup and monitoring, motion detection, video, and audio monitoring, media and cloud storage, email and push notifications and night viewing capabilities, they can be mini-security systems by themselves.

I've had and used network cameras at home for many years. Like a lot of tech products, however, no device or service is perfect or works perfectly all the time. I'm a big believer in diversity and backups for tech gear. On my most recent vacation trip with my wife, I had three different network camera types set up to monitor our home.

My oldest cameras are Samsung SmartCams; I've had three for about two years now. You can live-view from their web site (through IE only) or app, and store video on the internal micro-SD card or to their cloud account (subscription fee required). They have infrared LEDs for night vision and can be set to provide email or push notifications to your phone if audio or motion is detected (it can attach a captured image to the email, so at least you have that if the camera is taken). These work pretty well, but I have not found a way to set them up to completely avoid false triggers (I'd get a few each day). There were also a few days on our trip when something must have been wrong with their web service, as I could not access any of these cameras. Fortunately, I had others.

My wife gave me four Blink cameras for Christmas last year. At the time they were a private company, but now they are owned by Amazon. They are waterproof and battery-powered, so they are more versatile in terms of placement. Because they are limited by battery power, they should not be viewed in continuous video mode for long. I mostly take snapshots on them or use their motion detection to send notifications to my phone. They have free cloud storage, so you will have video clips to show the police if your

cameras are taken in a break-in. The batteries are supposed to last 1-2 years under normal use. They work very well as a security system, less so if you just want to observe a live stream of someone you left at home.

My third camera is a Panasonic HomeHawk indoor camera. It is a lot like the Samsung, but is newer, costs less and seems to work a bit better. While its notification and recording functions seem to work well, its app menus make it less convenient to use. The Blink camera app is the most convenient, as each camera has a single button in the app to enable/disable detection, notification, and recording. For Samsung and Panasonic, you must enable motion detection and sound detection separately, in addition to notification and recording; these are on several app pages. The Panasonic camera seems to work well as a security camera, but like the Samsung, it is more difficult to switch between “home” and “away”. It also can’t preserve an image or video of a break-in anywhere but on its own internal memory.

Another important aspect of protecting your home is making it look like you are not away when you are. Lots of new smart home devices can help with that. There are sophisticated systems that can control lights and draperies, but simple and inexpensive smart bulbs and light controllers can provide much of the same capability. There are many companies that make these items. They are all typically connected through Wi-Fi, controlled through apps and almost always can integrate with Alexa and Google Home Assistant.

Again, for robustness, I currently use three different smart light products. Belkin makes Wemo smart home products, including smart plugs and light switches. I have several of these smart plugs with lamps connected to them. There are many companies making smart bulbs, which simply replace Edison-base light bulbs in lamps and light fixtures. I currently have smart bulbs from TP-Link and Feit Electric. These are easy to install and many have dimming and color-changing capabilities. While the apps often provide the ability to schedule light events, on my last trip I simply switched lights on manually through the evenings with my apps. The apps give feedback that the light was switched, and I could also confirm this by looking at my network cameras. I’ve found these smart light products work very well.

For those with extensive landscaping, Wi-Fi smart sprinkler controllers can keep your irrigation going while away or at home. They often have rainfall sensors or weather monitoring capabilities to help save water as well.

Indoor water should also be considered for control when traveling. Many years ago, a good friend returned home from a trip to find a stream of water running down his driveway. A plumbing failure has caused a leak; his prolonged absence had allowed water to flood the inside of his home, resulting in major water damage and extensive renovation costs. Ever since I’ve always shut off the main water valve into the house (and shut off the water heater) right before leaving on a trip. It also serves as a plumbing test on our return; if I hear a flow when the valve is turned on again, it means I have a slow leak somewhere that I need to locate.

Leaks can cause damage anytime, whether you are away on vacation or just to the store, or even while you sleep at night. There are many new smart home electronic water shutoff systems available to continuously monitor and protect your home from water damage. Some, like Belkin's Phyn device (\$600), are connected in line with your water supply pipe and can monitor the flow and cut off the water to the house if a leak is detected. Others, like the Guardian Leak Prevention System (\$200), use water sensors placed at likely leak sources to automatically rotate your existing main water shutoff valve (no plumbing change required) and shut off the water. The Xenon Smart Wi-Fi Water Valve mounts on your existing water valve in a similar way, allowing your water to be shut off by Alexa, Google Assistant or through an app. The Streamlabs Wi-Fi Home Water Monitoring System (\$140) takes a different approach, ultrasonically monitoring the flow in your home supply line (it clamps on the pipe with no plumbing changes) and alerting you via a notification on your smartphone to shut off your water valve manually. Even Zircon's \$44 Water Leak Detector could provide a useful warning to your smartphone if it detects water where it is placed.

Electronic locks and safes can help provide additional protection for your home's contents and valuables while traveling. The Schlage Encode Smart Wi-Fi Deadbolt replaces your front entry lock and allows remote management of the lock through an app. This allows you to lock your door while on the way to the airport if you forgot to or let in a trusted friend to check on that possible leak while away. Electronic safes are great for locking away valuables and that computer backup you should have made before traveling; many are not expensive. A USB external hard drive with hardware encryption, like the Western Digital My Passport drives, provide an easy way to protect your most valuable data while away. Simply copy all your important data or backups to the encrypted drive and leave it with a trusted friend before departing (with encryption, you don't have to trust them absolutely).

While you can get a neighbor to pick up your newspaper and mail when on travel, some of us, unfortunately, may have closer relationships with fellow online gamers in other countries than with the people that live across the street. It is good to have a neighbor watch over your place, but if you are not sure you want your neighbors to know your home or apartment is temporarily vacant, technology can still help. I now get the newspaper electronically as a pdf so I can read it remotely, help the environment and avoid a pile of papers on the driveway while on vacation. You should contact the USPS to stop your mail delivery while you are away (you can set it up online). If you are concerned about mail theft, you can also sign up for Informed Delivery on the USPS web site. This allows you to view images of letter-sized mail that will be delivered to you and manage package deliveries. This could allow you to determine if mail is being stolen from your box.

No matter where you travel, you'll want to know everything you left of value will be there when you return. If you leave the right technology behind, you can monitor and control your home and property remotely and be assured there is no place like home to come back to.

