

Packing a Laptop Bag

Like stocking a backpack for a week in the mountains, packing a laptop bag forces you to walk a fine line between preparedness and aching shoulders. But picking the right mix of accessories can mean the difference between a successful trip and the forehead-smacking revelation that you've forgotten a key laptop-helper. By stocking your bag with the following items, you'll be more prepared than the average traveler. Indeed, you might find yourself a hero among other coffee shop laptop-pers. Some of these items require a few hours of preparation; others, a few days.

Fully Charged Battery

A laptop's battery drains away like chocolate milk in front of a child. A freshly charged battery gives you a few hours of extra work time (or DVD viewing), even if you forget everything else listed in this appendix. Always charge your laptop's battery before taking your machine on the road. This step also saves embarrassing delays when airport security demands that you prove your laptop works; there's nothing worse than having to plug in your laptop to demonstrate prove that it's a working unit.

Tip: A spare battery is expensive, and much too heavy for most folks. But if you're working outdoors, an extra battery will keep your laptop running on batteries all day.

Power Adapter and Accessories

Most power adapters (the brick-shaped, electrical funneling boxes) have a detachable power cord, so be sure to pack the cord as well. If you'll be charging your laptop inside a car, bring along a 12V adapter to gather juice while on the road.

Kensington's (www.kensington.com) Notebook AC/DC Power Adapter (\$130) is a space-saving alternative that comes in a small case and plugs into cars, airplanes, or wall outlets. It comes with enough plugs to power up laptops, iPods, cell phones, DVD players, and palmtop computers.

If you're heading overseas, examine your power adapter's fine print. You're safe if it says both "100V/240V" and "50Hz/60Hz." Those adapters automatically adjust their voltage and current cycles for foreign countries; you need only a small "prong" adapter to fit the outlets at your destination. If your adapter doesn't sport both these ratings, contact your laptop's manufacturer or visit a travel supply store like LaptopTravel (www.laptoptravel.com) for either a different adapter or a voltage converter. If you're already at the airport, head for the gift shop.

Business Card

Lost laptops occasionally reunite with their owners thanks to this important homing device. Tape a business card to the top of your laptop so that you can safely establish that it's *your* Vaio when it emerges from the airport's X-ray machine conveyor belt.

Wireless Adapters

With WiFi hotspots (page 320) in Starbucks, McDonalds, airports, hotels, and corporate offices, wireless adapters (page 412) are a necessity for laptops.

- **WiFi.** If your laptop doesn't include built-in wireless networking, bring a wireless adapter that plugs into a PC Card slot or USB port. The cord on the USB models are handy for positioning the adapter near a window to increase signal strength, or even to piggyback on a stronger wireless connection across the street.
- **Bluetooth adapter** (page 452). Optional for everybody but owners of Bluetooth-capable PDAs or cell phones, these tiny and lightweight adapters cost under \$25 and plug into a USB port. They're a great cord substitute if you happen to be somewhere with Bluetooth-ready printers.

Tip: Unplug or turn off any wireless adapters when you're not using them to conserve battery power.

Mouse

Touchpads rarely work as efficiently as a *real* mouse. An optical mouse works better than a roller mouse on the uneven surfaces you encounter while traveling—the arm rest of a padded chair, for instance, or even the top of your thigh on the airplane. Small mice designed especially for laptop owners are sold at Kensington's (www.kensington.com), Amazon (www.amazon.com), and many other retailers.

Cables

True nerds bring along one of each of the cables listed below. Everybody else should bring the first two on the list. Travel stores often sell retractable cables for easier packing, as well as double-duty cables: one cable with extra connectors to make it perform two or more tasks.

- **Telephone cable.** In a pinch, borrow the cable from the phone in your hotel room.
- **Network cable.** (Also known as an Ethernet cable.) You may need one of these to plug into a hotel room's broadband Internet connection.
- **Crossover network cable.** This cable comes in handy for creating on-the-fly, laptop-to-PC networks (page 448). But it really shines when you need to share a friend's wireless Internet connection at a coffee shop. Connect the cable between both laptops' network ports, and set up a quick network with Windows XP's Network Setup wizard. Doing so lets both laptops share the single wireless Internet connection (page 448 has full details).
- **FireWire.** Like a crossover cable, FireWire can create a super-fast, two-PC network. FireWire moves data four times more quickly than standard network cables and still lets you share another PC's Internet connection. It's also great for backing up video from your digital camcorder.
- **Digital camera-to-TV cable.** Toss your digital camera's cable in your laptop bag to keep it from getting lost. Digital photos look much better on TV than on the camera's tiny display. Better yet, leave the camera cable at home and pack a PC Card flash reader, described next.

PC Card Flash Reader

Most computer stores sell tiny "all-in-one" gadgets that plug into a USB port and read all major flash card formats. These gadgets let you back up your digital camera's photos, keeping you from losing all your vacation shots if your camera's stolen. Keep an extra memory card in one of the flash card reader's slots to create a jumbo-sized floppy disk for moving files to other PCs.

Manuals

Slide your laptop's manual into the laptop bag's magazine pocket. But don't stop there. Create a new folder on your laptop, visit the Internet, and download PDF copies of manuals for your laptop, digital camera, and any other gadget you'll be using while on the road.

DVD/CDs

- **Windows XP CD.** Useful for emergency repairs; be sure to bring a duplicate of your CD, not the original. And write the Product Key (page 548) onto the CD's label side using a Sharpie marker.
- **Knoppix CD.** You may never need this bootable, one-CD version of Linux, but if Windows XP goes down, Knoppix let you scrape your My Document's folder off your hard drive and copy it to a USB thumb drive or flash card. (For full details on getting started with Knoppix, see page 538.)
- **Blank CD-Rs.** Three of these should do, letting you give friends copies of your digital photos—or grab copies of *their* photos.
- **Movie DVD.** Bring a favorite to watch on the plane. If you own a TiVo, copy shows or movies onto the hard drive with TiVoToGo (www.tivo.com/4.9.19.asp).

FedEx Envelope and Airbill

Sure, you can pick up these supplies at the FedEx office. But when timing's crucial, it's nice to whip this out, drop in your important contract, and dash to the nearest drop box. Better still, sign up for a FedEx account (www.gofedex.com), and the white truck delivers to you FedEx envelopes and airbills, pre-stamped with your address and account number.

Skype Account

Skype works much like the “voice chat” feature in instant messenger programs. Free Skype accounts (see Appendix C) let you talk to anybody with a Skype account. All laptops come with speakers, and some come with built-in microphones (look for a pinhole-sized opening above the keyboard). Add a microphone, if needed, and your Skype account transforms your laptop into a free long-distance phone. Make sure your friends sign up for Skype accounts before you head overseas for the summer.