

# Rules of the road trip: Keep data use down, power level up

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Managing my devices and data on travel-writing road trips used to be easy as pie. During the day, I'd charge my laptop when I ate at cafes or worked at coffee shops. At night, I'd deal with emails, upload photos and download podcasts via WiFi at hotels or friends' houses. But now, when I travel on assignment, I avoid hotels and restaurants, and I don't invite myself to stay with pals en route. That's meant I've had to employ new tech strategies.

We're all recalculating these days. According to AAA, Americans are largely avoiding air, bus and cruise travel, choosing road trips for 97 percent of this summer's leisure travel. Whether you're escaping to a cabin in the woods or visiting family in another city, it's important to figure out how to road trip smartly and safely, which includes having access to technology to keep you informed and entertained without breaking the bank with data usage.

To prepare for a cross-country trip last month, I packed a couple coolers of meals, camping gear and what seemed to be a silo of dog food. Figuring out how to keep all the devices charged without access to traditional power sources was trickier. My partner planned to join me and work as I drove. He set up a hotspot through his iPhone and bought a power inverter that made it possible to charge his laptop — two game-changers that allowed him to host Zoom meetings, take calls and manage email like a boss from the passenger seat.

I downloaded podcasts ahead of time and fully charged all my devices: flip phone and Bluetooth earpiece for calls, Garmin GPS for directions, iPad for podcasts and email, and LED bike lights for poking around the car and tent at night. I also charged my camera and MacBook and packed an external hard drive for backups.

Within hours of our departure, the car became a jumbled mess of invasive cords. But we covered thousands of miles in four days and experienced only a few small tech hiccups. I made a note to find cable organizers before our return and asked friends and mobile experts to recommend gadgets and tech hacks from their own road



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**Many travelers are opting for road trips over air, bus and cruise travel. You can keep your devices charged, your passengers entertained and, for those who are working, your productivity high with the right setup — and it doesn't have to be expensive.**

trips. Here are 10 suggestions to get organized, stay connected and save data.

**Understand your limits:** Before you leave, familiarize yourself with your data plan. Keep a close eye on your usage during the trip and consider switching to a new plan if you're on a trajectory to exceed your minutes.

**Find cheap entertainment:** Before you leave, download entertainment for both the driver and passengers. The driver may listen to a podcast, for example (always with at least one ear free to hear traffic and sirens), while passengers might prefer to watch a movie. "Before a trip, I make sure we have shows and movies downloaded," said Andrew Moore-Crispin, director of content at Ting Mobile. "You don't want the kids asking for 'Paw Patrol' when you only have 'Abby Hatcher.'" Downloading this content ahead of time saves data charges, as well. "It's possible to have a whole sea-

son of TV shows on your phone ready to watch offline whenever you want, and you won't need your mobile data minutes," Moore-Crispin said.

**Power up:** If you want to charge a laptop during your drive, you'll need a power inverter, which plugs into the vehicle power outlet. A power bank to recharge your phone in case of an emergency is a must-have. My tech wizard friend Scott recommends the Select Speed Plus power bank from Monoprice, where he buys reliable off-brand gear and gadgets at a discount. Goal Zero is a popular high-end brand among the outdoorsy set. Expert tip: Switching your smartphone to airplane mode will conserve battery life and allow for faster charging.

**Get hot:** If you already have a smartphone, it's a snap to turn it into a WiFi hotspot, which allows other devices, such as tablets or laptops, to share your phone's

high-speed network connection. (Beware: You can also gulp down a lot of data this way.) Or, you can purchase a separate hotspot, such as Verizon's Jetpack or T-Mobile's SyncUp Drive, and add it to your data plan. Portable hotspots have long-lasting batteries and will allow you to continue sharing the connection with others even if you step away with your phone.

**Make connections:** On our recent trip, we charged multiple devices at once, using a multi-port USB adapter and a two-socket splitter for the vehicle power outlet. My buddy Scott usually carries three-in-one charging cables, with Apple Lightning, micro USB and USB-C connectors, allowing him to charge all his mobile devices simultaneously (including a power bank). The combo cables help prevent wires from getting out of control; if you're still battling wire anarchy, try the Nite Ize Gear Tie rubber twist-ties, available on Amazon.

**Rely on WiFi:** The easiest way to control your mobile data usage is to switch to WiFi on your phone whenever you're in range: coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, libraries, service centers, rest stops and even some campgrounds. There are tools, such as the Wi-Fi Free Spot website and Avast Wi-Fi Finder app, to help you find the nearest free WiFi. Keep in mind that the iPhone's Wi-Fi Assist automatically switches you to the mobile data network if it can't find a strong WiFi signal; you can turn off that feature in your settings.

**Control those apps:** Moore-Crispin said the biggest data-eating culprits include apps like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. With some tweaks in each app's settings, you can prevent photos and videos from automatically downloading into your feed (or completely disable them) until you're back on WiFi.

**Map it:** Downloading maps ahead of time saves data and en-

sures you have directions even in places without cellphone service. "We are so used to having cell service that people forget in the mountains and desert that you lose the very thing you need," said Denise Barlock, a Google Maps Local Guide and superuser who averages 12,000 miles a year in her motor home. Last year, she downloaded the maps for a trip to Alaska from Seattle and was amazed by their functionality using only her phone's GPS feature. With downloaded maps, you won't get real-time traffic data, but you will see all but the most recent reviews and updates for establishments along the way. Check out AAA's Covid-19 Travel Restrictions Map at TripTik.AAA.com, and search Google Maps to learn whether a destination is open during the pandemic, requires masks or has curbside pickup.

**Know your new vehicle's tricks:** If you've bought a new car recently, you know that Apple CarPlay and Android Auto offer navigation and the ability to manage basic smartphone features with voice control. Many newer vehicles also offer in-car WiFi options that allow the driver to pair the Internet connection from a smartphone in the vehicle directly to the car's system, creating a hotspot. Some vehicles now offer a HUD, or head-up display — a safety feature familiar to pilots that presents navigation and speed information in a line-of-sight display. You can also purchase a portable HUD device; AAA's Ben Young recommends Hudway Drive.

**Neglect the tech:** Keeping devices charged, updated and organized takes time — and can become a distraction in the car. On those long stretches when you don't need navigation instructions, try turning off your electronics. My low-tech friend reminded me that using the sun to orient yourself works surprisingly well and that the pretend-you-don't-have-GPS game can be super fun (I concur). If silence isn't your jam, try engaging with your passengers, even if the only one has four legs.

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