

TECH TEST DRIVE

Have tech, will travel with help from these products



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I don't often travel on business, so I'm paranoid about overlooking something important in my preparations. This especially applies to tech gear I use on trips — so I plan this out, well in advance, as Eisenhower once planned D-Day.

What follows is a tidied-up version of my checklist for my recent journey to the Macworld Expo tech show in San Francisco.

Ziploc bags and twist ties:

Yep, these are always the first things I grab for any trip, business or pleasure. I still have nightmares about trips gone by where my electronic cables and cords got tangled in suitcase pockets, requiring a good half-hour to separate. Never again!

I first fold all my cables into little twist-tied bundles. Then, I sort them by category (camera, computer, iPod, cell phone, etc.) and tuck them into a series of Ziploc bags. These go into the mesh pocket inside the main flap of my suitcase.

This not only keeps your stuff neat but also makes surprise airport inspections easier. My luggage never draws undue scrutiny, but I know of several fellow Macworld attendees who were forced to unpack everything — *everything* — for security workers who were curious about all their gear.

Ziplocs came in handy for my toiletries, too. And I packed extra Ziplocs and twist ties for the return leg of my trip.

Protection for electronics: It's important to protect your electronic gadgets. I had lots of pricey loaner gear on my trip and had to ensure it got to San Francisco and back without a scratch. So, I turned to my favorite maker of protective cases, WaterField, which lent me a sleeve for my Apple MacBook laptop, a case for my Canon pocket camera and sleeves for an iPhone and several iPods.

WaterField cases are so good that I didn't bother procuring a padded backpack or carrying case — I just used my regular daypack and jammed my shielded MacBook and other gadgetry into it. The cheapo backpack had the added benefit of making me inconspicuous — the last thing you want to do when walking around a metropolis is announce you're lugging

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electronics worth thousands.

I did make an exception for one of Waterfield's iPhone cases that attaches to a backpack strap for easier access to the Apple device. This felt awkward after a while, though, so I resumed my standard practice of cramming my iPhone into a pants pocket.

I sampled a couple of other protective products as I prepared for my trip.

Atlantic Inc. lent me one of its new water-repellant Raindrop sleeves designed for Apple laptops — versions of the Neoprene covers are available for 13-, 15- and 17-inch MacBooks. I found the Raindrop stylish enough but not nearly *protective* enough. It might be a good choice for those using padded packs or bags, though.

RhinoSkin lent me one of its new Aluminum Hardcases for the 13-inch MacBook. This fits like a second skin over the laptop and lets you use the computer without pulling it from the case. I like this idea but found the case to be flimsily built — one of its plastic latches broke off only minutes after I unpacked the case — and, frankly, rather ugly.



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So, I left the Hardcase with the Raindrop at home.

Internet access everywhere:

Online access is important for those traveling on business — including yours truly, because I had to file newspaper articles, upload digital photos to the Web, post to a blog, “tweet” on Twitter and the like.

But Wi-Fi is often a problem for travelers and certainly was in my case. Wireless access at my hotel was slow and unreliable, while Wi-Fi at the Moscone Center convention complex was often flakier. It got turned off during one key news event, the Macworld Expo keynote speech by Apple chief executive Steve Jobs.

So, like other bandwidth-addicted traveling types, I made certain I had alternate high-speed access to the Internet.

It was my first real-life test of Verizon's cellular modems for computers, consisting of stick-like devices that plug into a laptop Universal Serial Bus port and then piggyback on the wireless carrier's high-speed EV-DO data network.

I took *two* USB sticks — Novatel's slim USB727 and Sierra Wireless' slightly bulkier AirCard 595U — but I needn't have bothered since the Sierra model worked flawlessly during the “Stevenote” and at other times during my travels.

Sound gear: I fear boredom on a long trip, especially when cooped up in an airplane or in a cramped hotel room with nothing good to watch on TV (for free, anyway). So, decent audio gear was a key part of my tech kit.

I didn't want to carry multiple sets of earbuds for use with my iPods, iPhone and MacBook, so I picked one set that would do it all, everywhere.

V-Moda's Vibe Duo buds were perfect for my purposes. They are in-

ear models that you jam into your ear canal to create a near-sound-proof seal and block outside noise, which made them ideal for use on a noisy flight. An alternate set I tested, NewerTech's Hands-Free Mic & Earbuds, have a different bud design that sits lightly outside the canal, not in it. These are better for motorists who need to hear what is happening around them, not for people on planes.

The Vibe Duo strikes me as more stylish, too, but aren't very durable.

The V-Modas and NewerTechs have microphones and built-in controls for use with Apple's iPhone, too. So, while listening to Macworld-related tech podcasts in San Francisco on my Vibe Duos, I could pause that audio

to take calls and then resume listening to the shows.

I also wanted a set of iPod speakers so I wouldn't have to wear earbuds in my hotel room. I found a dandy speaker set, Atlantic's groovy-looking Ice. This works atop a table or dresser, but also in a bath or shower courtesy of its waterproof design and a strap for hanging the device from a showerhead.

I took the Ice on the Macworld trip but got so busy I did not have time to test it (so much for boredom). I've since tried it and like it. It's designed for use with all recent-model iPods. Atlantic also sells two kinds of mobile, waterproof IceBar speaker sets for use with three generations of the iPod nano.

(Not) counting my steps: The cheapest product on my trip? That would be the \$7 Shoe Pouch, a Neoprene case attached to my sneakers for use with a Nike + iPod motion sensor. This is the little pill-shaped gizmo that works with a plug-in device for the iPod nano to keep track of how much ground you've covered.

I took all this along, thinking I'd find the time to

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count steps but overestimating how much mental capacity I'd have for tech pursuits not directly related to Macworld coverage. Still, the Shoe Pouch is a great idea for those who don't have special Nike footwear with integrated slots for that motion sensor.

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MORE INFO

- **WaterField Designs**
sfbags.com
- **RhinoSkin Hardcase**
xrl.us/rhinocase
- **Atlantic Raindrop**
xrl.us/atlanticraindrop
- **Verizon Wireless**
verizon.com
- **Atlantic audio gear**
xrl.us/atlanticsound
- **V-Moda Vibe Duo**
xrl.us/vibeduo
- **NewerTech earbuds**
xrl.us/newerbuds
- **Shoe Pouch**
shoepouch.com

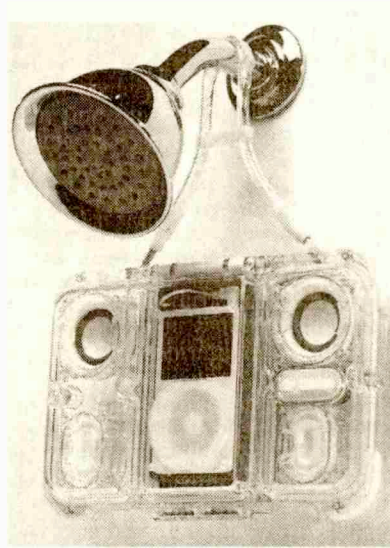
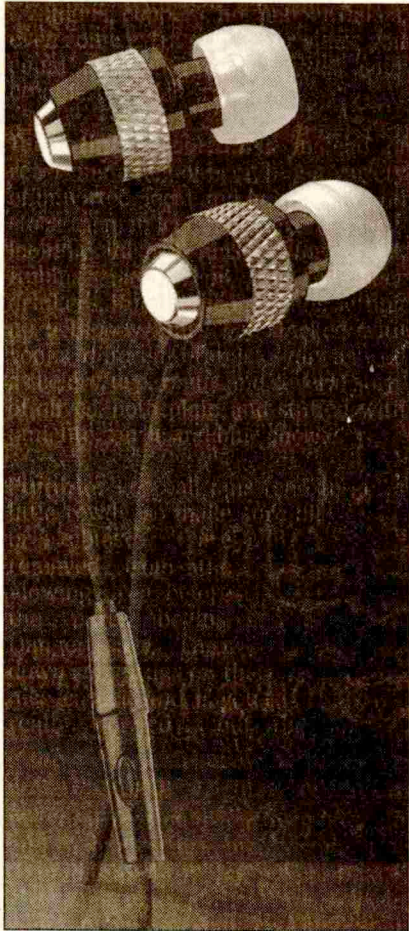


Above: The Shoe Pouch is a Neoprene case that can be attached to athletic shoes for use with the Nike + iPod sensor.

Left: San Francisco-based WaterField makes some of the best protective cases and sleeves available for laptops and gadgets.



To ensure you have high-speed Internet access on the road, carry a cellular laptop modem, such as this EV-DO model that plugs into a USB port.



Left: V-Moda makes stylish earbuds for iPods and iPhones, including this Vibe Duo model with a built-in phone microphone. It isn't particularly durable, though.

Right: Travel speakers for long trips are a must, and this Atlantic version will even work in the shower courtesy of its waterproofing and rugged build.