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Published: 09/03/2006

Helping you get through the flight

Help Desk
Al Gordon

Remember when air travel used to be fun? No, I don't either. These days when you go on the road, a priority in selecting equipment and accessories is to minimize your travel aggravation.

Step one is to find a practical bag for your notebook computer. Priority No. 1 is that it make it easy for you to pull the notebook out for airport security inspection yet still protect the computer. Plus you need to be able to comfortably schlep it to the gate and then stow it onboard the airplane. (Sadly, those requirements may be on borrowed time - if security requirements tighten further, we will be looking for cases to safely stow computers as checked baggage.)

One good solution: the Brenthaven Duo 15 wheeled case (\$200, www.brenthaven.com).

Although Brenthaven advertises that the case is only for standard width 15" notebooks, I found that my widescreen Apple MacBook Pro fits just fine. The case uses what the company calls its "Premium CORE" protection system. In essence it uses the flexibility and springiness of the form padding to create a padded compartment without the typical glove-tight fit of other cases.

Or in practical terms: you can easily pull the notebook out of the case at the security checkpoint.

As for the schlepping part, the Duo 15 has a suspension system for its wheels to get you safely over rough spots. Equally important, it uses a vertical layout - your laptop goes in sideways instead of

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lengthwise. This narrows the case, making it vastly easier to roll down the aisle of today's cattlecars, err, airplanes.

So now that you have the right bag, you need to put some stuff in it. Accessory giant Belkin has some useful items to ease travel tech annoyances:

* Getting tangled in too many cables? Try the 7-in-1 Retractable Cable Travel Pack (part No. F3X1724). A tidy zipper case holds retractable phone, ethernet, and USB cords with a slew of adapters that will connect almost all the devices, from external drives to cameras you likely will take on the road. (An iPod adapter for the USB cord is the only significant omission.)

* Don't trust hotel power outlets? The Travel Surge Protector (F9H220-TVL) lets you protect two devices and its own plug folds back so the unit packs easily. The device also provides telephone and ethernet surge protection.

* Not enough USB ports on your laptop? The F5U237 Hi-Speed USB 2.0 7-Port Hub, although intended for a desktop, is small enough to pack. If you want to take up minimum space, there's the four-port Thumb Hub (F5U218vMOB), which is about 2 / inches long. As with the 7-port hub, an included power supply is needed to run all the ports. But you can leave the Thumb Hub power supply at home and still get the use of two ports.

In one of the first "Help Desk" columns, I wrote that I hate carrying an endless number of power bricks for my electronics and recommended the multipurpose power supplies from iGo. Still do.

The lineup has changed since I last wrote, however. The new flagship is the iGo everywhere130 Universal Notebook Power Adapter - the 130 signifying the 130 watts of power it provides, which is sufficient for all but the most humongous laptops. The unit lets you charge more than one device at a time via an adapter accessory, and it will work with a/c, car cigarette lighters, and airplane power jacks. iGo maintains a huge arsenal of tips for most major notebooks, cell phones, digital cameras, PDAs, Bluetooth headsets, and music players including the iPod. If you aren't taking a laptop along, the compact 8-watt iGo everywhere Universal Power Adapter will handle cellphones, music players and such, and a retractable cord lets it stow away as a tidy bundle.

While iPods have built-in clock radio features, they are clunky at best. The very cool iH26 iPod Travel Portable Alarm Clock from iHome gives you speakers, a highly visible clock - and a snooze button. Comes in white, black, and silver versions to cover all the color coordination bases. If your sound needs are not iPod-specific, Logitech's mm28 Portable Speakers use NXT flat-panel technology to deliver impressive performance for the size and price.

They won't help you get through the flight, but both devices will help you musically soothe your frayed nerves after you arrive.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.



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