(Approx. 1631 words)

President's Corner

Tech Travels 2.5

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My wife and I are back from another vacation trip, a week-long stay in northern Arizona to celebrate our anniversary. This comes not long after a week trip to Idaho in August to visit friends. Every time we travel, we can learn what tech techniques work when away from home and what does not. I thought I'd have everything worked out for the Arizona trip for smooth tech travels, having had the recent rehearsal on the Idaho trip. Things change, new experiences come up, and situations are different, however, so I always find something new to add to my list of tech travel do's and don'ts.

Different circumstances bring up new problems as well as new solutions. We found rental cars in short supply and expensive when we were planning on our Idaho trip, so we chose to fly instead of drive. This limited what we could bring along, so I left some things home. I brought only my 14" HP Windows 10 laptop, leaving my Chromebook behind. For the Arizona trip, rental cars had come back down in price, allowing us to drive and have the luxury of more cargo space in a small SUV. The default for this trip became "take it if we might need it," so extra clothes, several coolers, plentiful snacks and water, and the extra tech got to come along.

I had in the past always traveled with one of my Chromebooks since they are so small, light, and quick to start up and connect to the web. The Idaho trip was the first I'd done with the Win10 laptop, and I found it to be nearly as light and quick as my Chromebook. In addition, the laptop had the advantage of superior application compatibility and greater processing power with its I7 processor, so it could run my Thunderbird email client, something the Chromebook could not do. Despite my prior travel experience, I decided to take both on the Arizona trip since I had the space. I only used the Chromebook once (reading the newspaper pdf while riding in the car on the first day), so I think I will go with experience and leave the Chromebook at home in the future.

I probably need to think about buying a new Chromebook; however, by June 2022, mine will no longer receive any further Google Chrome OS and browser updates. Every Chrome OS device has an AUE (Auto Update Expiration) date, which Google sets. After this date, the Chromebook will run but not be eligible for security and feature updates. So, just as Windows users are eventually forced to buy new computers when their old ones don't run new OS versions, Google is culling out the older, weaker Chrome devices and generating sales for their device maker clients.

We stayed in three different locations on our Arizona trip. Our first two nights were in Cottonwood, AZ, about 30 minutes southeast of Sedona. This allowed us to enjoy Sedona but stay for about 1/3 the hotel costs. Next, we did some hiking, took a jeep tour, and visited many local scenic locations. We then traveled to Flagstaff and stayed two nights, visiting the local meteor crater, Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument, and Wupatki National Monument. We also drove to higher elevations northwest of Flagstaff to see the fall colors of the aspen trees.

Our final two nights were in Williams, AZ, where we stayed at the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel. On our last full day, we rode on the Grand Canyon Railway to the Grand Canyon, took a bus tour along the south rim, and returned to Williams on the train. The railway, hotel, affiliated Fred Harvey Restaurant, and many of the facilities at the Grand Canyon are run by Xanterra, a concessionaire for the National Park Service. Though we planned our vacation initially as a visit to Sedona, for me, the highlight turned out to be the train ride and visit the Grand Canyon.

We used lots of technology on our trip. I brought AAA paper maps as backups, but we relied primarily on Google maps (run on my Android smartphone) for our navigation. I connected to the hotel internet and used my laptop to find attractions and dining options, plan our next day, and get my email and San Diego e-newspaper from home. Checking the weather online became necessary, as it snowed a little in Flagstaff the night before we arrived.

In addition to Google Maps, I ran the Gas Buddy app on my phone to find low-cost gas on our travels (when we were not near a Costco). The phone camera was handy for taking photos of trail maps posted at the trailheads when we didn't have paper maps. It was helpful to have photos of the car and the license plate on our phones for reference with a rental car. Finally, I could use the smart home camera and control apps on my phone to check on our house while we were away and confirm we had no intrusions or other issues.

Since we would be hiking, I brought my handheld GPS receiver as a backup should we get confused on a trail. We didn't do much hiking, as my wife preferred photography to exertion. We both brought digital cameras to record our adventures; I took more than 2000 pictures on the trip. I brought my action cam (small video camera) but only used it on the jeep tour in Sedona.

One thing that became important in taking so many photos was battery management. I have two batteries for my Panasonic Lumix digital camera, and I tried to make sure both were charged before each day of adventuring. The power adapters and charging cables came out every night at the hotel, each one seeking a wall outlet. I brought an ac travel power adapter, providing three outlets from one wall socket, but didn't have to use it, as our hotels usually had an ample supply of ac connections. We also brought my car dash cam to use in the rental car, so we had to keep the two battery packs I brought for it charged up. So any time we were in the car, I was charging my phone from the car USB socket or the 12V to USB adapter I brought.

We had one long day on the road where I did run low on camera battery power. So rather than cut back on picture taking, I alternated with a small Nikon pocket point and shoot digital camera I had brought "just in case." I was also concerned about my phone battery on one day, and we were not in the car much, so I switched the phone to airplane mode for a time to conserve power.

To carry cold drinks and snacks in the car, I brought my 12V-powered electric cooler. A 110V ac converter provided the 12V for it when we were in our hotel room. In addition, I brought a towel to cover the cooler and keep the sun off it when we were parked somewhere during the day. The towel also kept things in the back of the car hidden from theft-minded eyes.

Our hotel internet access was pretty good most of the time. Our three stays were with three different hotel companies, resulting in three different experiences. The first two hotels required a password for access to their Wi-Fi. So I always connected using my VPN, Private Internet Access (PIA), though I didn't do anything more sensitive over the connection than accessing my email. A VPN was essential for our third hotel stay, as they had open Wi-Fi there. I sure was glad I had verified my PIA VPN was working and up to date before we left.

I did fall down on the job in navigation preparation for our trip. I failed to remember to download offline maps for the areas we would be visiting for Google Maps before leaving. Google Maps relies on two communications channels for navigation - internet access (usually a cellular signal when driving) and GPS signals from overhead satellites. The internet connection allows Maps to search for the destination you enter, plot a route, and get real-time traffic and detour information while on your way. The Maps app loads enough route information when you establish a route to navigate to your destination, even if it is a location where no cell coverage exists. If you have to reroute or start a route in a location without a cellular data signal, however, Maps may not be able to do it. Having a saved file of map data for the area on your phone allows Maps to navigate without a data connection (but with no traffic information, of course). We saw this happen when leaving the Meteor Crater but could follow the road back to the Interstate and a cell signal.

A bigger problem for Google Maps is the lack of a GPS signal. An adequate signal from four orbiting GPS satellites is required to allow a receiver (your phone) to get a 3-D position fix. Unfortunately, occasionally geography or position will cause a loss of line of sight to enough satellites for the receiver to be unable to determine your position. This happened to us twice on our trip; we had to proceed with our best guess for navigation until enough satellites came into view again (glad we had those paper maps).

Our trip was a lot of fun, with no real mishaps along the way. Of course, we depended a lot on technology, which enhanced our travels, but we were prepared with backup methods and contingency plans when the rare glitch occurred.