

savvytraveller

Keep in touch and lighten your load – flashpacking, anyone?

WHEN CURTIS FOREMAN AND HIS wife Lindsie started thinking about packing their bags for a year-long, round-the-world trip, they were quickly overwhelmed. “How do you pack for Southeast Asia, Australia and Europe in one go?” Foreman asks. “When you travel for a year, you can’t bring everything you need. We decided to pack very little and go shopping along the way.”

The Foremans’ packing list was a bit more complicated than it sounds though. While they packed little in the way of clothes, they brought all the technology they use every day at home in Vancouver: two digital cameras, two iPods, numerous memory cards, a memory card reader and laptops – basically everything they needed to keep in touch with family and friends and do a little work along the way.

The Foremans are flashpackers, a new breed of tech-savvy travellers. They even blogged about their flashpacking lifestyle at *flashpackinglife.com* and *flashpackingwife.com*, and Curtis plans to write a flashpacking book. While the definition is loose, he defines it as “bringing as little as you need, and there’s a techy component to it. You don’t skimp on the technology.”

The term grew out of the backpacking movement as budget travellers started bringing their electronic gadgets to the beaches of Thailand and the hostels of Australia. But flashpacking is distinct from backpacking with toys. Flashpackers expect more from their experiences and aren’t afraid to spend more money to get it.

“Flashpackers make up a growing group of tech-savvy travellers who are still budget-minded, but with more disposable income than their backpacker counterparts,” says Aisling White, marketing manager for *Hostelling.com*, a major hostel travel site. “They never leave home without their [technology]. They stay in private rooms in top-notch hostels, eat out and take taxis.”

Aisling says hostels are catering to flashpackers with private rooms, ensuite bathrooms, in-room lockers and all the power outlets and free Internet access a blogger and Twitter addict could want. For good reason.



A *Hostelling.com* survey found 88 per cent of travellers bring a mobile phone, 85 per cent a digital camera, 71 per cent an MP3 player and 35 per cent a laptop. Plus, travellers over 30 now make up 27 per cent of hostel bookings.

So what are travellers doing with all that technology? Staying in touch. Where group emails sufficed a few years ago, they don’t cut it in the Facebooking and tweeting age. Travellers like the Foremans want to talk to friends and family, and keep in touch with work. They write blogs, update their Facebook page, post pictures on online galleries and Skype call family. “When you’re away, being able to stay in touch easily is nice,” Foreman says.

And it’s getting easier. While iPhones, Blackberries and other smart phones mean that a computer isn’t necessary anymore, heavy roaming fees from cell calls and data time abroad are a rude homecoming present. In light of that, many cell providers are now cooperating with international partners to reduce fees, and companies such as MAXroam are eliminating roaming all together with international SIM cards.

As well, heavy guidebooks are being replaced by Internet-enabled cellphones and electronic readers. “We need to make sure travellers can get our content wherever and

however they want,” says Matthew Cashmore, innovation ecosystem manager for guidebook guru Lonely Planet. “That’s not just on our website and in our books, but on their mobile.” Shoppers can buy guidebooks by the downloadable chapter at the Lonely Planet store (*shop.lonelyplanet.com*), and LP’s recently released iPhone city guides were instantly popular, adds Cashmore.

It’s all about being able to go longer with less, Foreman says. “If you don’t have everything you need – toiletries or the right clothes – don’t worry about it. You will be able to get what you need when you get there.”

He says the real flashpacker brings only a carry-on bag. And the ultimate is what Foreman almost pulled off: to make a living while travelling (he worked part-time, designing websites and doing technical writing). “The idea of working on the road goes back to the basic philosophy of flashpacking – light, flexible travel. It’s serendipity travel. If you see a 20-euro flight to Madrid, you take it and don’t worry about the consequences.” ❖ –Ryan Stuart

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