

## Out on the Open Road: Working virtually

**By Amber Drake**

I've now been a full-time traveling VA for nine months and have experienced life in a single location for a few months at a time, as well as a two-month trip through 14 states logging over 10,000 miles.

When on the road, Internet connectivity is definitely the most challenging obstacle, while electrical power runs a close second. The key to traveling successfully is back-up and more back-up.

Before going full-time, I invested in an RV mounted Internet satellite system that required an approximate \$5,000 initial investment and \$99/month service fee. Because I've experienced a higher than average down-time with my satellite, I've needed to seek alternative solutions. For those of you who enjoy travel, whether it be in an RV, hotel stays or on road trips, the following are the most viable options available to the traveling VA, without the satellite investment.

Whether your laptop contains a built-in WiFi feature, or you purchase an after-market WiFi card that fits into your PCMCIA slot, this is a great solution. Many hotels, truck/travel centers and RV/tent parks now offer either complimentary or pay-for-service WiFi connections. Some helpful resources include:

- ... **[www.wififreespot.com](http://www.wififreespot.com)**: Website that lists free WiFi hotspots, including hotels, truck stops, libraries, coffee houses, restaurants, airports, vacation rental properties and more.
- ... **RVer's Friend**: Directory listing RV/travel services at truck stops, including Internet, 24-hour restaurants, showers & more. This has been absolutely invaluable for us on the driving days when we don't wish to pay for an RV site just to park our rig to sleep. This is also a good resource for non-RV'ers on a road trip, as you can work a couple hours in the morning, get on the road, stop at a travel center later in the day for a few

hours to work, and then continue. Family can take showers, eat a meal, play at a playground, take a walk, visit a local library, etc., while you're working.

When making reservations at hotels, important questions to ask are:

- ... Do you offer WiFi Internet access, and if so, is there a cost?
- ... State you will require this WiFi service and ensure they place you in a room within WiFi range (some hotels only offer WiFi on a certain floor or within a specific booking category).



When making reservations at a RV/tent park, important questions include:

- ... Do you offer WiFi specific Internet access (don't just ask about "Internet" access as many parks have a shared dial-up desk with a 15 minute limit).
- ... What is the cost?
- ... Where is the WiFi area? (i.e., are all sites within range, only certain sites, or is it clubhouse only access). This is especially important to specify if you will be arriving after hours and wish to be reserved in a specific WiFi space.

Another alternative is cellular broadband offered through cell phone providers. Because of my extensive travel, this has been a necessity. To date, I've been using Verizon because that's my primary phone carrier since I'm 100% mobile, and my whole family and some clients are "in network." I purchased a Verizon Air Card, which slips into my PCMCIA slot on my laptop (looks similar to a WiFi card). This also works well when hubby is driving and I'm working in my passenger seat's "mobile office," so those thousands of miles translate to productive work time.

Expect an initial investment for the card itself to be between \$99-\$299 and an additional monthly fee of \$59-\$79, both depending on the service contract.

Verizon works well along main interstates within populated areas and in most larger cities. Speeds seem to vary as "broadband" speed isn't available everywhere. On our recent 10,000 mile trip, I would estimate availability at approximately 70% of the time; however, we generally did not stray from main highways while on the road. Note that Verizon's broadband service only works on the "primary network." In other words, if your phone works while in the "extended network," the air card and Internet service will not.

Recently, while conferring with fellow travelers, I've been researching Cingular's service, which boasts Internet service availability even within the extended network. Just today I've ordered their PC card in hopes of better coverage area. Time shall tell whether one service is superior to the other.

Another obstacle while traveling is powering the laptop while on the road. While traveling in a vehicle or on a plane, I use a power inverter, which plugs into the vehicle's cigarette lighter and offers a standard plug on the other end. Note that some laptops require a "sine" inverter which outputs cleaner power. Bring your laptop into the store and ask to test it with the inverter you plan to purchase. Standard inverters can be found at many electronics stores, but you may need to visit a solar power specialist to obtain a sine inverter.

Whatever your travel style, as Virtual Assistants we're blessed to have a profession that can travel with us. With a little extra preparation and creativity, today's technology transforms the dream of a traveling lifestyle.

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