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Not all road warriors have to hotwire hotel lines



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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In 1983, I used to travel with a small, portable, Radio Shack computer. It had only a 16-line screen, 32k of memory and could hold about 10 or 20 documents before it filled up.

But at the time, it was the tool of choice for modern day road warriors. In my case, I used its 300-baud modem to check e-mail while travelling, using what was known as an acoustic coupler — a device that looked like a set of headphones and fit onto a telephone handset.

Sometimes the device wouldn't work, and that meant that if I really wanted to pick up my e-mail, I had to be able to plug directly into my hotel room's phone line.

Yet not many hotel rooms had jacks. That meant people like me carried a screwdriver, alligator clips and other paraphernalia in order to directly access the telephone wires behind the panel.

Most of the time it worked. Sometimes it didn't. I remember accidentally bringing down the entire hotel switchboard in a hotel in Sydney, N.S. Oops.

Today, of course, the situation is far different. E-mail has become indispensable to many travelling executives, and the ability to surf the Web while on the road has also become crucial.

That's why one of the fastest growing areas of Internet infrastructure involves the hotel sector. Around the world, hotels are ripping out wires and installing new ones to satisfy the demand from business travellers for Internet connectivity.

Increasingly, slow connections won't do. With half a million Canadians using high-speed Internet services such as cable modems and ADSL at home, and even greater numbers using fast connections at work, travellers are coming to demand more from hotels. Indeed, when I can, I choose a hotel specifically on the basis of which one offers high-speed connectivity.

Some of the offerings that are emerging are truly impressive. In the past few months, I've been able to plug into high-speed Internet connections in hotel rooms in Calgary and in Amelia Island, Fla.

Both hotels featured Ethernet jacks in the room. You simply plug in your laptop network adapter, and you're on-line through a remarkably fast connection. Each hotel featured service from a different company, and there was a small charge added to the room bill. But from my perspective, the service was well worth it.

The market for hotel access is expected to be enormous. Just this week, 3Com, one of the world's largest providers of networking equipment, established a separate division that will work to provide service to hotels, hospitals, nursing homes and apartment complexes, a market that is expected to grow to several billion dollars within just a few years.

It's hardly an inexpensive proposition; the typical 240-room hotel might have to invest about $250,000 (U.S.) to equip itself to offer high-speed access to guests.

In case you do end up staying in hotels that are still in the dark ages and have just a phone jack — or even worse, no jacks — you should prepare yourself before you go. First, visit iGO (**www.igo.com**), where you'll find all kinds of computer products for travellers, including connectivity tools. Also browse **www.kropla.com/phones.htm** to find detailed information on the various types of phone jacks and telephone systems that you may encounter around the world, as well as detailed instructions on how you can take off the wall plate to hook up your modem.

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