

Ditch the Laptop for A USB Key

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Nowadays, whenever someone plans a long distance trip, staying in touch with the world is a major priority. Bringing a laptop, with all its weight, bulk, and potential for theft is often viewed as a necessary evil. Most people simply cannot be without their email, and access to their personal travelogues. In the past, keeping all the relevant information on a laptop was the only solution to connectivity on the road. With the availability of cheap USB keys and hard drives, though, the world traveler has a few more options.

Now, they can carry an entire computer's worth of software everywhere they go, and keep a personal mini computer stored on a usb key, accessible through almost any computer in the world. Thanks to the hard work of sites such as www.portableapps.com and Open Source, the software is all free and easily accessible. Word processors, web browsers, even entire office suites are available for free download. Lets get started!

First of all we need to determine whether we'll be using a USB key drive, or a USB Mini Hard drive. Let's compare the two:

Mini USB Hard Drive

Pros: Extremely large disk capacity (store all you're photos), take anywhere, no external power supply, size of a matchbox

Cons: A little more expensive, more fragile than usb key

Price Range: \$100 (4GB, 800 hi-res photos @ 5 megapixels) - \$150 (8GB, 1600 hi-res photos @ 5 megapixels)

USB Key

Pros: Extremely small, super cheap, reliable

Cons: Less disk space than USB mini hard drives

Price Range: \$10 (64MB, Enough for personal web browser, Abiword text editor, and email - barely) - \$380 (8GB, Enough for anything. And everything. Jeeze) UPDATE: Prices have been cut in half in the past 12 hours! Click above for link. May run out of keys soon at these prices!

A 64 MB key will get us on the net and keep our small text files, if all we do is write and send to our web server while on the road. Otherwise, it makes sense to spring for at least a 512MB key for our long travels on the road to insure we have a backup of the text we send to our blogs. If we want to store pictures while traveling in the third world with its crummy internet connections, it's probably a good idea to get a USB Disk with a few gigabytes on it, so we can store our photos until we get to a decent internet connection to upload them to.

Armed with our USB key as big as we can afford, lets get to work tricking it out, and making our little key a road warrior.

The best website for filling up a USB key with valuable software is PortableApps.com. All of the software below comes from that site and is 100% free and awesome.

Web Browser: Hands down, Portable Firefox is the greatest asset a traveler has when on a long trip and when using slow, third world computers. It's a minimized version of Firefox, the fast and secure browser, and all your bookmarks and personal cookies are stored securely on the usb key.

Web Mail: I strongly recommend portable Thunderbird with Enigmail and GPG. With this great open source piece of software, you'll be able to send and receive messages in complete security. Learn how to use the GPG encryption and encourage you're friends to do the same. Encrypting email helps protect personal privacy and discourages government spying.

Word Processor: My personal favorite is Abiword. Abiword has the ability to open and edit Microsoft Word documents, spell check, and has a really slick interface. A definite must download.

Instant Messaging: Portable Miranda takes the cake as the best portable Windows Instant messenger. It's streamlined and super efficient, so it runs great on those slower, low memory internet acces terminals that seem to be everywhere we

go. Download it if you want to talk at all on the road.

Image Editing: The GIMP has long been a beacon for the potential power of Open Source software. Add the GIMP to your USB drive, and you've just added an image editor rivaling Adobe Photoshop to our tiny USB key. Yes, you can worship free software now.

Once all of our software has been loaded onto the usb drive, you're all set to have a personal computer at any internet cafe the world over. Just walk into any cafe, plop the usb key in the drive, and a folder with all the software will automagically pop up. Write away and share the magic of your travels. For cheap!

If you like this story, please digg it, and share it with everyone else on the net. I also have another article, about staying anonymous online using a USB key and free encryption software.