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THE INSIDER

Savor the Trip, Don't Tweet It



A visitor focuses on his mobile phone.

Photograph by Burçin Yildirim

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By Christopher Elliott

Last summer, my family of five was driving down a two-lane highway that cuts through some of the most gorgeous scenery in the Catskills. But the kids—ages three, four, and eight—didn't have a clue. They were busy watching *Wizards of Waverly Place* and *Phineas and Ferb* on iPhones. Me: "Kids, are you seeing

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this? Look at the mountains! Look at the cows!" Kids: "Uh-huh." Remember vacations before social networking, DVD screens in the back of the minivans, and Flip video cameras wrapped around every wrist? Think back. The smart phone wasn't always buzzing like a hornet. The GPS wasn't ordering you to make a U-turn now. The first thing you saw when you stepped onto the overlook at the Grand Canyon wasn't a miniature Grand Canyon in the viewfinder of your HD video camera.

Vacation meant leaving the world you knew for a world you didn't. We immersed ourselves in a new place with minimal interference from technology. To be fair, there were always shutterbugs who obsessively took photos, and some vacationers were never really there to begin with, because they were engrossed in a novel. But the numbers of these distracted travelers increased significantly when portable consumer camcorders came on the scene in 1983. Digital cameras appeared in the 1990s. And then so-called convergence devices came along, merging the cell phone, camera, video camera, and personal computer. Case in point: Apple's iPhone, introduced in 2007. Today's model comes loaded with two cameras, digital compass, and gyroscope. Oh, and some of the quarter million apps available.

Now it's almost impossible to avoid seeing a vacation through the prism of your portable gadgets. Nearly one in five Americans carries a smart phone, according to Forrester Research, Inc. Among travelers, the adoption rate is even higher. With more than 500 million active Facebook users worldwide—each with an average of 130 friends—just imagine the number of vacation photos and status updates posted every second.

But do we know when to power down our gizmos? Indeed, a recent poll by Harris Interactive on behalf of PC Tools found that about one in ten men think they shouldn't have to switch off their mobile devices during weddings.

Their own weddings.

Annette Priest says gadgets have made travel a less memorable, less meaningful experience in the 21st century. She studies how people use computers and smart phones for Revel Insight in Austin, Texas. "Technology constantly used to connect people can make travelers miss the positive disconnection and fresh insights of their own day-to-day life," she says. Technology analyst William Bao Bean adds, "Social media has fundamentally changed travel; when you're on the road, there is a constant stream of pictures, comments, complaints, and video to share with friends, family, and even strangers."

Technology short-circuits some of the delights of discovery, too. We can almost experience the trip before we step off the plane. Where will we stay? There's an app for that. Recommendations for dinner? There's an app for that, too. What to do right now? Open your browser, and all will be revealed. Whatever happened to exploring, happenstance, and serendipity? That essential, spontaneous part of the vacation is at risk of extinction.

"The process of reporting, documenting, and communicating pulls you out of the experience," says adventure travel expert Don Mankin, a former psychology professor. "Instead of having the experience, you are now observing yourself having the experience. It's a layer removed and just not as sensual."


Another problem, according to Priest and other usability experts, is that some travelers see the world through the tiny screens of their smart phones before they bother looking at the real thing. They perceive a vacation as a film director might, blocking off each shot, concerning themselves with backlighting and background interference rather than taking it in with all their senses. Travel, then, is compressed into a series of still images or high-definition video for posterity. But it's fake, because you never had the experience in the first place.

Full disclosure: I own not only several iPhones but also an iPad. I use Facebook and Twitter, and I shoot digital pictures and video. If you send me a tweet right now, I'll probably respond. As a travel journalist, I love the way technology can connect me with readers, sources, and friends. Then again, that's my job.

Putting the electronic toys away while traveling isn't just a nice idea. It could also improve the quality of your life when you return home "Those who take a real



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vacation by untethering from technology have higher overall long-term productivity than those who don't," says Marc Resnick, a usability expert who teaches at Bentley University in Waltham, Mass. Resnick isn't just talking about laying off the work when you're on vacation. He means cooling it on the electronics while you're away—even the occasional game of Super Mario Brothers.

It's not all bad. Used in moderation, technology can make your trip go more smoothly. Priest hastens to add that technology can increase travelers' safety and confidence, as well as provide supplemental information and context while in the destination. Wondering if George Washington is buried at the base of the Washington Monument? You can look up the answer while gazing at the obelisk. (No, he's not.)

The solution? Set boundaries on technology. If work requires you to check in, limit yourself to a half-hour in the morning and answer only the most urgent messages. Say no to obsessive Facebooking. Let the kids use the iPad during the flight, but bury it deep in the suitcase when you arrive. That's what I did last year, on a memorable trip to Hawaii's Big Island. We had a rule: Turn on *Hannah Montana Forever*, and the phone goes in the volcano. We still have all of our iPhones. If that doesn't work, book lodgings without cell phone or Wi-Fi connections. I recommend the Catskills. (Also see the story on classic summer lodges in the May/June 2010 issue.)

Technology isn't really the issue. But too much of it is. It trivializes travel, turning it from a much-needed, multisensory recreational experience into fleeting and utterly forgettable entertainment. You might as well stay home and throw a bag of popcorn into the microwave.

*Had a bad trip? Contributing editor Christopher Elliott may be able to fix it. Give him the details at [elliott@ngs.org](mailto:elliott@ngs.org).*

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