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the end user

A voice for the consumer

E-mail to go

Free service lets travelers leave their laptops at home

By Victoria Shannon

PARIS

As we get in gear for summer vacation, many of us will be facing the perennial packing dilemmas: Shorts or slacks? Bring a beach ball, or buy one there? Lug the laptop along, or leave it at home?

There are various reasons people bring a portable computer along on their travels - e-mail, news cruising, photo storage, game-playing and movie-watching are mine. But if all you want is access to e-mail and don't mind borrowing a friend's computer or bellying up to a PC at an Internet café, there is a little-known, graceful way to avoid hauling computer gear with you. It's called Mail2web.

Like Microsoft's Hotmail and Yahoo's Internet-based e-mail services, Mail2web lets you see your e-mail on a Web site from anywhere you can access the Internet. But Mail2web takes it a step farther: You don't need to start a new e-mail account. You use any - or all - of your existing accounts, and you don't have to remember any of that SMTP server gobbledygook; just your user name and password.

It's so simple, it's almost scary. Kerry Paterson, an Australian who lives near Tours, France, and runs a small business there with her husband, swears by the service. As far as she can tell, there is truly no catch.

"I've used it in France, Australia, Asia, Holland, Belgium - never had a problem," said Paterson, who has an AT&T Global Network account. "I'm one satisfied customer."

Although Mail2web has been around since the dark ages of 1996, Paterson discovered it only about a year ago after the name popped up in a search engine. Hotmail and Yahoo had just eliminated their

free e-mail forwarding services, both of which Paterson had used when on the road to avoid having to switch and juggle e-mail addresses. When I checked out Mail2web on Paterson's recommendation, I admit that I felt more than a little ambivalent about typing my e-mail passwords onto a Web site. Aren't the risks of hacking, keystroke capture and identity theft worth considering?

"It doesn't really worry me," Paterson said. "I don't have anything super-secret in my e-mail, just normal messages and reservations" for her business, French Country Cottages, which finds vacation homes for Australians.

Tony Yustein, founder of the Toronto company that runs Mail2web, said he would feel funny, too, if he were sending passwords over the site of some new Internet merchant. "But we have a solid track record," he said while traveling in Europe last week (and, yes, he says he uses Mail2web every day). "In seven years, nobody has ever complained about any stolen passwords. Major Internet service providers - EarthLink in the States and Freeserve in England - recommend it to their customers. And we have two levels of security encryption. It's all about reputation."

I would also note a line of common sense from Mail2web's terms of use. This document and Mail2web's privacy policy promise up and down that your information won't be divulged, shared, stored or recorded. But it also says, "Due to the public nature of the Internet, all information should be considered generally accessible to the public." Wise words that apply to any Net service.

Yustein, a former Microsoft regional director in Europe, said he created the service for himself to get around a firewall problem he was having with his own e-mail.

About 1 million people have used Mail2web, 60 percent from outside the United States. (It is available in 16 languages.) A fraction of them - 140,000 - have become registered users.

Usage spikes up and down throughout the year based on holidays in various countries, large conferences or even university openings and closings, Yustein said.

There are also Mail2web versions specifically for handheld organizers and Internet phones.

Besides the convenience of not changing e-mail addresses, Mail2web also offers a not-insignificant benefit: No new spam. You'll still get all your old spam, but because you're not creating a new identity, you only get as much as your existing addresses already see.

Yustein's isn't the only such service out there. One, MailStart, charges \$15 a year. Your own Internet service provider may also allow e-mail access from a Web site. Look around. Mail2web's drawbacks? If you're an America Online subscriber, you can't use it - not because of Mail2web's technology but because of AOL's, Yustein said. Besides, AOL users can already get their mail from the Web.

Another drawback is that your particular e-mail account may not work. Most do, because most are POP3- or IMAP-types of accounts. But even though Yustein designed the system to overcome corporate firewalls, I couldn't access my work e-mail on the system. Definitely worth a test before you travel.

And, as with any free Internet service, another drawback is the chance that Yustein's company, SoftCom Technology Consulting, will start charging.

Yustein is dismissive of the idea. SoftCom's main business is Web hosting (Myhosting.com), and he claims to get enough referral business from ads on Mail2web's sites that he doesn't need to charge. "It costs less than what it gains," he said.

Besides, "If it wasn't free, nobody would use it," he said.

He has a point. Paterson, grateful customer though she is, said she might pay a fee for the service, "although I probably would just try the next one down the list."

I was still skeptical of his promise until Yustein said solemnly, "As long as I run this company, Mail2web will be free."

Okay, okay. So we're probably safe for at least this vacation season. Unless you want the laptop for other uses, I would pack the shorts, but wait until you're on the road to pick up the beach ball and your e-mail this summer.

Occasionally, The End User will ask readers to share their experiences with everyday technology, and we will report back on tips, tricks and advice on how you, the real end users, make it all work.

This week's topic: What has been your experience with cell phones while on vacation outside your home network? Do you take your own, rent while you're there, or have another solution? How cheap and how convenient is it? What do you advise friends visiting you from abroad to do? We're particularly interested in hearing about trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific travels. Send e-mail to tribtech@iht.com.