

Baby your bytes

*How to keep
electronics safe
when you travel*

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A trip to a relative's house for the holidays can be murder on your electronic equipment.

Delicate parts can be jarred by a rough ride in the trunk; crushed, dropped and thrown on the way to the baggage carousel; or frozen solid in your rental car as you rest in comfort at an inn overnight.

Cheri VandenHeuvel of Detroit, 37, packs her tech on the road for more than just holidays.

"I'm a stage actor, so I do a considerable

amount of traveling, and I can be away from home base for anywhere from two to six months," she said.

"I take my laptop with me always. I have a cell phone. Webcams are a gift from the Internet gods. The PlayStation 2 comes with me. Nintendo DS lives in my purse in case I have a gaming emergency. The Shuffle travels in my purse as well."

She has different solutions for packing all of them — and so do our experts.

Laptops

For most people, the most expensive thing they'll take on

the road is a notebook computer. It's worth it to take your laptop in a case that's specifically designed for it.

But don't just stick with the basic cloth case it may have come with, warn the experts.

"Make sure that it has extra padding in the corners and a separate space for the laptop," said Anne Camden, a Dell spokeswoman.

Targus' SafePort system is a good example; it uses strategic foam placement to cushion laptops. The company has designed a special line of laptop cases made for people who have to check them as baggage — see it at www.targus.com/us/airport.asp.

If your case doesn't have the extra padding, use T-shirts or other items from your luggage to provide your own.

Most people choose to carry on their laptops, but if you're traveling by car or have other bags you need to carry on, you may need to pack it inside a larger suitcase. Whether you're driving or flying, the method is the same:

"Make sure there is plenty of padding between the notebook and the sides of the suitcase," Camden said. Same goes for top and bottom, with extra attention to making sure that plenty of soft padding is be-

tween the screen side of the laptop and the outside of the suitcase.

You don't want the laptop at the top or the bottom of the bag, especially if you're going to check it, because it can get crushed by other bags and boxes sitting or slung on top of it, she said. Don't put anything hard above it or below it, and consider using a hard-sided suitcase.

If you don't have the original box your laptop came in — something that Camden recommends using if you have it, whether you're packing the notebook in your luggage or hauling it separately in the car — then consider wrapping it in bubble wrap and enclosing it in a cardboard box before packing it, she said.

Don't forget to pack a separate mouse or keyboard if you're in for an extended stay — it could save you wrist pain down the road.

VandenHeuvel's solution? A pink faux-alligator laptop bag.

"Girly-nerds love it," she said. "Style aside, it's well-padded with stiff sides. I never worry about the laptop when it's in there."

Wireless phones

Chances are if you're travel-



ing for the holidays, you're taking your cell phone with you.

Start by making sure that calls to and from your phone at your destination are covered under your plan.

"There are a few plans still out there that you might want to check on," said Tara Traycoff, Cingular spokeswoman.

To check what the coverage will be like when you get there, visit your provider's Web site — many are now offering maps that show in detail what kind of reception you'll get. Cingular's is at www.cingular.com/coverageviewer.

Don't forget to pack both the car charger and the wall charger. And consider tucking your phone into a case before tossing it into your pocket (with your change and car keys) or a purse (with God knows what). The screen you avoid cracking may be your own.

Small gadgets

Consider investing in "device armor," said Merilee Kern, spokeswoman for CableOrganizer.com (an online store that sells device accessories).

These are small, hard-sided,

waterproof cases that assure your favorite wireless phone, PDA, pager, iPod or other personal tech won't get crushed, damp, damaged from being dropped or even scratched from riding around in a bag with your other devices.

Kern recommended the Pelican Micro Case Series. They come in a variety of colors.

The best packaging may be the box you purchased the device in, experts say. They're designed to protect the item from being dropped or jarred, and often make an ideal container, inside your luggage or larger bags.

Universal chargers that handle multiple devices are available, Kern said, and can simplify what you pack. Don't forget a surge protector.

VandenHeuvel's cell phone roams free in her purse, but her Webcam — which she uses to keep in touch with her husband when she or he is on the road — gets special treatment.

"The Webcam has a small padded case with room for cords," she said. "I don't worry about it when it's in the case."

Gaming machines

If you're traveling to a relative's house for a while and you own a video game system, there's a decent chance you'll be taking it with you to entertain yourself and other family.

There are a host of custom cases out there for your favorite console (Xbox, PlayStation 2 and the like), and experts say it's definitely worth it to invest in one.

If the console has a hard drive and it's easily removed — think Xbox 360 — consider sliding it off and slipping it into a separate bag, surrounded by clothes or soft items that you carry on the plane or carry with you in the car.

VandenHeuvel's husband travels as well, and when he does, he gets possession of the couple's Xbox — which has its own carrying case.

"So far, I've driven to all my gigs, so the PlayStation 2 will travel in a bag with controllers," she said. "I think it's totally worth buying a case designated for the game system. I worry about the PS2 since we don't have one."

PCs

If you're moving back home for the holidays, as tens of thousands of Michigan college students do every winter, chances are you're not just packing a laptop — you're hauling a desktop PC home as well.

"In an ideal world, if they had their original packing material, we'd advise that's what they should use," Camden said. Otherwise, consider taking the PC to a shipping store to have it professionally wrapped up and sent to you via mail or delivery service, rather than having it rumble around in the belly of an airplane.

If you're driving, be sure to wrap the PC in blankets or other soft packing material, she said.

VandenHeuvel uses that trick for all her electronic devices.

"Sometimes when I have moved, I would pack my tech in a box with my stuffed animals," she said. "They make awesome bulky padding."

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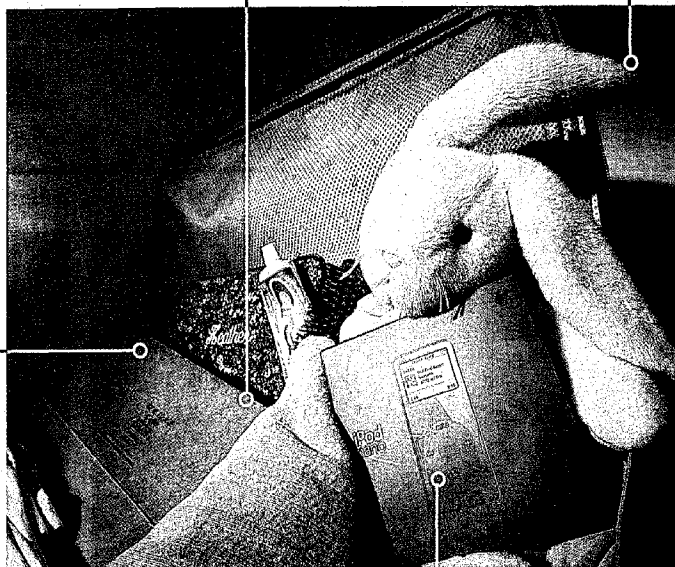
■ SUNDAY, NOV. 26, 2006

Put boxes with electronic devices — or the gadgets themselves — in the middle of your suitcase, with soft things on all four sides plus the top and bottom.

Firm, soft items make the best padding — including stuffed animals.



If you don't have a specific case designed for it, wrap your laptop in bubble wrap, then put in a cardboard box, then pack the box in your suitcase.



Never stack hard items on top of or underneath gadgets inside your suitcase. Don't stack devices on top of each other, either, or pile up AC adapters over a device.



When possible, pack gadgets in their original packaging before tucking them into suitcases — those boxes are designed to protect devices from impact (though not from crushing).



KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

Bubble wrap protects your electronics in checked luggage.