How do I protect my laptop while traveling?

Q: How do I protect my laptop while traveling?

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Answer

There are two reasons to be careful when traveling with a laptop. One is to make sure that the laptop is not damaged, lost, or stolen while you're traveling. The second is to make sure that the information (data) on the laptop remains safe and confidential.

Did you know that more than 60,000 computers are stolen from airports annually in the United States?

So what can you do to keep laptops and the information they contain safe?

Be Aware of the Risks Before You Go

- IS&T recommends leaving your standard MIT-issued and personally owned equipment at home and using loaner equipment when traveling internationally. For more information, see: Secure Devices for International Travel.
- It is not a good idea to use your laptop on Boston's public transit system (MBTA, also known as the T). Although the transit system is generally safe, the T's crowded buses and subways are often a haven for purse snatchers and pickpockets.
- When flying with a laptop, it is a good idea to keep your laptop in your carry on bag, rather than in your luggage, in case your luggage gets lost. However, keep an eye on your bag at all times. Many laptops get snatched when going through security.
- When entering the US from abroad, the border patrol agents can ask to see the contents of your laptop by order of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and, if they deem it appropriate, can confiscate it. According to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, TSA has the right to search laptops of travelers entering the country, without warrant or probable cause. Be aware of these kinds of border laws and the laws of the countries to which you are traveling.

Preparation Before You Travel

Laptop Insurance

- Invest in personal property insurance if you own the laptop yourself. If you are a student, laptops can be covered with an appropriate rider on your parents' homeowner policy. If your parents do not have this kind of policy, you should consider contacting an insurance agency. Insurance agents can tell you the types of insurance available and how much coverage you need.
- There are several insurance websites. MIT does not endorse any of these companies: Safeware, RC Knox, and LoJack for Laptops are just a few.
- All MIT property including computer equipment is covered by Institute insurance. For property to be covered under MIT's insurance, it not only must belong to the Institute, but also must be registered. Equipment bought on a requisition is registered with the Property Office; equipment received as a gift is registered through the Treasurer's Office.
- Record the laptop's serial number and store it in a safe place.

Precautions to Protect Data

- Do not keep any personally identifiable information on your laptop. A product such as Identity Finder can find files on your hard drive that may contain personally identifiable information.
- If the laptop does contain sensitive files that you do NOT need while traveling, keep them at home. Remove them from the hard drive and

put them on another system or disk. Make sure you will be able to re-access the stored files when you return from your trip. To ensure that the files are really deleted from the laptop's hard drive use a proven media sanitizing software tool.

- Use a system password on your laptop to help slow down the novice thief. Use file passwords when available on confidential files. Make sure your passwords are strong.
- Encrypt your computer's hard drive if you need to carry files that are sensitive. Make sure you can access the passcode but keep it in a safe place away from the computer.
- Put a STOP tag on your device to deter theft. Tagged devices are registered with MIT police and in a worldwide tracking system, resulting in higher recovery rate, whether they are lost or stolen.
- Create a backup of your laptop's hard drive before you go, using a service such as TSM or an external hard drive.
- Make sure security applications and software updates are current, including anti-virus, firewall, anti-spyware software.
- Make sure the laptop battery is charged before you go to the airport; expect to be required to remove the laptop from its carrying case. You may also be required to power it on to demonstrate to security that the laptop is functioning correctly.
- In spite of taking safety precautions, anything can happen while traveling. Don't take your laptop with you if you can't face losing it. Take one with you that you can afford to lose or can face getting destroyed.

What to Take With You

- Use a USB flash drive or other portable storage to copy and carry files that are most critical while traveling. It is important to make sure information such as bank and credit card details are kept safe. Keep them encrypted or protected with a strong password and keep this device safe while traveling.
- Bring an Ethernet (Cat5) cable with you on your trip, in case there is no wireless connection available and you have to hook up to the box next to the phone that you'll find in most hotel rooms.
- Bring a universal adapter and power surge protector with you. In some parts of the world, the electricity fluctuates. Without a power surge protector, you run the risk of your laptop being rendered useless.
- Use a well-made, well-padded case to carry your laptop. Consider using a nondescript bag that will not "advertise" you are carrying a laptop.

To Retrieve a Lost Laptop

- Label your laptop. Provide your full contact information so that if the device is found, the finder will be able to reach you, your company or school quickly.
- Know who to call. Airports especially may have a difficult lost and found process, when it concerns the loss of a laptop computer or other data-bearing devices. Know what you're up against if a laptop does go missing at an airport or your hotel.

Precautions While Traveling

In Airports and On Airplanes

- Allow yourself enough time. Airline travel is a hassle that only gets worse when you don't allow enough time to get on your plane. Mistakes can be avoided if you slow down your pace.
- Do not check your laptop with your other luggage.
- Do not send your laptop through the airport X-ray conveyor belt UNTIL it's your turn to walk through the metal detector. That way you'll be able to pick it up promptly when it comes out the other end and prevent anyone else from walking away with it. X-ray equipment will NOT harm the laptop.
- While on an airplane, place the laptop under the seat in front of you. Do not place it in the overhead storage area as it could easily get bumped and damaged there.

Safety Risks While Traveling

- When using the laptop, keep it with you and in sight at all times, including when on breaks while attending a conference.
- Do not leave laptops in places with little protection, like a car or hotel room. Use a hotel safe to lock your laptop or use a strong cable to attach it to a secure object in the room.
- Do not keep the username and password with the computer.
- Do not subject your laptop to extreme climates or lock the laptop in your car's trunk for long periods of time.
- Limit confidential information transmission, such as any credit purchases and reservations or anything with a Social Security number. Unfamiliar networks are always potentially dangerous. If you need to, use a one-time password and then change it as soon as you can,

once you're out of the public eye.

Staying Connected

- To help you make a secure network connection, MIT provides a Virtual Private Network (VPN). You can download the VPN software from the Software at MIT page.
- If you have an MIT email account, use Outlook Web Access (OWA) to access and send your mail rather than storing the messages on your laptop.
- Learn more about remote access to the MIT network.

Additional Resources

- MIT's Travel Assistance Program with International SOS, is a resource for faculty, staff and students traveling abroad for business or personal reasons. View the online courses available through the MIT Learning Center.
- Visit the MIT Travel website for policies and procedures related to while you are traveling.