

Top 10 travel innovations of the past 10 years

Budget Travel asked you to tell us what the best travel innovation of the past decade were. So many ideas came in — with convincing explanations — that they put the 20 finalists to a vote at BudgetTravel.com. (This is an election year, after all.)

10. Online maps

MapQuest provides "such detailed turn-by-turn directions" that even people who "don't know how to read a map" are able to find their way. Google Earth has also revolutionized maps by letting you "zoom in and take a closer look" at a location and "see exactly where you're going and what's around you." This online mapping tool "makes any first-time visitor a seasoned traveler" before he or she even arrives in a place.

9. Digital photography

You can "take hundreds of photos" with a digital camera and "see right away whether you got the right shot" — so you don't have to "pay heaps of money to develop a ton of photos that didn't turn out." Moreover, photo-sharing Web sites like Snapfish and Flickr allow you to upload all your photos and "send them to your family and friends while you're still having your adventure." Without these sites, you'd have to "put your photos on a CD and mail it or send e-mails with large attachments."

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8. Online flight check-in

Nothing has helped "shorten wait times at airports" like the ability to "bypass lines at the ticket counter" by checking in for your flight on the Internet and "printing your boarding pass at home." You still have to deal with security lines, but at least "you can get ahead of everyone who didn't go online before leaving for the airport." Another plus: You can go on the airline's Web site to select or change your seat "right when the exit-row and bulkhead seats open up."

7. GPS navigation

Driving is so much easier with a global positioning system to show you the way, whether you're in a "dangerous city at night" or you want to "take the back roads and not worry about getting lost." With a "comforting voice" to guide you, there's no need to look up directions — "GPS devices have made paper maps a thing of the past."

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6. Worldwide ATM access

Being able to withdraw money from your bank account anytime "on almost every street corner in the world" alleviates the stress of "running out of cash" after "the

banks have long since closed for the day." You also don't have to deal with the "hassles of cashing traveler's checks" or agonize over finding the best "exchange rate at the banks or the money changers," because ATMs "make it a breeze to get money in the local currency" when you arrive in a foreign country.

5. Cell phones

Having the option of "checking the hours of a tourist attraction," reserving a table at a restaurant, or "making a hotel booking from the road" is a "huge travel blessing." Cell phones are also handy in an emergency, such as when you run into "serious problems with your rental car."

4. Global Internet access

A "cheap and convenient" way to keep in touch when you're traveling, the Internet is available today even "in the most remote parts of the world." Plus, with the proliferation of Internet cafés in tourist destinations, you can search for flight and hotel deals and "plan your itinerary on the spot."

3. TripAdvisor

With "real people" sharing their "unbiased opinions" about hotels, restaurants, and tourist sights, TripAdvisor offers travelers the kind of "detailed information that guidebooks never have the space to include." The hotel rating system "takes the guesswork out of deciding where to stay" and "empowers travelers to make smart choices" — no more "booking a hotel on blind faith alone."

2. Online travel booking

Before the Internet, travelers were "limited to brochures, a few books, and travel agents" to help them plan and book their trips. Now, with Web sites like Travelocity, Expedia, Orbitz, and Priceline, "anyone can be their own travel agent." The "best prices on flights, hotels, and car rentals are right at your fingertips" — and the best part is, you "don't even have to pick up the phone once."

1. Roller bags

Unlike "the old suitcases with four wheels and a strap," today's roller bags have retractable handles and two wheels — "a simple concept" that keeps them from tipping over easily. "People of all ages and physical abilities" can now "move quickly through busy airports without having to carry heavy luggage." These bags have "changed absolutely everything" about travel.

Source: Newsweek Budget Travel, Inc.
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