



# The Traveling Voice-Over

Keep your clients happy when away from your studio!

by George Whittam

*Is this you?*

You've finally landed the client you've always wanted: They pay on-time, call you for work on a regular basis, the pay is great, and your career is really starting to get into the groove. How regularly? How about everyday, every week, whether you are in the studio or not! Or perhaps you're really making a go of this voice-over thing and don't want to miss a single audition opportunity when it comes time to make a trip.

## **Searching for a studio**

Some design their itinerary based upon the availability of recording studios. Just about every major city in the world has a recording studio, but fewer and fewer, especially in Europe and Asia, have ISDN service. You can find studios with ISDN at [www.broadcastisdn.net](http://www.broadcastisdn.net), for example. But what if you'd rather stay in a beautiful, quiet villa in the hills of Tuscany? Maybe your friend has a cabin in the mountains and it's the perfect escape, but the idea of leaving your clients high-and-dry for a week gives you a nasty pit in your stomach?

## The Solution

If you've faced this scenario more than once, **it's time to build a traveling recording kit**. In this article we'll look at the elements of the well-equipped portable recording "studio," suggest some specific products, give you ways to deal with noisy locations, and provide resources to help you assemble your kit and support you as you travel.

## The Basics

### The computer

While there a lot of cool, hand-held recording devices available, which are really amazing for their size, I haven't found them useful for voice-over. It just seems impossible to avoid the venerable computer. From one device you have access to email, recording, editing, file delivery, travel info, language translation, web access, and movie playback for that long flight to New Zealand.

When traveling, my first choice for a laptop is always the one that weighs the least, makes the least noise, and is easy to use. Apple computer users like myself will find that a five-year-old Powerbook 12" is still the most travel friendly Mac made to date. It's the smallest Mac laptop you can buy that still has a full-sized keyboard, important if you find yourself doing a lot of typing. (I am using one to type this article). If you can get the mic far enough away from the fan, which I find runs more often than not, it's ideal for voice-over recording. If you'd prefer buying new, the basic Macbook is MORE than adequate.

Until Apple releases something smaller, **the ultimate travel laptop is really a netbook**, a new category of PC computer featuring the Intel Atom CPU. While underpowered by modern laptop standards, coupled with Windows XP and the right software it is capable of handling everything you need to do, and is priced way below most regular laptops.

Manufacturers such as Asus, Acer, Dell, HP, and others all have their flavors, but in my research, one stands out as the winner: The Dell Mini 10.

What makes the Dell Mini 10 top of the heap?

- a nearly full sized keyboard with conventional keyboard layout so the right shift key's in the *right* place
- the fanless design means it makes zero noise



- inexpensive
- Dell customer service and warranty

### Choosing a mic

Perhaps you already have a favorite that you feel is the perfect match for your voice and you've grown comfortable using it in your home studio. Unfortunately, it may not be an ideal mic to travel with.

Many users have a large diaphragm condenser microphone, which is by far the most common design in use for recording voice. Maybe you have a Neumann TLM-103 or an MXL-V89; whatever the case, these mics tend to be large, heavy, and fragile. The diaphragm is mounted on a little post that can snap off when your bag hits the floor or is tossed onto the airplane luggage belt. Also, they tend to hear EVERYTHING, and are very sensitive to low frequency vibration from air conditioners and vehicles.

You *could* purchase a less expensive, large diaphragm mic just for your traveling kit, of course, and keep your pride-n-joy safe at home. You can get surprising results for well under \$300, thanks to myriad choices

manufactured overseas. We suggest going a different route: The shotgun mic.

Maybe you've seen a shotgun mic in use at the studio or agency while cutting auditions. It's the long, tube shaped mic that was designed primarily for on-location work on film shoots. It works well on many voices and has a particular sound that punches through the mix for commercials, radio imaging, promos, etc.

Beyond the sound, several other characteristics make it great for the traveling voice-overist. First is size and weight: It can fit in the smallest spaces in your luggage or carry-on bag. Second, durability: Shotguns are designed for field use and can generally withstand abuse far better than a large diaphragm studio mic. Lastly, noise rejection: Due to the unique design of a shotgun mic, the pick-up pattern (area mic can hear) is highly focused. It tends to hear mostly what it is pointed toward, and less of what's behind or to the sides.

The classic shotgun most often used is the Sennheiser MKH416, and is usually my first choice. Coming in new around \$1100, it's out of reach for some, but can be had for a little more than half the price by the savvy Ebayer (just beware of flakey mics!). Rode introduced a lovely 416 look-alike called the NTG-3, which will save you a few hundred bucks. If it were black like the 416, you'd have a hard time telling them apart, and they share most of the same characteristics, but do sound a little different.

### Mic-computer connection

If you are chained to using Pro Tools, your choices are highly limited here. Digidesign's most travel-friendly interface is the Mbox2 Mini, which does a pretty good job at giving you a clean sound from the mic without carrying a separate mic pre-amp. But if you



find Pro Tools daunting, overly complex, and unreliable due to system errors, you are in good company. Most audio applications for Mac and Windows allow you complete flexibility in choices.

There's an ever growing number of USB microphones hitting the market, but a much smaller number that I consider on-par for professional voice-over recording. Most every one is a large diaphragm condenser design, and some allow you to monitor your microphone directly while recording. Models I've found up to the task are the Shure PG27USB and the MXL USB.009, which both feature the ability to plug headphones directly into the mic for zero-latency (no delay) monitoring of your recording, and very low noise. A better solution *does* exist for those who'd rather not be tied to limited mic choices, but still want a very simple and portable solution.

Yes, I buried the lead here, enter the **USB mic interface**. Pro audio manufacturers are jumping on the usb mic interface bandwagon, but only two have seemed to get it right. The CEntrance MicPort Pro provides the best audio I've heard from such an inexpensive and portable device. It weighs less than an iPhone, provides true 48V phantom power, has zero-latency monitoring, can record up to 24bit/96kHz files, and sounds incredible. It's plug-n-play on Macs and uses a free driver for Windows to record at the standard 16bit sample rate most voice-over projects require.



Once again, Shure has been paying attention and introduced their answer to the MicPort Pro: The X2U, or XLR to USB interface. While twice the weight of the MicPort and lacking the 24bit A/D converters, it has all the features you need to use your high-quality condenser mic, and the added bonus of a monitor dial to balance between the mic level and

computer playback, which is handy when using Source Connect or Skype for directed recording sessions. Sound quality is very good, just shy of the MicPort Pro, but certainly the quality you need for voice-over when a studio is not an option.

## The Details

### Software

I won't go into too much detail on the recording applications here, because it's likely you'll use the same software you already have in your home recording studio. There are a few applications that stand out for ease of use, value, and efficiency that I'll share.

For Mac users there's *TwistedWave* from Mein Software, my favorite recording/editing application. My client Beau Weaver turned me on to this one, and he is in regular contact with the developer, providing feature suggestions to make it even better for voice-over artists' needs. For those who've been baffled at Garageband and dislike some of the idiosyncrasies of Audacity, this one's an affordable step up that will give you a breath of fresh air. If all you need to do is record your voice, edit, and do some simple effects like compression or normalization, and save as an MP3, this is the app for you.

Another Mac application I like is *Amadeus Pro* from HarrierSoft. While not as elegantly simple as *TwistedWave*, it is cheaper and can do basic multi-track editing when you need to assemble a demo with music, for example.

Windows and Mac users alike can use Adobe *Soundbooth*, a simple yet powerful audio editor intended for video and filmmakers. It includes noise removal tools when an extraneous sound (like a bird or car horn) ruins a perfect take, as well as many other effects, and can import music and effects tracks to build demos.

My go-to Windows software is Sony *Soundforge Audio Studio 9*, the lesser known light version of Soundforge. At 1/6th the price of Soundforge, it still has the features you need and it's very fast to learn and use. Seekers of free apps will likely land on *Audacity* (Mac and Windows), but it can sometimes be frustrating to use and install the MP3 option if you aren't computer savvy.

If you are leaving behind an **ISDN-equipped studio**, you'll likely need a way to connect to your ISDN-using clients. Gone are the days that you can order an ISDN line in your hotel room, and if you are traveling overseas, you may not be able to *find* an ISDN-equipped studio in some parts of Europe or Asia. There are two software solutions widely used in the voice-over industry which help circumvent this barrier to traveling freedom.



Mac and Windows users can use *Source Connect* by Source Elements to create a real-time audio link to a studio or ISDN bridging service, while *AudioTX Communicator* is only available to Windows users. Both applications are similar in that they stream your audio over the Internet to another user running the same software, providing a function similar to an ISDN codec box like the Telos Zephyr, without the need for ISDN phone lines.

I could write an entire article comparing and contrasting these two softwares, and both have loyal users. In a nutshell I can say that if you are Mac user that likes the comfort of staying in a Mac environment, Source Connect is the way to go. Eldorado Recording Services provides very user-friendly instructions and support to set it up, and the support from Source Elements is stellar. It works and feels like Skype, in that you have a contacts list and central user database where you can find Source Connect equipped studios and talent around the world, as well as bridging services.

*AudioTX Communicator's* primary advantage to travelers is its ability to connect successfully on smaller pipes, that is to say, slower Internet connections. While *Source Connect* generally requires 300kbps or more, *AudioTX* can work with as little as 140kbps while still transmitting MPEG L2 Mono 128kbps audio streams (equivalent to the ISDN standard used by voice-over studios). It can also run easily on the lowliest of laptops, performing effortlessly on the affordable netbook computers flooding the market.

### **Bridging services**

By now you are probably wondering what a bridge is in the context of voice-over recording. Bridging services provide the missing link between the ISDN and IP (Internet Protocol) worlds. Their service is vital to staying connected to those clients who have not started or are unwilling to use *Source Connect* or *AudioTX*, and require the real-time recording capabilities of ISDN.

While there are several bridging services available such as DigiFōn (all listed on Source Element's website), there is one I am particularly fond of. I built Out Of Hear's bridging service for one of my clients, so I'll use them as an example, since I am intimately familiar with their system.

Out Of Hear's bridging service at [www.outofhear.com](http://www.outofhear.com) has multiple ISDN lines and Telos Zephyrs always ready to go when a session arises. You can book by the hour, day, or week, and you'll have a pair of ISDN SPIDS assigned to you for the duration of your trip. Provide those SPIDS to your agent and clients and they'll always know how to reach you. A few minutes before the scheduled session time arrives, log onto Source Connect, connect to the user account assigned to you, and wait for the studio to dial in. Aside from an increase in delay, which the recording engineer can easily compensate for (they already do it for ISDN), they rarely notice a difference. That's the key! Your clients needn't do anything special to continue

working with you while you travel. If you are *really* slick, some may not know you ever left the studio.

### **Nuts-n-bolts**

As they say the devil is in the details... You'll need a few more things in your kit to make it useable. I recommend a pop screen for your mic because it is more effective than the foam wind screen that comes with some mics and sounds better. A small folding desktop stand works OK, but I find it positions the mic too low in many cases. Stage Ninja makes the SMS-12CB mic arm that can clamp to a table top, chair back, lamp, or door (or steering wheel!). It's extremely light but strong and holds its position well, even with a heavy mic.



A good pair of headphones is very nice to have, but most studio cans are too bulky, and I am not a big fan of earbuds like those that come with an iPod. A few great choices of portable headphones that sound far better than they should are the Koss PortaPro, Sennheiser PX100, and Ultrasonics iCans, all well under \$100.

If you haven't adapted to reading your copy off your computer screen or iPhone yet, and the place(s) you are visiting don't have business centers, you may want to haul along a printer. Canon's ip90v has proven to be reliable and is one of the most compact of the bunch. It uses regular paper (not thermal), and it's surprisingly fast, too.

If you find that clients require you to phone patch with them for direction, and hate the idea of holding the hotel phone to your head while performing, Skype is an excellent solution. For \$30/yr you can get a Skype phone number for any area code and give the number to your clients, or forward your office or cell phone calls to Skype while on the road. On a Mac your audio interface can easily be shared between

Skype and your recording software of choice, so you can be heard while you record, and you can hear direction. Your mileage may vary on Windows, depending on the drivers your audio device supports.

### Dealing with the room

You've got the gear squared away, now to deal with the sound of your recordings and Internet access. Depending on your location, you may have very little control of the noise getting into your room. Here's a few practical tips you can use when booking a hotel room or choosing a place to stay.

- Pick a room on the side facing away from the street.
- Find a hotel somewhat off the beaten path
- Call the hotel IT department in advance and ensure the Internet connection will be adequate



Once you're there look for a space to setup your equipment that has the least reflective surfaces for your voice to bounce around. Ask the front desk to send up extra pillows and build a pillow fort. Position your mic so that it points to any heavy drapery in the room, thereby picking up the least room sound. You can also pack a collapsible box in your bag with some acoustic foam squares to make a miniature booth for your mic, such as Harlan Hogan's Porta-booth. If you have a foam-lined case you pack your gear in, like the Pelican 1510 roll-aboard case, stand it on the table, open it part-way and put the mic inside, creating a baffle around your mic. Get *creative!*

Here's a dirty trick I heard once that might get you in trouble, so don't say you read it here. Grab a couple "Do Not Disturb" signs from other rooms around the

hotel. When you are about to do some recording, hang them on the doorknobs of the neighboring rooms. That way the housekeepers won't disturb *you* with their vacuum cleaners! Just make sure you remove them when finished.

### Internet access

These days you'd be hard pressed to find a place that doesn't provide some degree of Internet access. But if you are a frequent traveler, the costs of paying for the hotel service can add up, the speeds may not be up to snuff, and sometimes the service in your room is behind a firewall or proxy, which can partially or completely cripple Source Connect.

Mobile broadband access has become a reality now thanks to 3G USB modem technology. Services from Verizon, Sprint, ATT, and most recently T-Mobile, can be as fast or even faster than the DSL you use at home, depending on signal strength. What's nice is your connection is not shared with a neighbor downloading movies or video chatting with the family, and you never have a firewall problem getting in the way of your connection. Need to pull over on the side of the road to bang out an emergency (aren't they all?) session while on a road trip? No problem!

If you don't travel frequently, you can rent a 3G modem from services like [www.cellhire.com](http://www.cellhire.com). Not only do they cover the US, but much of the world. Just sign-up before your trip, they Fedex the modem to you, and you are good to go. Virgin Mobile now has a pay-as-you-go option as well, but it is somewhat steep in comparison.

It's time to break the stay-cation habit; go out there, see the world, and keep making money!

*George Whittam owns EIDorado Recording services, providing equipment and support to the voice-over artist community. You can visit the website for more useful information and products at [vostudiotech.com](http://vostudiotech.com). There you'll find a hyper-linked version of this article which will quickly take you to the products and services mentioned herein.*