In the Big Apple, Michael Hewitt finds keeping in touch from his hotel room as easy as pie.

Start spreading the news

A few years ago I wrote a book called *Travels with a Laptop*. A seminal work, its impact on portable computing was almost as great as that of *The Joy of Sex* on the semiconductor manufacturing industry. The trouble was, it came out just a couple of years too late. My *œuvre* described the problems involved — and there used to be many — in lugging a laptop around the world and hooking up its modem to foreign telephone systems. It was all about attaching acoustic couplers to handsets, modem transmission protocols, gratuitously vandalising your hotel's skirting boards in order to get at concealed phone wires, and all sorts of other horrible, technical stuff. Unfortunately for my royalty-cheque prospects, between writing the thing and its publication there was a quiet revolution: laptops suddenly went from being jokey executive fashion accessories into practical, workaday tools; comms software became idiot-proof; and hotel bedrooms worldwide started offering dedicated data ports, and more besides.

Take, for example, my room here at the Waldorf Astoria (he said, casually, in a doomed attempt to persuade the Inland Revenue that by writing about it in a computer magazine, it would become a tax-deductible business expenditure rather than just a holiday). There are so many data ports in the wall, it looks as if I've got a bad infestation of rather energetic termites. There's also a modem in case my computer hasn't got its own. If I haven't got a computer, I can ring down to room service and they'll have the latest Pentium Pro sent up to me. And as for finding an internet service provider, well, this is New York: if I want it, there's probably even a pastrami-flavoured one out there somewhere, with extra mayonnaise. But as it is, I've come prepared with an AOL account, which, with a couple of clicks, allows me to connect to a freephone 800 number, thereby avoiding silly hotel phone surcharges (and in this hotel they are *really* silly, believe me).

The point is, sending an email message back home — which, just two years ago, would probably have been a Herculean task — has become about as difficult as finding your own backside in the dark. (Less so actually, because in the case of errant backsides, there's no 24-hour helpline number you can call.) Indeed, sending a mere ASCII email message is nothing at all. I've been doing a lot more besides. This morning, for instance, following in the footsteps of King Kong, I went to the top of the Empire State Building. My visit, although somewhat less eventful than his, nevertheless gave me the opportunity to take lots of photographs with my digital camera. Likewise my visit to the Statue of Liberty later in the day. Back at the hotel, I transferred the pictures to my laptop, incorporated them into a web page, and uploaded it to the internet. Then I sent lots of "click on this" messages to friends and colleagues. *Et voilà*, instant, interactive, electronic postcards. And because the new version 4 of AOL allows the service to act as a regular ISP, I was also able to Telnet into CiX and get my Demon email via POP3. As well as the usual internet-type things, like finding a good bar in the vicinity.

Indeed, these days you're not simply limited to the terrestrial telephone network. My plane coming over, a Virgin Atlantic 747-E, was equipped with a Skyphone on every seat. Swipe a credit card through one of those, and courtesy of a geostationary Inmarsat satellite, you can

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talk to someone virtually anywhere on the planet while you're airborne. Skyphones in first class have RJ-11 data ports, allowing executives to plug in their laptops and go online. Mind you, at just 9600bps and a cost of $9 per minute, you probably wouldn't want to download too many Pamela Anderson .gifs. Then again, if you can afford first class, the price probably doesn't bother you unduly. Inevitably, though, rates will tumble and speeds will increase such that, very soon, we'll all be netsurfing at 40,000 feet.

So, a book about travelling abroad with a laptop now has all the "must have" and "couldn't put it down" appeal of one about, say, the trials and tribulations of buying an adapter plug for your electric shaver. Now, perhaps that's an idea I could put to Remington…

Mike.hewitt@mjh1.demon.co.uk