

SATELLITE COMMUNICATIONS



TRIED AND TESTED

If you believe all the hype about the national coverage of the 3G network, satellite phones should now be virtually redundant in Australia's outback. But visit almost anywhere outside the major peripheral towns in WA's Kimberley region and you're going to experience unexpected – and unwanted – silence from your handset.

Even at a high profile wilderness resort like El Questro, which hosts thousands of travellers every year, there is no mobile service, or even Wi-Fi. And what about breakdowns and accidents? In the case of serious injury or accident you

can't afford to just wait for another traveller to pass by.

If you want, or need, to keep in touch with the outside world you'll need a satellite phone. Fortunately, this no longer means a commitment to great size, weight and cost. We took the latest Thuraya XT GSM tri-band and GPS smart phone on our recent five-week trip to the Kimberley – and completely rethought those outdated ideas.

Marketed as the world's toughest sat-phone, the Thuraya XT is also one of the smallest and lightest, measuring 128x53x26.5mm and weighing 193g – about the same as the last analogue phone you had.

It also packs most of the features of the latest smart phones, including clock, world time, calendar, contacts, speed-dial and SMS (but no camera), along with talk time of up to six-hours and standby time of up to 80-hours. You can also tether it to your (Windows) laptop, meaning you can transmit and receive data and emails via the internet.

For remote travellers, there is the added reassurance of its current position co-ordinates, tracking option and waypoints, meaning it could be used to record your travels or download them to a PC for others to follow at a later date.

With its pull-up 10cm aerial, the XT remains small enough to slip into a baggy pants pocket or a backpack when walking.

At most times it connected quickly to the Thuraya satellite and, other than an occasional slight delay, the signal was strong. Unlike earlier sat-phones, the XT is promoted as a 'walk and talk' unit, which means you don't have to root yourself in one position to maintain connection. However, the connection is more consistent if you don't wander around.

The tough XT is splash and dust resistant, and also shock-proof – essential for use in rugged conditions.

PRICING

A perceived high purchase and usage cost does tend to scare many people off sat-phones, but things have definitely improved in this area. Outright purchase of a Thuraya XT (through Indigo Telecom) will cost \$1499, but many customers may be eligible to apply for the Federal Government subsidy of up to \$1000 (or 85 per cent of costs if the handset is less than \$1000) if they are dependent on the phone for business or other specified reasons.

With call costs you have two options: get a satellite number, which typically begins with '88' prefix, in which case you will be able

to receive calls for free (the caller pays at the nominal rate, which can be as high as \$5 per minute); or get a regular '04' prefix mobile number, in which case you pay for all calls. If you opt for a pre-paid sat-phone, you must have an '88' prefix number.

Through Indigo Telecom, who markets the Thuraya XT, a Voice Only plan will incur a service charge of \$20 per month, while a Voice and Data Plan (1MB) will cost \$50. There is also a one-off activation fee of \$50 for both plans.

In Dual Mode, the flag fall per connection is \$0.35 (GSM) and \$0.40 (Sat), while calls to standard Australian mobiles and landlines cost \$0.30 (per 30-seconds) and \$0.70, respectively.

For budget-conscious travellers, SMS is the way to communicate, with texts of up to 160 characters coming in at \$0.40 in GSM and \$0.50 in Sat mode. We chose to have a regular '04' prefix mobile number for our trip, but mostly used text to exchange not-vital information.

If you travel regularly, especially to more remote locations, a sat-phone should definitely be on your shopping list.

– Michael Browning



SATELLITE PHONE

RRP: \$1499 (handset)

Where: Phone retailers

More info: (07) 3838 0200 or www.indigotelecom.com.au

RATING ★★★★★

TRAVEL LAWN

It may seem like a novelty product, but bear with us a moment. Purchasing turf for the ground outside your caravan is more useful than you might think. Apart from the obvious aesthetic touch – a 2x3m lawn would make your stationary rig look especially quaint and neat – the turf, like a normal groundcover, works to keep dust, dirt and mud outside the van. It also creates a reliably



MOBILE LAWN TRAVEL PACK

RRP: \$280

Where: Lush Turf Solutions

More info: (07) 3390 2551 or
www.lushturfsolutions.com.au

safe surface in close proximity to the van, which is handy when travelling with small children.

The turf comes with laying pins, though these are unnecessary for short-term use, and the

product rolls up for storage. (Pink flamingos sold separately, as far as we are aware.)

GUARANTEED RECEPTION

There has always been a difference between budget satellite options and the real deal – thousands of dollars' difference, in fact. The aim of this new automatic satellite TV system from Aardvark Electronics (VANSAT) is to bridge that gap by offering a unit with all the capabilities an RVer needs from a satellite dish for a more competitive price.

The dish is designed for those on the go and incorporates new auto-skew technology, which means you don't need to climb onto the roof to make adjustments. With the 85cm Super Gain Dish, Australia-wide reception is guaranteed and installation is as simple as accessing your rig's roof – no soldering required.

The dish is compatible with the new VAST technology (see page 211) and if your provider permits, you can take your satellite pay-TV plan on the road with you.



AUTOMATIC SATELLITE TV SYSTEM

RRP: Introductory price of \$2899 for online orders (normally \$3199)

Where: Aardvark Electronics

More info: (07) 4955 5879 or www.vansat.com.au/bluestar.shtml

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PACKING A CHARGE



We all have a mobile phone and these days no traveller will hit the road without one. But with this continuing proliferation of phones – and ways to charge them – travelling without a mass of plugs and cables is becoming difficult.

Jaycar's Car and Mains Mobile Phone Charger Pack is designed to be a universal solution to charging your mobile phone in the car or on mains power. The pack includes both a cigarette lighter and mains USB car charger, each capable of delivering 5VDC up to 1A via a USB output, as well as a universal USB charging lead with four interchangeable tips to match common mobile phones, including iPhone and Nokia 2mm. Travellers can also use either charger with any existing USB charging lead they have.

CHARGE PACK

RRP: \$29.95

Where: Jaycar stores

More info: 1800 022 888 or www.jaycar.com.au