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Southwest Wisconsin cellphone gaps pitched as tech-free tourism

By [Rick Barrett](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Dave Decker has a summer vacation idea: Take your cellphone and notebook computer, put them in an egg basket and just walk away.

Decker is executive director of the Tri-State Tourism Council, which covers southwest Wisconsin and parts of Iowa and Illinois. He's urged tourism businesses to promote technology-free getaways - in part because it's sometimes hard to get a wireless connection in their neck of the woods.

Take a perceived "negative" and turn it into a positive, says Decker, going against the grain of many tourism destinations that tout the fact they have high-speed Internet connections almost everywhere.

If you have a bed and breakfast or farm retreat, for example, ask people to leave their electronic gadgets at the door. Put their cellphones in an egg basket and don't give them back until they leave. Don't be militant but have a little fun with it, Decker says.

With its hilly terrain dotted with small towns, southwest Wisconsin has some issues with cellphone connections and broadband service.

That's not easily changed, Decker said, but it doesn't have to be a turnoff to tourists.

"We have such great ecotourism. Leave your gadgets behind and go for a hike or a bike ride. Do something that you normally don't do the other five days of the week."

Technology-free getaways have gained some acceptance. The Irish Hollow Inn, in Galena, Ill., for example offers luxury cabins with fireplaces and spas but no television.

Down in a hollow, even cellphone service can be hard to get, said co-owner Matthew Carroll.

"It's a shock at first when people realize there's no TV or telephone, and they have to talk with each other. But we are sold out every weekend, and the No. 1 thing people are saying is how grateful they are for a place to shut off the cellphone and get away from the electronics," Carroll said.

There's a place for unplugged vacations, said Mike Nevil, owner of the Chalet Landhaus Inn in New Glarus, which sometimes benefits from the concept by default.

Only a week ago, Nevil said, a woman staying at his hotel was upset because she couldn't get a cellphone connection. By the end of her visit, she was enthralled with the lack of connectivity.

"She said 'I love this.' It was relaxing for her," Nevil recalled.

Usually he recommends that people go to the hotel's third floor, or take a drive out of the valley, to get a solid four-bar phone signal.

The hotel has wireless Internet in all of its rooms. But, for the leisure traveler, there's good reason to be unplugged for a few days.

"People from Chicago love the fact that it's so quiet here," Nevil said.

Some increase access

Other tourism destinations have gone to great lengths to increase their Internet access, including Three Lakes, in Oneida County, which has held technology trade fairs to attract broadband providers.

Three Lakes now has high-speed Internet available to nearly 90% of its residents, including about 8,000 people who are in the area only for summer vacations.

The town's population includes many business executives with summer homes, or who come to Three Lakes in the winter for snowmobiling and hiking.

Some people stay at cabins without Internet access and migrate into town to satisfy their Web cravings.

"You see them parked outside the library or the community building, checking their email while their kids order ice cream," said Town Chairman Don Sidlowski.

Some people with vacation homes stay tethered to the area's Internet connection even when they're hundreds of miles away.

Their summer homes have security cameras that can be accessed online. If someone breaks in, a motion-activated camera catches the action and sends an email or text message to the homeowner.

Some people complain that Three Lakes is too connected to the outside world.

"But I will take that punch in the nose every day of the week. It's your choice whether you want to be connected or not," Sidlowski said.

Giving visitors a choice

There's a difference between unplugging from the pressures of the business world and shunning your Twitter and Facebook accounts, said Jack Moneypenny, chief executive of the Door County Visitors Bureau.

Some people want to tell friends and family about their vacation experiences as they happen.

They also use their smartphones as a substitute for the tourism information booth.

In Door County, only Washington Island is a "little disconnected," Moneypenny said.

Tourists will determine - through their travel habits - whether vacation destinations are plugged in or not. That's the way business works, Decker said.

He isn't advocating that lodging owners confiscate cellphones and notebook computers when people check in for a weekend getaway, but he wouldn't mind making that an option.

"Give people a choice on how unplugged they want to be," Decker said.

For a romantic weekend: "A bed and breakfast could get by with just candlelight."

About three hours from New York City, a 100-acre organic farm in the Catskill Mountains offers technology-free vacations where guests stay in tents tucked into a hillside facing a creek.

The farm advertises that its accommodations don't have electricity or free Wi-Fi.

"If push comes to shove, I let people know they can get on the Internet in our house. But they have to drive into town to get cellphone service," said Kate Marsiglio, Stony Creek Farm manager.

Marisa Cohen, a freelance writer from New York City, spent a weekend at Stony Creek with her daughters Bellamy, 9, and Molly, 7.

They cooked a stew over a campfire and ate by candlelight. The girls never once asked to play with their mom's iPhone, and they didn't grab the DVD player out of the car.

Instead they chased chickens, milked a cow and built a teepee out of firewood.

"They got into the spirit of the place immediately," Cohen said. "In a way, the real world was a lot more interesting than anything they could play with on their electronic gear."