

A no-tech world is no place to be

February 11 2009, By Barbara Brotman

I felt desperate as I drove. My second trip to Starbucks in four hours; how pathetic was this? But I had to have a fix. Caffeine? Sure, I'd take some. But that wasn't what I really needed. I was there, again, as I would be again in 12 more hours, for the Internet access.

So began my week of living dangerously short of technology. Due to a combination of quirky circumstances and my own tendency to lose items like cell phones, I found myself in a nearly no-tech world.

No DSL. No WiFi. No Internet access at all.

No cell phone. No land line with long distance service.

Just crickets.

For a lesson in the breakneck pace of technological change, nothing beats a trip into the past. Now that I'm back from mine, I'll stop kissing my replacement cell phone enough to warn you: Don't go there.

I traveled via my mother's apartment in New York, where I spent two weeks helping her get ready to move to Chicago.

I had steeled myself for slo-mo Internet. My mother was still using that devil's instrument, dial-up. Whenever I visited, I groaned through the 30-second-to two-minute waits every time I clicked the mouse.

Did we all really once consider that acceptable, even fast? Our

conception of time has changed so radically that 30 seconds is an eternity. Furious at wasting those packets of time, I would get up and make a bed or wash a dish while I was waiting.

But on this trip, I would not have even that quaint form of Internet access. My mother told me that her dial-up service had inexplicably disappeared. Maybe the phone lines had been chewed up by dinosaurs.

Once upon a time, people survived without the Internet. But now it seemed unbelievable. What, I couldn't Google a restaurant? No MapQuest? When I wanted details on President Barack Obama's inauguration, the newspaper mocked me: Full schedule online. Nyah nyah nyah nyah nyah.

Most pressing, I was also working, which was impossible without electronic contact. Thus, Starbucks. Every day, and sometimes twice a day, I drove 10 minutes to Starbucks for an infusion of WiFi, joining the little band of regulars who knew where the power outlets were and which seats had the least window glare.

But then I accidentally dialed the way-back machine back even further. I lost my cell phone.

And my mother's land line service doesn't permit long-distance calls.

I was reduced to begging my mother and my daughter, who was in New York for part of my stay, for their cell phones. Soon they were fielding calls from Chicago Tribune editors with whom I'd left their cell numbers. Unable to search online for a train schedule she needed for her trip, we had driven to a nearby station and picked up a paper version.

Then my daughter and her cell phone left New York.

Then my mother and her cell phone left the apartment to get her hair done.

There went my other link.

Mommy, come home!

Now I was truly alone. I could call anyone in the five boroughs, but no one else. I drove to Starbucks and sent frantic e-mails. "I have no e-mail access!" "I have no cell phone!" "Call me in 45 minutes on my mother's home phone number!"

Back in her apartment, I felt as though I should take up whittling. What else was there to do? It was so quiet in my little house on the no-tech prairie. For a while, I sat in front of a sunny window looking out at the snow-frosted trees. Under non-working circumstances, it would have been a delight.

Under working ones, it was untenable. True, you can get a lot done when you can't check Facebook. But if you can't send what you've done to anybody, what difference does it make?

If I really wanted, I could still reach the outside world. All I had to do was use my mother's land line to call her cell phone, ask her to call my husband on his cell phone and ask him to call me so I could ask him to BlackBerry a Tribune editor and ask her to call me.

Which is what I did.

The next day I was in the Verizon store arranging to have a new phone sent to me overnight.

I licked my wounds and counted my lessons learned. The speed of life is

forever changed. Life without technology is intriguing if you're on vacation, impossible if you're not.

Off to Starbucks so that in this space I can say so.

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