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## Honeymoons and cyberspace--a match made in heaven

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When Tiffany and I decided to forgo the classic week-on-a-beach honeymoon and instead embark on an 80-day journey around the world, those nearest and dearest to us opined we were flat out nuts. When we expressed our intention to fully research, plan and book the honeymoon online we were written off to sheer lunacy.

But we were on a mission. As members of the generation expected to more or less live our lives on the Internet (somewhere between Generation X and Y), we figured we may as well use the most important vacation of our adult lives to test the capabilities of the myriad travel Web sites vying for our eyeballs.

The blur that was our wedding and extended honeymoon is now behind us, and here's how it went . . .

**Where to go:** Besides Tiffany's burning desire to see if the Discovery Channel had pegged Africa accurately, we were two very blank slates with no clue as to where we should spend our time. After all, neither one of us had spent anything close to this much time on the road, and we had certainly never been charged with planning our every waking moment for a bit less than three months.

Step one was to simply hunt down good ideas, and some basic Net surfing led us to two worthwhile sites for general destination information--[www.fodors.com](http://www.fodors.com) and [www.roughguides.com](http://www.roughguides.com). Tiffany also took quite a shine to the chatrooms on another valuable Web site for basic travel information, [www.concierge.com](http://www.concierge.com), as she succeeded in befriending more locals from around the world prior to leaving our living room than I would manage in person for the duration of our journey.

Now armed with at least a rough idea as to where in the world we might like to set foot, it was time to somehow concoct an actual itinerary. On previous occasions, we had performed simple hotel and flight bookings at some of the major travel sites ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com) and [www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com)), but they just didn't cut it for a trip of this complexity. We needed help--and got loads of it from our favorite Web site of the lot: [www.moonrings.com](http://www.moonrings.com).

This outfit provides expert information, logistics planning and a heavy dose of handholding in putting together first-rate exotic honeymoons, and what could possibly be more exotic than an around-the-world soiree? We loved their useful online tools and information, but more importantly, their live travel experts helped us pull all of the disparate parts together. In fact, the good folks at MoonRings asked if we would be so kind as to share our experiences from the road with those hunkered down back in the U.S., which we were only too happy to do--we e-mailed travelogue pieces when possible, and our travails can still be found on the MoonRings Web site.

**What to bring:** With two around-the-world airline tickets in hand, as well as an assortment of hotel reservations and an overall game plan to hit South America, Africa and Australia/New Zealand, we turned our thoughts to packing. We threw our two mid-sized backpacks onto the bed, and once Tiffany came to terms with the fact that most of her "cute honeymoon outfits" would in fact be spending the next three months in Sweet Home Chicago, we began to pack.

But what should one take for a journey through wildly varying climates, not to mention reversed seasons?

With liftoff only days away, we frantically logged onto [www.weather.com](http://www.weather.com) and keyed in all of the relevant dates and cities. Less than an hour later we had been transformed into international meteorologists, though we remained perplexed as to how we were going to pack lightly for extreme heat, sub-zero blizzard conditions, high altitudes and dense jungle. We also learned that it once rained for 20 straight days in the Ohio River Basin back in 1937, but we weren't planning to visit there anyway.

"Are you kidding me?" Tiffany incredulously questioned as she held up my Boy Scouts knife and Mickey Mouse flashlight from 5th grade. "I suppose we'll need an upgrade," I responded, as I scurried off to our computer for some last-minute shopping. No worries, as we searched the web and found [www.walkabouttravelgear.com](http://www.walkabouttravelgear.com), where we not only bought a shiny new pocket knife and headlamp (good for exploring caves), but we also picked up a device known as the Chinese Survival

Tool. I'm still not exactly sure as to the purpose of this unusual piece of gear, yet we both somehow felt better having it along for the ride.

**Mom needs to know we're okay:** Blissfully playing in the mountainous western region of Panama during Week 2 of the honeymoon, we suspected our respective moms had probably worked themselves into a frothy stupor after not hearing from us for 14 days in succession.

While 15 years ago contacting our worried parents would have involved finding a phone capable of connecting with the U.S., purchasing a calling card with enough minutes to make said call and timing the call to account for the time difference between home and wherever we were, today there's another option. It merely involves a 10-minute visit to one of the ubiquitous Internet cafes that have found their way into every nook and cranny of our rapidly shrinking globe.

We chose from among the 10 or so available to us in Boquete, a tiny Panamanian mountain town, logged onto [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com), signed onto our respective e-mail accounts and told each of our moms how much we loved them. Internet cafes would become regular hangouts throughout our honeymoon, including such gems as the McInternet Cafe located in a McDonald's restaurant in Panama City and the Holy Internet Cafe in an old converted church in Christchurch, New Zealand.

**Trouble!** Our tickets had us boarding a plane from Panama City to Quito, Ecuador, in less than 24 hours when we learned of apparent civil unrest throughout the country. One of our hotels in Ecuador had contacted our MoonRings representative with the unsettling news, who in turn passed it along to us via e-mail.

What to do? Was it really as bad as we read in the papers? While the folks at MoonRings peppered their local contacts in Ecuador for information, we concurrently posted a "thorn" at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) asking for guidance from any travelers in Ecuador at the time. This was the Internet at its best. Four hours later we had three responses to our inquiry from within Ecuadorian borders, all of which indicated we should pretty much chill out, relax and get ourselves to Ecuador on our scheduled flight.

Had we not had access to reliable, real time updates, we would almost certainly have skipped Ecuador altogether and pressed onward directly to Patagonia, but then I would have missed the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness my wife of three weeks intentionally consuming a live jungle ant (we had been informed that they taste much like lemons, and Tiffany confirmed this to be true).

**A strange medical condition:** The mother of all headaches befell Tiffany as we entered the Namib Desert in the northwest reaches of Namibia, Africa, and we were sadly informed that there truly wasn't "a doctor in the house" (or at least within 200 miles of our remote position).

Having spent a week in the Amazon jungle, and a couple of additional weeks viewing wildlife in southern Africa, malaria was a distinct possibility.

The stakes were high, as this all too common condition would have required an immediate rush to the nearest hospital for treatment, whereas your basic headache could be remedied with a combination of Advil and some time away from me. While we were unable to locate a doctor, we were able to get ourselves in front of a computer and log onto [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com).

Turns out malaria is typically not accompanied by the hacking cough Tiffany was now enduring, which seemed to suggest that Tiffany probably had nothing more than a simple head cold. The honeymoon would go on.

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Finally back from our three-month sojourn, all that's left to do is boast of our adventures and misadventures to garner the envy and jealousy of our peers.

We are dying to get our photographs in front of friends and family, but getting them developed and sent to all those asking to see where the blazes we've been for so long would take months.

Undaunted by the 1,000-plus pictures we somehow snapped during the honeymoon, Tiffany has simply chosen to upload the good pictures (a.k.a "those Darren didn't take") to [www.shutterfly.com](http://www.shutterfly.com), and soon we should be in a position to circulate via e-mail a link and password to the Web site-let the accolades begin.

As we re-enter our mundane lives and reflect back on this magical journey, our Internet experiment seems nothing short of a marvelous success.

MoonRings was an invaluable "e-companion" for the duration of our honeymoon, and the countless other Web sites we visited from time to time rounded out the experience.

The Internet allowed us to research entire regions we intended to visit ([www.cometoboquete.com](http://www.cometoboquete.com)) and scope out upcoming restaurant scenes ([www.christchurch-restaurants.com](http://www.christchurch-restaurants.com)), all at no charge and literally at our fingertips within minutes.

But while the Internet has undoubtedly revolutionized travel planning, it has not yet found a way to re-create the sensation of hiking the tunnels of a bluish-white glacier in western New Zealand. At some point it's time to simply turn off the computer and go outside.

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## IF YOU GO

### WHAT IT COST

So exactly how much does an around-the-world honeymoon cost?

Well, that depends on a host of issues, ranging from the newlyweds' choice in nightly creature comforts to the strength of the U.S. dollar at the time of travel.

As for Tiffany and me, we chose to juxtapose **rugged nights of camping** with **excessive pampering** throughout the journey, which allowed us to immerse ourselves in local culture while still rejuvenating with a luxurious bubble bath from time to time (it didn't hurt that our good old dollar was near all-time highs).

As best as we can tell from poring over our credit card bills and travelers' check receipts, the aggregate cost for us to live out our dream was **approximately \$27,500**, which breaks down as follows:

**Two American Airlines One World Alliance around-the-world tickets, in Coach:** \$8,300.

**Accommodations for 80 nights:** \$9,500.

(**Most expensive night:** \$875 for the Executive Suite at Selati Lodge in the Sabi Sabi parklands, located outside of Kruger National Park in South Africa. **Least expensive nights:** \$7 per night for the six nights of camping on safari in Northern Namibia.)

**Food:** \$6,400. (**Most expensive meal:** \$175 at Canterbury Tales Restaurant in the Park Royal Hotel, Christchurch, New Zealand. **Least expensive meal:** 75 cents for lunch-a local candy bar-while trekking in Torres de Paine National Park in Patagonia, Chile.)

**Odds and ends (gifts, activities, local transportation, etc.):** \$3,300. (Most expensive activity: \$115 each for a "fly-over safari" to view from above the largest sand dune in the Namib Desert in western Namibia. Least expensive activity: 25 cents each to bask in natural hot springs outside of Boquete, Panama.)

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