

TV & Internet On The Road

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This is a primer on watching television, movies and internet while on the road. It won't cover every situation but should give you enough basic information to do research on the web and talk to vendors to find the solution that works for you and your RV. As always, these are my opinions and you are responsible for your own choices.

First a word about hardware. If you still have an old style 4x3 ratio television, replace it with a modern 16x9 HD television. You can buy one for less than \$200 so if you want to watch TV on the road, spend the money. The old TV won't work unless the signal comes from a VHS or DVD player or from a Standard Definition satellite. At least for as long as they continue to broadcast. It is 2018 – get with the times!

Broadcast Television

To watch TV, at home or on the road, you need to receive the TV signal provided by a broadcaster and get it to your TV. There are 7 ways to send out a TV signal:

1. Over the air (OTA) from a tower on the edge of most cities.
2. Cable TV (Coaxial cable, this is traditional cable TV)
3. Fibe TV (fiber optic cable)
4. IP TV (internet protocol based, usually provided by the phone company via copper wire and/or fiber optic cables)
5. Satellite service (signal is broadcast from a communications satellite in a fixed orbit above the equator)
6. Wi-Fi (from a wi-fi hotspot in the RV park. I have never seen one that provides the bandwidth / data volume needed to watch anything more complex than a YouTube video)
7. Internet (possible with an internet connected smart phone or tablet with 4G or better connection, broadcasting to a smart TV. You need a very high-end data plan that gives you GB per day of downloads. Not very practical at current data rates.)

Of these methods, #2, #3, and #4 are impossible for RVers because they need a physical cable, and #6 and #7 just aren't practical because of cost or data speeds. We are left with OTA and satellite so here we go.

Over The Air

Many people forget about this method because they have used cable or another delivery method at home for years. OTA was the first method of delivering a TV signal – remember rabbit ears on top of the family TV set? This is still often the best HD picture quality broadcast in full 1080P. It is a digital signal so it will be all or nothing – perfect picture or no picture.

Any RV rooftop antenna can pick up these HD signals. The bat-wing antennas that are very common are directional. Different TV stations broadcasting from different locations mean you may have to rotate the antenna to get a picture. There are add-ons for these old bat-wing Winegard antennas that reduce or eliminate the need to turn it. We have the addition and it helps but isn't perfect. The

newer digital antennas do a better job, I think. They are usually round and don't need to be cranked up and down.

To get an OTA signal to your TV, you need an antenna with a cable to a signal booster (an amplifier), a cable from the booster to your TV. You'll have options for different cable types between the booster and the TV. Use an HDMI cable if you can, although others will provide an adequate picture.

Modern TV signals don't use the old channel 2-13 system - yes, I'm that old. Channel numbers don't matter as your TV will remember which channels are broadcasting and ignore the other couple of hundred channels. Set the input on your TV to whatever cable you are using from the booster, such as Antenna, RGB, HDIM1, etc.

Since you don't want to have to flip through a hundred channels to find one with a picture, your TV will do that for you. Look in your TV manual or explore its setup menu to run a channel scan. It will find all stations broadcasting and ignore the rest. If you are within 75 kms of a major city, chances are you will get a half dozen local stations. If you cut the power to the TV or move to a different location, you'll need to run channel scan again.

If that's all you want for those occasional rainy days or to catch the evening news, you are all set for not much money. If you want more, read on.

Satellite Service

In principle, satellite TV service is no more complicated than your other choices but getting everything to work can be more challenging. The service providers (in Canada that's Bell and Shaw) gather their signals and beam them up to their satellites. Those satellites broadcast the TV and music channels to large swaths of the continent. Your dish receives the signals, sends them to your decoder box/PVR which in turn sends them to your TV. The box controls the channel being sent to the TV, the TV or home theatre system controls the volume.

Coverage area differs with the signal provider. Bell has a tightly focussed beam that extends across half of Canada east to west and south to about 100 kms below the 49th parallel in the west and Niagara Falls in the central-east areas. Shaw has a less focussed signal that can be seen all the way down to Mexico.

There are other satellite providers including Telus, Shaw and perhaps others. They are using either Bell or Shaw satellites. If in doubt, get clarification from any provider you are considering.

The usual warnings about satellite reception apply to RVers. Weather can affect your reception, as can trees, buildings or terrain that blocks or screens the southern sky. And your TV and receiver box require 120 volt AC power meaning being plugged in to shore power or running your generator.

Based only on coverage area the choice of provider seems clear if you are planning to go into the USA and want TV signals from home, since the cost of both providers is similar. The big difference is the cost of the equipment. The satellite box/PVR cost is in the same ball park, the big difference is in the cost of the satellite dish you need to receive the signal. The dish to receive Bell signals is about \$800 while the dish to receive Shaw is nearly \$3,000!

You can reduce the cost of either to perhaps \$150 by buying a used manually aimed dish on a tripod. We tried this and found it to be a frustrating and sometimes impossible task to get it pointed at the satellite. I bought a dish that I just plug in and it finds the satellites and locks on automatically. It is great!

Some of the factors you need to consider before deciding are:

- Will you regularly go far enough south that only Shaw will work?
- Which provider do you use for home? Current Bell or Shaw customers can use their existing boxes from home instead of spending hundreds for a new one.
- If you have landline based TV at home (cable, etc), you save a little money by suspending service while you are away but it won't cover the cost of a satellite subscription.
- If you will spend a lot of time in the USA and are willing to give up Canadian programming while you are away, subscribing to an American service provider such as Dish Network or DirecTV while you are there and suspending your home service might be the way to go. You'll need a USA based mailing address but those are readily available for a few dollars per month. If you go this route be aware that, at least theoretically, you are not allowed to receive the signal when you return to Canada. I have heard these signals can be received as far north as southern Alaska but I have no first hand knowledge of that. One additional note – Bell and Dish networks use the same physical hardware to receive the signal. You can use the same dish for both. I believe there is also an American satellite TV provider that uses the same hardware as Shaw so if you are interested, Google is your friend.

So, which to choose? No easy answer. Ford or Chev? Honda or Toyota? Talk to your fellow RVers with the equipment you are considering. They are pretty obvious when installed on the RV or sitting on the tripod on the ground.

We chose the Bell/Dish compatible dish because that's what we use at home and I just take the PVR into the RV. We have not yet spent a winter in the USA and probably won't. If we do, I'll buy a Dish Hopper box and use a family member's USA address while using our existing satellite dish. Dish has great subscriptions specifically for RVers.

On the other hand, the most common unit I see in RV parks is the Shaw unit. Perhaps I just notice them more because they are so much bigger.

Other Options

Here are a few other ways to be entertained by the TV in your RV. Their big advantage is cost. All are less than \$100 and will entertain you on a cold and chilly evening where you want to stay inside. Each assumes you already have the content such as a movie or TV show, and just need a way to watch it.

Content can come from a disc you have purchased or borrowed, or a media file you have downloaded, perhaps from your local library or over the web. This is not the forum to talk about pirated media, I'll leave that up to you.

Media Player

A media player is a small box that connects to your TV and into which you can plug an external portable hard drive via USB cable, a memory card, or a thumb drive. They will play most any media file you are likely to have. We use one from Asus but there are lots of other brands that work fine.

Blu-ray, DVD

These have been around for many years. A Blu-ray player will play a CD or the newer and much better quality high definition Blu-ray disc as well as music CDs through your TV. You may already have a collection of these and I see them in discount stores for only a couple of dollars each.

ChromeCast

This is a proprietary technology from Google which now has several other brands producing clones. It basically plugs into your TV and receives TV signals broadcast from your phone, laptop or tablet. You can use it to display anything on the TV that is on your portable device. For entertainment purposes, you can play any digital media files like video, or if you have a good high speed wi-fi connection, you can watch YouTube cat videos or Netflix on your big(ger) TV instead of your portable's small screen. I've seen these in action and they work well.

Make sure your device is capable of 'casting to an external device. Most modern ones can but you should check yours (ask a kid) to see if it is capable.

Internet Access

The internet has become such an integral part of our lives, it has become a requirement even while on the road. This article ignores cell phone based internet connectivity for messaging, email and brief web searches because you likely already are doing these every day already.

There is one thing to think about when on the road. Roaming fees can cost you dearly, even if you don't send or receive any calls or texts. If you don't have an affordable roaming plan, turn your phone off before you leave your home country. Just pinging off an Alaskan cell tower accidentally while we were physically still in Canada cost us \$. There are lots of options such as buying a SIM for the place you are visiting or buying a disposable or "burner" phone that comes pre-loaded with minutes and text allowances. You can call forward your regular phone to the new number then turn your regular phone off. You won't miss any calls and won't have to pay roaming costs.

If you have a cellular data plan that supports the volume, you can set your phone to act as a wi-fi hotspot. You can use your tablet, laptop or wi-fi enabled desktop computer to connect to the hotspot and access the internet. Depending on the cellular data capabilities of your phone, provider and the individual cell tower you are connected to, speeds will range from somewhat slow to faster than you have at home. In this scenario, anything you can do at home, you can do on the road. Its just a lot more expensive.

We have stayed at campgrounds with wi-fi internet access and most have been at least a little unreliable, slow and expensive. Adequate for searches and email but less so for moving large volumes of data like website updates and my genealogy research.

Your only other practical choice for internet access is to use public access points like the library, Tim Hortons, McDonalds, or if there are any left, an internet café.

And yes, you can get satellite based internet but if you can afford that, you aren't likely going to be reading this!

Summary

To sum up, if you want video entertainment while on the road, get a decent HDTV and plug it into whichever options make sense for you. TV has its place but certainly won't make or break your RV trip. Choose whatever system meets your needs at a price you are willing to pay.

Good luck!