Google's Chromebook could become popular among travelers

At first glance, the choice of a laptop computer may seem to have no particular relevance to travel. Yet many of us want to bring along a laptop when we travel.

Therefore, we look for a laptop that is extremely light in weight, enjoys a considerable amount of battery time, and has a full-size keyboard so that we can type easily and confidently on it. (That latter requirement, for many people, rules out use of a small netbook.)

Until recently, the only laptops meeting these criteria were either MacBook Airs or the new UltraBooks, most of which cost a minimum of $999 (the tiniest MacBook Air costs at least that much).

A third, far less costly option is now at hand: a cheap Google Chromebook laptop manufactured by either Samsung or Acer (available from Amazon or Tiger Direct).

One version of the Chromebook — which weighs under 3 pounds, has a full-size keyboard and an amazing nine hours of battery capacity — costs only $299 from Acer and $349 from Samsung, with rumors abounding that they are about to be further reduced in price.

How can the price be so low?

It's because the Chromebook has no hard drive, in fact no storage capacity at all, and contains none of the expensive Microsoft or Apple software programs that adds cost to most laptops.

Using a Chromebook, you simply access the Internet for everything you want to do or consult (word processing, spreadsheets, websites, etc.), storing what you want to retain in the "cloud" (a central Google server located somewhere in the U.S.). If you lose the Chromebook or it is destroyed, the files you've created continue to exist, unharmed, in the cloud.

I've been taking along a Chromebook on some of my recent trips, and I am happy with it. It cost a fraction of what an Ultrabook or MacBook Air costs, and I can confirm that amazing nine hours of battery time.

A great many "techies" have posted damning reviews of the Chromebook on the Internet, however.

It is unsuitable for "power users," they say. It cannot perform all sorts of unusual, arcane tasks of the sort that "power users" require. And most important, they point out, it requires access to the Internet; it cannot be used where Wi-Fi is not available.

But neither can a standard laptop access the Internet where such access (usually by Wi-Fi) doesn't exist (or you don't employ an expensive 3G service). And who among us carries a laptop without planning to use it mainly for the Internet? How often do we make use of a laptop simply for writing purposes, without accessing the Internet?

In that regard, the Chromebook suffers no greater an infirmity than any standard laptop. And when you do access the Internet through your Chromebook, you can write on the cloud-based Google Docs rather than on Microsoft Word.

One version of the Chromebook permits users to obtain 100 hours a month of free access to Verizon's 3G service, for use when in a location where there's no Wi-Fi.

I happen to believe that the Chromebook and its cloud point the way to the future of personal computing.

In defense of my own objectivity, let it be known that I don't own a single share of Google (I wish I did), Samsung or Acer; nor do I have the remotest connection to any of those companies. (In fact, I am currently infuriated over the mishandling of an information request by Samsung customer service.) I simply believe that the Chromebook is unusually helpful in traveling situations.