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Generated on 21/10/2026 17:24

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Why a backup is huge or fails, and how to make it smaller

Backups & Migration

CODE	VERSION	COUNTRY · LANGUAGE
RLX-MZ-KB-1264	v2026.10.10	Mozambique · English

Interweb Mozambique
RLX Holdings, S.A. · Group RLX Holdings
Tax ID (NUIT) 401 191 607 · Legal entity no. (NUEL) 105 045 974 · Economic activity code (CAE) 62022

https://www.meu.interweb.co.mz/knowledgebase/1264

Why a backup is huge or fails, and how to make it smaller

Backups & Migration Created on **October 10, 2026** 3 min read



A huge backup is almost never “the site”: it is what has piled up **around** the site. Cache folders, old copies forgotten in the account, error files that kept growing, full mailboxes. Clear that out first, and the copy gets smaller, faster, and stops failing halfway.

Why it fails

The full cPanel backup is written **inside your account** and counts against the space you bought (see **making a full cPanel backup and downloading it**). In most cases it fails for one of three reasons:

What happens	Likely cause	What to do
It fails straight away, or the file never appears	There is no free space to write the copy.	Check **Disk Usage** and free some space first.
It takes forever and stops halfway	Too many small files, or an account too big for one operation.	Make partial copies: the site folder, each database and the mail, separately.
It runs, but the file is gigantic	There is rubbish mixed in: cache, old copies, logs.	Clean up and generate it again.
The account “has space” but saves nothing	It hit the number of files, not the size.	See **the limits nobody advertises: inodes, processes and memory**.

Step by step to make it smaller

1. **Find what is heavy.** In cPanel, **Files** then **Disk Usage**: it lists folders by size. Start with the biggest ones, before deleting anything.

2. **Old copies left behind.** A `.tar.gz` of a full backup you downloaded months ago and left on the server is the most common culprit: the next backup carries it inside. Download it to your computer and delete it from the account.

3. **Cache and temporary files.** Cache plugins write thousands of files that rebuild themselves. Clear them from the plugin itself, not by hand.

4. **Error files.** Look for files called `error_log` inside the site folders. They can grow without limit when a warning repeats. Fix the cause, then delete the file. See **where the PHP error log is and how to read it**.

5. **E-mail.** Empty Trash and Spam in every mailbox and archive what is old. A mailbox is a folder of files that goes into the copy.

6. **The database.** On shops and old blogs, log tables and temporary data fatten the database. See **the database has grown: where to see its size and what can go**.

7. **Generate it again**, and confirm on your computer that the file opens.

For your own copy, leave out what rebuilds itself.
If you make copies from the command line you can exclude the cache: `tar -czf backup.tar.gz --exclude='public_html/wp-content/cache' -C /home/ACCOUNT public_html` (swap `ACCOUNT` for your account and the cache folder for your site's). It comes out smaller and restores the same. See **automatic backups of your own application: cron and mysqldump**.

Do not delete what you do not recognise.
A folder with an odd name may belong to an application that works. If in doubt, download it first, delete afterwards, and confirm the site still opens. And remember that our daily copy is a safety net, not your copy: see **making and keeping your own backup, and testing that it works**.

NEED A HAND?

Still failing after you cleaned up? Tell us the domain and the time you tried.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Making a full cPanel backup and downloading it
- The limits nobody advertises: inodes, processes and memory
- The database has grown: where to see its size, and what can go
- How many backups to keep: daily, weekly and monthly copies without filling your space

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