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Copying files to another server with rsync, safely

Administration & Fixes

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Copying files to another server with rsync, safely

Administration & Fixes Created on **October 10, 2026** 3 min read



`rsync` copies folders between two computers over SSH and, on later runs, sends only what changed. It is the most used tool for taking a copy of your VPS to **somewhere else**, which is the golden rule of any backup: a copy on the same disk is lost with it (**backing up a VPS: snapshots or files**). The typical command is `rsync -avz /var/www/ user@other-server:/backups/www/`. On an unmanaged VPS these copies are yours.

Step by step

1. **Check rsync is on both sides.** `rsync --version`. On Debian and Ubuntu you install it with `sudo apt install rsync`. You also need SSH access to the destination (**first steps with your VPS**).

2. **Rehearse first.** `rsync -avzn /var/www/ user@other-server:/backups/www/`. The `n` (*dry-run*) shows what would be copied, without copying anything.

3. **Do the real copy** by dropping the `n`: `rsync -avz /var/www/ user@other-server:/backups/www/`. If the destination uses another SSH port: `rsync -avz -e "ssh -p 2222" ...` (2222 is an example).

4. **Check the result** at the destination: `ls -l` and the size with `du -sh`. A copy counts only after you have restored it once: **making your own backup and testing it**.

5. **Automate it.** To run without a password, use an SSH key meant only for the backup and schedule it with cron (**automatic backups with cron**). Keep a record of the output with `--log-file=/var/log/rsync-backup.log`.

The options you will use

Option	What it does
`-a`	Archive mode: keeps permissions, owners, dates and links, and goes into subfolders.
`-v`	Shows what it is doing.
`-z`	Compresses while sending. Saves bandwidth, costs processor; for files already compressed (images, video) it does little.
`-n` / `--dry-run`	Rehearses without copying. Always use it before a dangerous option.
`--exclude='cache/'`	Leaves out what is not worth copying (caches, temporary files).
`--delete`	Deletes at the destination what no longer exists at the source. It makes a mirror, and mirrors the deletions too.
`-P`	Shows progress and lets you resume an interrupted large file.

The slash at the end of the path changes the result.
`/var/www/` (with a slash) copies the folder's *contents*; `/var/www` (without) copies the whole folder into the destination. Getting it wrong creates an extra folder, or mixes files where they should not be. Rehearse with `-n`.

`--delete` propagates mistakes.
If you deleted a file by accident at the source, the mirror deletes it at the destination on the next run, and the copy no longer has it. For a copy that protects you from deletions, keep several older copies (dated folders) rather than a single mirror.

Databases are not copied with rsync while they are working.
Export them first (**mysqldump and pg_dump**) and copy the exported file. Use a user only for backups, instead of root, and limit what it can do at the destination.

NEED A HAND?
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SEE ALSO

- Backing up a VPS: snapshots or files
- Automatic backups of your own application
- Backing up with mysqldump and pg_dump
- Making your own backup and testing it

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TAX ID (NUIT)	401 191 607
LEGAL ENTITY NO. (NUEL)	105 045 974
ECONOMIC ACTIVITY CODE (CAE)	62022
REGISTERED OFFICE	Bairro 7 de Setembro Vilankulo 1304 · CEP 0411-02, Inhambane, Mozambique
CONTACT	info@interweb.co.mz · +258 84 635 1111 · +258 86 635 1111 · www.interweb.co.mz
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