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Running a VPS without a control panel: what the panel did and how you do it by hand

VPS & Servers

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This article is for people with a VPS or a dedicated server with root access who work from the command line. A panel is just an interface for a dozen tasks that exist on any server. **The short answer:** without a panel, you do those tasks with the system's own tools. You get a lighter server, with fewer open ports and no licences; you lose the buttons and have to **write down what you do**, because no screen will remind you.

What the panel did, and what you use instead

Task	Without a panel
Sites and domains	One Nginx server block or Apache virtual host per domain: installing Apache and a virtual host and several websites on one VPS .
PHP and versions	PHP-FPM, with one pool per site when you want to isolate sites from each other.
Databases	MariaDB or MySQL from the command line; backups with <code>mysqldump</code> .
SSL certificates	Certbot with Let's Encrypt, which also schedules the renewal.
E-mail	The hardest part. It is often better to keep mail with a separate service: why mail on a VPS is hard .
DNS	At the registrar or with a DNS service: pointing a domain at your own VPS .
Firewall and access	ufw or firewalld, SSH keys, fail2ban: installing fail2ban .
Backups	A program such as restic, scheduled, with the copy off the server: encrypted backups with restic .
Files and FTP	SFTP with the same SSH user; no FTP server needed.
Scheduled tasks	<code>crontab -e</code> or systemd timers.

The order that works on a new server

1

Access first: a sudo user, an SSH key, no password login for root: **creating a user with sudo** and **your first session on a new Linux VPS**.

2

Firewall: open only SSH, 80 and 443 (and whatever your application needs): **ports and firewall on a VPS**.

3

Web server and PHP: pick one (**Nginx or Apache**), install it and test the configuration before every reload: `sudo nginx -t`
`sudo systemctl reload nginx`

4

Database: one user per application, with rights on its own database only, and never the database port open to the internet.

5

Certificate: with the domain already pointing to the VPS IP, request it and confirm the renewal is scheduled: `sudo certbot --nginx -d example.com -d www.example.com`
`sudo certbot renew --dry-run`

6

Backups and updates: schedule backups, test a restore and switch on automatic security updates: **updating a Debian or Ubuntu VPS**.

7

Write everything down in a file kept off the server: domains, folders, databases, scheduled tasks, open ports. It is the “panel” you will look at six months from now.

Without a panel, nobody tells you something stopped. A certificate that did not renew, a disk filling up or a backup failing silently are only seen if you look. Schedule checks and read the logs now and then: **seeing what uses CPU, memory and disk**.

If you come from cPanel, the list of what the panel did for you is in **moving from shared hosting to a VPS**. Read it before switching off the old service.

Running the VPS without a panel and want to check your plan before starting?
Tell us what will run on it.

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