



## Now you can wi-fi, then fly

Wireless Internet available, for fee, throughout airport

By [KIRSTEN TAGAMI](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 10/27/05

Denise Mainville, a professor at Virginia Tech, usually works out of an office in Blacksburg, Va.

But Wednesday, thanks to wi-fi, her desk was a food court at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

"I'm stuck here all day, so I might as well be working," said Mainville, a professor of agricultural and applied economics whose flight to Peru was rerouted because of Hurricane Wilma. She bought a \$9.95 wireless day pass so she could send and receive e-mail using her laptop.

Mainville was an early customer of Hartsfield-Jackson's new airport-wide wi-fi service, which launched Wednesday. Officials say Hartsfield-Jackson is now the "largest indoor hot spot in the country."

The airport has spent about \$11 million on the project, which it expects to recoup in fees — ranging from \$2.25 to \$3 per connection — that Hartsfield-Jackson gets from wireless and cellphone providers.

Wi-fi, or wireless fidelity, uses short-range radio waves to connect laptop computers, personal digital assistants and other wireless devices to the Internet.

Passengers can now access the Internet from anywhere inside the 5.8 million-square-foot airport, including the underground train tunnels, said Mario Diaz, the airport's deputy general manager. He also promises total coverage for cellphones.

The Atlanta airport is a latecomer to wireless. About 1,840 airports around the world have wireless access in all terminals, according to [jiwire.com](#), a Web site that tracks hot spots.

The rapid growth of wi-fi is "really a response to the changing ways people travel," said Kevin Mitchell, chairman of the Business Travel Coalition, an advocacy group for travelers.

Wireless access is also a mainstay at hotels that cater to business travelers.

"Business travelers need to stay connected," Mitchell said. "It used to be that if you sent an e-mail, it was like a phone message. The thing to do was to return it before the end of the day. Now if you get an e-mail, you're expected to answer it within the hour."

Another factor making wi-fi increasingly popular: longer "dwell times" at airports because of increased security and congestion.

"You never know how long you're going to have to wait at the airport, so at least you can be productive during that time," Mitchell said.

A small fraction of travelers — as little as 1 percent — are expected to use wi-fi at Hartsfield-Jackson immediately, and most of those will be business travelers, said Jon Irwin, senior vice president of Boingo Wireless, one of the airport's wireless providers.

As the service becomes more popular, the airport expects more people will use it to download movies for their flights, play online games and send photos of the grandkids.

Diaz also hopes to be a pioneer in using wi-fi to boost sales for airport advertisers and for airport shops. He has long talked about using wi-fi to encourage travelers to click and buy something they see on one of the airport's many indoor billboards.

It's technically feasible, but "I haven't heard of that being done anywhere," said Karen Hanley, marketing director for an industry group, WiFi Alliance.

Atlanta-based Multicast, which provides streaming video of everything from church services to woodworking programs, also has been talking to the airport about ways to go beyond Internet access, said CEO Lou Schwartz. The airport could put a video message welcoming travelers on its "splash," or promotional, Web page that will appear on users' computers.

Another idea is a "video vault" of programs that people could access via the page.

Many airport wi-fi networks charge people who don't have a subscription with a provider. Some smaller airports, such as Portland, Ore., and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., offer free service to lure business travelers.

On Wednesday, some Atlanta travelers balked at the prices for a one-time 24-hour pass: \$7.95 from Concourse Communications; \$9.95 from Sprint; and a special 2-for-1 offer for \$9.95 from Boingo Communications.

"I wouldn't pay that if I was just going to be here for a couple of hours," said Mainville.

The "fee vs. free" debate isn't likely to be resolved anytime soon, but what does seem certain is that wireless access will keep expanding, said Roger Blackwell, a retired marketing professor at Ohio State University and co-author of "Consumer Behavior."

"Eventually, you will be able to drive from Atlanta to Columbus and have wi-fi all the way — which isn't so great if you're driving but maybe for the kids in the back seat."