

## **Airports join wireless wave: Hot spots growing: U.S. terminals offer convenience of Wi-Fi Web links**

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Wi-Fi is finally rolling into America's airports.

In the last couple of years, Wi-Fi, or high-speed wireless Internet access, has invaded Starbucks cafes and McDonald's restaurants as well as Marriott and Wyndham hotels. But it has been hard to find in airports, the one place business travellers are most likely to have time on their hands.

That is partly because so many potential users -- not only the throngs of passengers passing through airports, but also airlines and tenants such as retailers and restaurants -- have had to jockey for access to wireless networks.

"There are so many layers to how airports work, every airport operates differently," said John Yunker, a wireless-technology communications consultant from Escondido, Calif. "The more audiences the airport wants to serve with the network, the more complicated it is to deploy. We're still in the early stages of Wi-Fi deployment."

But the pace is picking up. According to a recent report by IDC, a research firm in Framingham, Mass., Wi-Fi hot spots, or locations available to the public, will more than double at U.S. airports this year to 379 from 178 in 2003. IDC predicts the number will nearly triple to more than 1,000 by 2008, exceeding the rate of hot-spot growth at hotels, cafes and restaurants.

Another sign of growth, said Richard Snyder, senior vice-president for marketing for **Concourse Communications**, a Chicago company that operates wireless networks: 19 of the top 50 U.S. airports either offer Wi-Fi in public terminals or are installing it; another six are accepting bids for the service.

Among airports offering Wi-Fi are Logan in Boston, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver International, Detroit Metro, LaGuardia and Kennedy in New York, Minneapolis/St. Paul International, Newark Liberty International in New Jersey, Philadelphia International and San Francisco International.

However, airports in major cities such as Hartsfield in Atlanta, O'Hare and Midway in Chicago and Ronald Reagan National and Dulles in Washington are only now taking bids from Wi-Fi providers.

At airports, Wi-Fi can be accessed in many ways. These include terminal-wide access, offered at airports in Austin, Tex., Kansas City, Mo., Denver and San Francisco. Other airports -- such as Kennedy, LaGuardia and Newark Liberty -- offer the service selectively, in certain terminals or gate areas.

Rates for the service vary, depending on how it is provided. T-Mobile, which serves San Francisco International, charges US\$9.99 for a 24-hour pass. It also offers monthly rates for unlimited usage that range from US\$19.99 to US\$39.99.

Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport in Florida offers Wi-Fi free in its terminals, though Julie Howlett, director of information systems, said it may eventually charge for the service.

Another way to access Wi-Fi at airports is by dining at restaurants that offer the service. Wayport, a Wi-Fi provider based in Austin, Tex., operates hot spots in airline terminals and at many McDonald's. Its rates for service in airport terminals and at McDonald's restaurants in airport terminals are US\$6.95 for one day's usage and US\$29.95 for one month's unlimited usage.

Airlines are also hopping on the bandwagon. JetBlue offers Wi-Fi free to passengers in its terminals at Kennedy and at Long Beach Airport in California. Carriers such as American, Delta, United and US Airways have hooked up with T-Mobile to offer Wi-Fi in their airport lounges. Northwest Airlines has begun to install Wi-Fi at its domestic airport lounges and charges US\$6.95 a day. Continental and Alaska Airlines both offer the service free to airport lounge members.

For information on the availability and pricing of Wi-Fi, travellers can consult a variety of Web sites, including Jiwire.com, Wifihotspotlist.com and Wifi411.com. One unpleasant discovery they are likely to make is that they cannot "roam" -- that is, log on to the hot spot of one service provider at one airport at the beginning of the day and log on to the hot spot of another service provider at a second airport later in the day, all for one fee.

Also, fees can be high, especially if you're a novice and unsure how to log on. "Unless you're going to be at an airport for a pretty good length of time, it's not cost-effective," said Jerry Olivier, an information technology consultant in Overland Park, Kan. "By the time you log on and mess with getting into the airport's system, you've lost 20 minutes."

Another issue is security: Experts say if you or your employer have installed a virtual private network, or software that provides secure access to your employer's databases, on your laptop, as well as a personal firewall that prevents unauthorized users from accessing your computer, your e-mail transmissions generally should be secure. However, they say, when in doubt, do not send any sensitive information in an e-mail message.

Henry Harteveltdt, an analyst in San Francisco for Forrester Research, predicts Wi-Fi usage at airports will become so widespread that it will eventually force airlines to redesign their lounges.

"Wi-Fi destroys a key benefit of airlines' private, fee-based airport lounges: dataports that members can use to go online," Mr. Harteveltdt said. "So, in today's value-conscious environment, some club members may think twice when the club renewal notice hits their mailbox."

To keep them on board, he said, airlines might shift the emphasis at their clubs to services "that will reduce travellers' stress, entertain them and generate revenue, such as shoulder massages and restaurants."

Color Photo: Sara Krulwich, The New York Times / Travellers take advantage of wireless Internet connections in Concourse C of New York's LaGuardia airport.