

WiFi in the sky

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A business traveler on Austrian Airlines boards a flight from Vienna to Warsaw and, once airborne, he opens his IBM ThinkPad notebook computer and connects to the Boeing 767 aircraft's wireless fidelity network. He sends e-mail and surfs the Web, keeping in contact with colleagues throughout Europe.

By early next year, that scenario -- announced just a few weeks ago in Paris -- will become a reality, experts told UPI's Wireless World. Working with a system called Connexion, developed by Boeing's business unit, Austrian Airlines will be among the first European carriers to offer in-flight Internet service to its passengers. "Our passengers will have the latest technology at their fingertips, allowing them to connect to the world, in-flight, beginning in the very near future," said Vagn Soerensen, chief executive officer of Austrian Airlines.

Another airline, based in the Middle East, last month also disclosed it would offer in-flight Internet connections to its passengers, beginning next year. The technology is "innovative and sophisticated," said Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saif Al Nahyan, chairman of the Civil Aviation Department in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and chairman of Etihad Airways.

The online WiFi service was first tested in 2003 by Boeing aboard a Lufthansa flight from Germany. On board, the planes are equipped with wireless routers, making them WiFi hotspots, just like a Starbucks coffee house or Kinko's copy center on the ground here. The airborne wireless networks are linked to an Internet service provider or a virtual private network via a satellite connection. Using wireless local area

network technology, an aircraft can deliver news, weather, stock-market reports and destination city information to its passengers via an onboard portal. To pay for the service, customers can either use their frequent-flier miles or put the service fee on their credit card.

"The time spent onboard will now become more efficient and valuable for our customers, since they will be able to work online during flights," said Terje Christoffersen, group vice president of marketing, products and service at TeliaSonera AB, a provider of telecom services in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

As the first airline to use the equipment, Lufthansa engineers in Hamburg, Germany, had to secure approval from the European Joint Aviation Authority for the project. Domestically, United Airlines is the first American carrier to roll out a WiFi-in-the-sky service. Industry experts indicate that the technology could have been made available earlier, were it not for the security concerns caused by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Now that business is returning more or less to normal in the United States, airlines are looking to make wireless service available as a competitive tool to entice business travelers to fly with them. At present, experts said, there are at least 80 aircraft internationally equipped with the WiFi technology, from Airbus and Boeing. Siemens and other leading technology companies are involved in the development of the services. China Airlines, Korean Air, Asiana, El Al Israeli Airlines and Japan Airlines have announced plans to place the equipment on their long-range aircraft. Other transportation companies are looking at WiFi as well. A train on the Paris to Brussels route in Europe recently tested onboard WiFi and attained bandwidth of 4 Megabits downstream and 2 Megabits upstream while traveling at 185 miles (300 kilometers) per hour. The cruiseship market also is introducing WiFi service.

"This is a fun topic," said Frank Hanzlik, managing director of the WiFi Alliance, an industry trade group in Austin, Texas. "The key thing is that

people are starting to expect WiFi wherever they go. A few years ago, WiFi on an airplane would have seemed strange, but now people think they can't be away from their business for too long, and they want access to e-mail all the time."

Hanzlik said he thinks onboard WiFi service will be offered, at least initially, to first-class customers, but eventually would migrate back to economy class. "It's like the headphones they give you to watch movies on the flights," he said. "At first, it was a benefit only for the first-class travelers. The same thing with bottled water. Soon, everyone wants it."

Hanzlik also said he expects WiFi service will become available not only for notebook PCs, but also for other wireless handheld devices.

Other experts agreed. "It's about time we started seeing that kind of connectivity," said Nick McKinney, a WiFi expert with the Geek Squad, a unit of Best Buy in Washington, D.C. "I expect that we'll see wireless VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) also being offered on the airplanes soon."

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