

'WiFi before you fly'

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Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport this week debuted a wireless Internet system throughout all its terminals, outflanking Boston Logan and other major U.S. airports by providing WiFi for travelers from the curb of the cabstand to the tarmac near the departing aircraft, experts told UPI's Wireless World.

The Atlanta project is said to cover all 5.8 million square feet of the airport -- extending the concept of WiFi beyond simple hotspots and making wireless online access nearly ubiquitous for travelers.

"The real power of WiFi is the ability to discover and connect with other people in proximity that you might want to meet," said Charles Ribaud, co-founder of Jambo Networks Inc., a WiFi-services developer in Dallas. "Until recently, people have been using WiFi just to access the Internet."

A network developed by Jambo already has been rolled out at New York City's La Guardia Airport, in partnership with Concourse Communications. The network enables travelers to discover and connect with other travelers who share something in common and are in the airport at the same time.

"For instance, Jambo can discover others from the same industry or company, those that went to the same university or that share a common friend," Ribaud said.

Most airports don't have WiFi coverage available to the extent that

Atlanta now does, however. The technology provider Wayport has developed what it calls Laptop Lanes and other services for a number of airports, including San Jose International, Seattle-Tacoma, Chicago's O'Hare and Buffalo Niagara International, among others.

The company provides high-speed WiFi (802.11b) wireless Internet access throughout all terminals and gates at airports, as well as their "Laptop Lane" airport business centers. These are essentially private "offices with all the business equipment and services you need, including PC workstations, Internet access, phones with long distance and conference-calling capabilities, printing, copying, faxing, and package shipping," a spokeswoman for Wayport said. The centers also sell an array of business and travel accessories for notebook computers and handheld devices.

One frequent business traveler, Marty Anderson of Babson College's extended enterprise programs, was in Atlanta this week and experienced the new WiFi system there firsthand.

"I did not try it on the escalators, but I suspect that is not where one would use it anyway," Anderson said.

The service at the airport -- provided by a number of companies -- ranges from \$7.95 per day to \$38 a month for access for frequent fliers.

There are several levels of WiFi support emerging at most U.S. airports today.

"There is often a free layer where you can find flight information, parking, and other local information. This seems to be sponsored by the airport or local government," said Anderson. "Then there is almost always a for-pay layer."

Anderson said that the free hot spots are something like public parks -- and are provided as a public service.

Interestingly, WiFi is now becoming an essential tool for some business travelers, helping them avoid getting lost when they are in strange environs.

"The number of wireless hotspots is getting so widespread I have literally developed a new habit," said Anderson. "If I am in my car in a city, and I am lost, I turn on my laptop and drive on a local street until I get a signal. Then I can get to Google Maps and get a satellite photo of where I am, so I can see the buildings around me, and where to turn to reach my destination. I can have success about 60 percent of the time in most cities right now with this technique. This is truly a brave new world."

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