

WiFi at the beach

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Are Americans and Europeans selecting vacation spots based on whether their hotel or resort offers WiFi hot spots? A new survey by chipmaker Intel Corp. suggests as much, but other experts told UPI's Wireless World they remain skeptical.

This week, Intel released survey results showing that tourists are increasingly likely to bring along notebook computers as they head off to exotic vacation locations, a development powered in part by the proliferation of e-mail and instant messaging.

The survey also demonstrated the creative integration of wireless connectivity in some of Asia's most attractive vacation locations, and it also revealed the "increasing importance" of public area wireless access for tourism.

That said, it may be a stretch to say tourists are making vacation decisions largely based on WiFi access -- at least for now.

"No, American consumers aren't choosing vacation destinations based on wireless Internet access," said James Chung, who heads Reach Advisors, a marketing strategy and research firm in Boston that works with the resort industry. "Despite Intel's dream, you aren't going to see hotels and resorts promote themselves as having 'Intel inside.'"

Consumers do, however, want online access when they are on the road, though it does not necessarily have to be wireless.

"Vacationers are traveling with laptops and have been conditioned to expect Internet access as part of their lodging now," Chung said, adding that the trend "has not been driven by resorts, but by the mid-level hotel chains serving road warriors. And when it's not there, a lot of consumers are getting ticked about it, since they're finding it rather hard to go cold turkey when it comes to e-mail, especially among the younger traveler."

He noted many properties have tried to set up business centers, but activity there is low. The computer stations have about a 10 percent utilization rate, concentrated among a very small number of users.

"Travelers are expecting access from their room, otherwise they won't bother going down to a business center," Chung said.

Some hotels indeed are starting to offer wireless access and are -- like Intel and the wireless carriers themselves -- hoping it will become a popular amenity in the coming years.

"T-Mobile offers WiFi poolside, and even on the beach at some hotels," said David Henderson, a company spokesman.

Officials at Marriott Vacation Club International apparently think WiFi at the beach will become a big trend in the coming years.

"The WiFi topic is a hot one here," said James M. Woelbern, a public relations manager for MVCI, located in Orlando, Fla. "In fact, it is so hot that of our nearly 290,000 owners, seven out of 10 think it is important that every villa and resort public area have WiFi access."

Experts think wireless access at such vacation spots is going to become something of a differentiator -- making the experience of one's stay more rewarding than a trip to another locale. It also seems to work both ways, with some businessmen and women wanting literally to get away

from it all on vacation.

"Earlier communication with our owners initially suggested that they preferred to disconnect from e-mail and the Internet while on vacation," Woelbern said. "However, over the last few years, new surveys have indicated a change in preference to a strong desire for WiFi connectivity. Staying connected to life while on vacation -- for easy access to information such as theme park tickets, movie show times, weather reports, restaurant reviews, instant-messenger and e-mail accessibility, uploading digital photos, not to mention work demands -- are of great value and desired by our owners and rental guests."

Woelbern said MCVI will offer WiFi access at all of its 46 resorts by the first part of 2006, including Palm Desert, Calif.; Maui, Hawaii; Orlando, and Spain, France and Thailand.

Companies like SBC Communications also have been setting up WiFi hot spots in state parks and recreation areas -- and along the Ohio Turnpike, said Andy Shaw, a spokesman for the telecom giant.

Even those who charter yachts are getting into wireless telecom, such as Sunsail, which is featuring WiFi on many of its charters, a spokesman told Wireless World.

At resorts where properties lack high-speed Internet access, Chung has seen many of the coffee shops and casual restaurants in the area offering the service.

"They've opened up their wireless networks and are seeing traffic count and average check size increase," he said.

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