

Some United flights to offer Wi-Fi

January 14 2009, By Julie Johnsson

Some friendly skies are about to become a Wi-Fi hot spot.

Passengers on selected trans-continental United Airline flights will soon be able to check e-mail and surf the Web via their Wi-Fi-enabled laptops, BlackBerrys and iPhones.

On Wednesday United is expected to unveil plans to roll out its first broadband offering during the second half of this year. The project will involve 13 Boeing 757 jets used for p.s., the Chicago-based carrier's premium service for business travelers who trek from New York City to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Like Delta and American Airlines, which previously announced mile-high Internet connections, United plans to deploy the Gogo Inflight Internet service created by Itasca, Ill.-based Aircell. It uses a cellular data network, beamed into the skies from a series of towers, to provide airborne Wi-Fi service at download speeds similar to what passengers have at home.

If the in-air Internet connections work as billed, and if many passengers pony up the \$12.95 per flight charged by Aircell, then United will consider installing Wi-Fi service on other aircraft, said United spokeswoman Robin Urbanski.

For now, BlackBerry addicts like Chicago lawyer Craig McCrohon can only dream of the work they'd get done while flying into and out of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

"I've been trapped at 35,000 feet circling airports recently and I could've used Wi-Fi more than the extra bag of peanuts," said McCrohon, partner with Burke, Warren, MacKay & Serritella. "Anything that allows me to be more productive when I travel gives me more free time when I'm not traveling."

Major carriers like United, American and Delta have spent much of this decade searching for onboard Internet service, a quest complicated by airlines' rocky finances and the implosion of product offerings such as Connexion, Boeing Co.'s satellite-based system.

Now, they are poised to make in-flight broadband cheaply and widely available, aside from Internet-based phone calls. To promote peace and quiet in their cabins, Aircell's airline customers thus far have requested that phone calls be disabled, said CEO Jack Blumenstein.

Although fewer than 50 aircraft had been outfitted with Aircell's offering at the end of 2008, Blumenstein expects more than 2,000 planes to be wired for Gogo by the end of 2010. Meanwhile, carriers such as Southwest, Continental and JetBlue are rolling out satellite-based Internet offerings.

"This is just an extraordinary change in the life of the passengers in the air," he added.

The carriers hope Aircell's Wi-Fi offerings will become a staple of travel and not a novelty like the old Airfones, which were pricey and rarely used. Aircell will be priced from \$9.95 to \$12.95.

"I would use it in a heartbeat," said aviation consultant Robert Mann. Whether it's embraced more broadly will depend on how effectively carriers and their cabin crews pitch the product and whether it works consistently, he added.

While onboard Wi-Fi seems a likely hit with passengers on long flights, carriers don't yet know if it will have short-flight appeal. Like United, American plans to test the service only on cross-country flights.

"I think it's a smart move," Mann said. "If it isn't popular there, then don't knock yourself out trying to put it everywhere on your fleet."

Delta, the world's largest carrier, is rolling out the service across the fleet as rapidly as possible. Passengers who tap into Wi-Fi on one flight will be frustrated if it's not available on the next Delta plane they board, said Chris Babb, product manager for inflight entertainment with the Atlanta-based airline.

A test of the service on Delta's Northeastern shuttle flights last fall was a hit, Babb said. "It has been very successful so far."

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