

Tech review: Devices let Internet go where you do

February 23 2010, By Jim Rossman

I'm envisioning a future where you get Internet access everywhere through the air, like your cellphone.

I've been reading for years about how [Google](#) or Microsoft or someone else is going to cover a large city with free [wireless Internet access](#).

Unless it's my neighborhood, it might as well be on the moon.

Sprint is the first wireless company to offer fast wireless Internet in Dallas, and I've been trying it out with two pretty neat devices.

The flavor of wireless offered is 4G, which stands for fourth generation but can include several technologies.

Sprint's 4G network is made up of WiMAX technology, but it also will eventually encompass a system called LTE (long term evolution).

I won't go into the boring details of how new technologies speed up our wireless surfing. What 4G really means is it's fast enough to replace your home DSL or cable modem.

Why would you want to replace your cable modem with WiMAX?

If you were spending an afternoon in a doctor's office waiting room or the backseat of a van on a trip to Houston, wouldn't you like to take your high-speed Internet along?

I know I would.

The Sprint 4G devices I reviewed not only can replace your home Internet but they're portable enough to take anywhere.

OVERDRIVE 3G/4G MOBILE HOTSPOT

WiMAX signal is all over Dallas-Fort Worth, but it's useless if your computer can't see it.

Almost every Mac or PC can use Wi-Fi so Sprint's Overdrive 3G/4G Mobile Hotspot can work with Macs, PCs and Wi-Fi enabled [smart phones](#) ([iPhone](#), Android, BlackBerry) to get your computer or device connected.

The Overdrive (\$99 after rebates with a two-year commitment) is made by Sierra Wireless. It's about the size of a tin of Almonds, and it's battery-powered, which makes it quite portable.

Imagine slipping the Overdrive in your backpack or purse -- now you're a roaming [wireless access point](#) for you and up to four of your friends.

The onboard battery lasts three hours, and a small LCD screen shows the Overdrive's status. The battery is recharged from a microUSB port.

Connecting is as simple as pushing a button and waiting for the device to connect to the network. Then just point your computer or phone to join the wireless network. The network name and password are displayed on the Overdrive's LCD.

It's a simple device to use. There is no software to install; just turn it on and join the wireless network.

The wireless range is 150 feet, but your range might vary depending on what's between you and the Overdrive.

There's also an onboard microSD card slot, which lets you use a memory card for sharing files.

The Overdrive first tries to connect to the 4G network. If it's not available, it joins 3G instead.

SPRINT U301 USB 3G/4G

If you only need to get a single computer onto the 4G network, the U301 USB device is a good choice.

It's Windows- and Mac-compatible and, like the Overdrive, connects to the 4G or 3G network, but you get to manually choose between them.

It's one degree less simple than the Overdrive, as there is software to install. You run a program on your Mac or PC to connect to the network.

The software install is simple, and it's really not a bother to use at all.

Performance was excellent, and the software provides good feedback of your connection status.

Overall, the U301 is a solid performer. Since it's free after rebates with a qualifying two-year wireless data plan, it's the cheapest way to get 4G.

PERFORMANCE

I'm disappointed 4G didn't work at my home. Neither device found the high-speed network anywhere in my house or yard.

I consulted Sprint's detailed coverage map and found out my street was not covered by WiMAX. Kudos to Sprint for making street-level coverage maps available. There are small pockets where there's only 3G coverage, so you'll want to consult the map before replacing your home Internet with WiMAX.

I was able to join the 4G network just a few blocks from my home.

Sprint says the 4G data connection should average download speeds of 3 to 6 megabits per second, which I achieved when 4G service was available. Upload speed was considerably slower, peaking at about 1 Mbps.

The data plan for either device is \$59.99 a month for a two-year commitment.

The unlimited data plan is for 4G areas. There is a 5-gigabyte limit for 3G surfing and a 300-megabyte-per-month limit for off-network roaming.

COVERAGE

Sprint has rolled out [WiMAX](#) to 27 markets including D-FW, San Antonio, Austin, Abilene, Corpus Christi, Amarillo, Killeen/Temple, Lubbock, Midland/Odessa, Waco and Wichita Falls. The Houston area goes live later in 2010. Outside Texas, 4G is available in Atlanta; Baltimore; Las Vegas; Chicago; Philadelphia; Seattle; Boise, Idaho; and several other cities.

OVERDRIVE 3G/4G MOBILE HOTSPOT AND SPRINT U301 USB 3G/4G

Pros: Both devices were easy to connect and worked as fast as advertised where the 4G network was available.

Cons: No 4G at my house and in many small pockets around town.

Bottom Line: For wireless broadband, Sprint was first with [4G](#) speeds and was a pleasure to use if it works in your town.

More information: For more information: sprint.com/4g

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Citation: Tech review: Devices let Internet go where you do (2010, February 23) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-tech-devices-internet.html>

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