

# Postcard from Pyongyang: The airport now has Wi-Fi, sort of

December 28 2017, by Eric Talmadge

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This Dec. 23, 2017, photo shows the Internet corner in the departures lobby of Pyongyang's international airport. Despite being one of the least Internet-friendly countries in the world, North Korea's main Internet provider recently set up an airport WiFi network available to travelers who have cleared customs. Access to WiFi and the Internet in general remains beyond the reach of most North Koreans. (AP photo/Eric Talmadge)

North Korea is one of the least Wi-Fi-friendly countries in the world.

Having a device that emits Wi-Fi signals can result in detention and a major fine. Worse, if you are a North Korean. Public use of the internet is a concept that just makes North Korean officials really nervous.

But here's a sign that might be changing.

North Korea's main internet provider appears to have put up a Wi-Fi trial balloon at the international departure area of Pyongyang's airport. It's a logical place to start. The service is only available, or even visible, to travelers who have already cleared customs, which included me last week. So, noticing the new sign with the familiar Wi-Fi logo in the internet corner of the departures lobby, I decided to give it a whirl.

My flight was fogged in, so I had some extra time. I didn't expect much. The internet corner, with a handful of terminals, opened in 2015, but I have yet to see anyone actually using it. The first time I tried, there were no attendants available and no keyboards for the desktops.

This experience was different. The young woman staffing the internet service area told me I could use the Wi-Fi for 30 minutes if I paid \$2. She took down my passport number and gave me a slip of paper with a username and password. The signal was strongest near the coffee shop, where the router is, so she suggested I log on there.



This Dec. 23, 2017, photo, shows a sign for the new Wi-Fi service being offered in the departures lobby of Pyongyang's international airport. Despite being one of the least Internet-friendly countries in the world, North Korea's main Internet provider recently set up an airport Wi-Fi network that is available to travelers who have cleared customs. Access to Wi-Fi and the Internet in general remains beyond the reach of most North Koreans. (AP photo/Eric Talmadge)

I tried. Several times. The login was incorrect, according to a screen message.

I went back to the internet corner and asked for help. The attendant apologetically came with me to the coffee shop and we tried it together. No luck. She asked me to wait, then came back with a new username. It didn't work. She called her supervisor on her cellphone. We tried again.

The final screen message we got before giving up was that the page could not be opened. The attendant took me back to the internet corner and refunded my \$2.



In this Dec. 23, 2017, photo, passengers wait for their flights in the departures lobby of Pyongyang's international airport. Despite being one of the least Internet-friendly countries in the world, North Korea's main Internet provider recently set up an airport WiFi network that is available to travelers who have cleared customs. Access to WiFi and the Internet in general remains beyond the reach of most North Koreans. (AP Photo/Eric Talmadge)

None of this came as a particular shock. Airport Wi-Fi can be more aspirational than functional in a lot of places. I've had essentially the same issues in Beijing, minus any helpful attendants. In a way, it was

also a relief. Logging on to any unfamiliar Wi-Fi network, especially at an airport, opens a phone up to all kinds of hacking mischief.

Still, the Pyongyang airport Wi-Fi IP address that appeared on my phone would be logical for a private network. And I was getting three bars when I was at the coffee shop, meaning something was indeed out there.

Moreover, the attendant seemed genuinely helpful. She did pretty much what anyone would do in a similar situation with a customer and clearly expected we would be able fix the problem and log on. She also offered to let me use the [internet](#) on one of the desktop terminals, suggesting that is now actually functional, too.

Maybe some kinks need to be worked out. Contrary to popular belief, not everything in North Korea is fake.

But then again, some things certainly are.



portal.net.kp  
Air port

< > Log In Cancel

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Username

PremiumPixel

Password Login incorrect!

☐ Keep me logged in Login

This Dec. 23, 2017, image shows a screenshot of a login failure notification appearing after an attempt to access the new WiFi service being offered to departing travelers who have already cleared immigration at the Pyongyang international airport. North Korea's main Internet provider recently set up the airport WiFi, though access to WiFi and the Internet in general remains beyond the reach of most North Koreans. (AP Photo/Eric Talmadge)

It could be the Wi-Fi is like the airport's still new ATMs—the lights are on, at least sometimes, but they have never completed a transaction as far as anyone I know can tell. Or they could be like the brand new coffee

vending machine in the arrivals area. Despite its own instructions, for the life of me, I couldn't find a slot on the machine to insert my money or any indication of how much it would cost.

Alas, I had to catch my plane without checking my email.

I'll try again next time, if it's still there.

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