

The Wireless World

Wireless isn't just for high-tech hubs anymore. We chose these cities and towns to show the variety of ways people are using this new technology

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HERMISTON, ORE.

Population: 13,200

Why: Rural areas need the Internet, too

Fact: Thirty-five towers and 75 antennas broadcast a signal that covers the whole county

The phone and cable companies ignore the towns along the Columbia River in northeast Oregon despite the prevalence of farms, food-processing facilities, power plants and military installations that crave high-speed Internet access. "Sometimes it seems like we live in a third world out here," says Fred Ziari, founder of EZ Wireless, the 23-employee company in Hermiston, Ore., that decided to do something about it. EZ Wireless built the country's largest regional wireless broadband network, a 600-square-mile Wi-Fi blanket, and activated it this February. The network of high-power Wi-Fi towers and antennas allows users anywhere in the county to surf the Net at speeds equal to those of fixed lines like DSL. But users can also take their laptops on the road, driving 20 miles across the region while maintaining a connection the whole way—a trick Ziari proudly demonstrates by watching a "Lord of the Rings" movie trailer while cruising down the road.

The Sunny City Where It All Began

SAN DIEGO, CALIF.

Population: 1.2 million

Why: In the third unwired generation

Fact: Employs the highest concentration of workers in the wireless field in the United States

If wireless technology has a birthplace, it's San Diego. In 1968, University of California, San Diego, professor Irwin Jacobs founded a company called Linkabit to create the world's first digital wireless-communications network. Today, spinoffs like Qualcomm and Leap Wireless, as well as the U.S. branches of international giants like Nokia and Sony Electronics, populate the region. San Diego has about 150 wireless firms and the highest concentration of wireless workers in the country. A special program at UCSD even offers a degree in wireless communications.

So it's not surprising to see the city on the cutting edge. Last year Verizon chose San Diego as the second city (with Washington, D.C.) to deploy its new, third-generation "EV-DO" high-speed wireless network. A 250-member community group called SoCalFreeNet is trying to make wireless Internet access available for free, installing a dozen public nodes around the city and in the suburbs. Some of the most interesting action is downtown. In One America Plaza, an office building that opened last year, tenants on all 36 floors get free wireless Web access. And atop the building, a company called XO Communications has installed a base station that blasts wireless broadband at speeds up to 20 mega-bits per second to subscribers within a five-mile radius.

Old Town, New Zeal

AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND

Population: 370,000

Why: Right on top down under

Fact: Eighty cellular sites around the city provide potential access to 1 million residents

Auckland is famous for sailing, aquariums, Maori culture and dinosaur skeletons. But wireless Internet access? In most cities around the world, connecting to the Internet means scoping out a Wi-Fi hotspot and sitting with your laptop in one place, or surfing the Net at slower speeds over a small, pocket-size phone with an uncomfortably tiny screen. Six months ago, Auckland became one of a few communities to deploy a single high-speed wireless network that blankets the entire city. Users can surf the Net at high speeds from the beach, their office, their homes or even a moving bus.

Upstart telecom firm Woosh Wireless developed the network. The four-year-old startup has challenged the city's entrenched land-line telco by installing three powerful wireless base stations around town. "Our vision is that in any corner of the city you can open your laptop and get megabit speed," says Jon Hambidge of IP Wireless in San Bruno, Calif., which provides Whoosh with the equipment.

Never Be Outstripped

LAS VEGAS, NEV.

Population: 515,000

Why: Phone, cable cos. can't match demand

Fact: Sin City has only four hotspots per 100,000 people—but the number is rising quickly

Even inveterate gamblers need to check their e-mail once in a while. Hotels on the Strip like the Rio, Circus Circus and MGM Grand are joining the worldwide wave of hotels offering guests Wi-Fi access in their rooms, usually for a daily fee of about \$10. Dozens of cafes, Subway stores and Panera Bread bakeries will let you log on while you munch. And chances are, if you're visiting Vegas for one of its many industry confabs, some enterprising company has turned the country's busiest convention center into a free Wi-Fi hotspot. Perfect for blogging during boring presentations.

Like many cities with exploding population growth, Vegas is outrunning some of its utilities. You've probably read about the water shortages. Now Sprint and Cox cable can't keep up with demand for Internet access. So local start-ups like Verde Communications are trying to plug the gap with wireless access. Verde's clients include the food court in the MGM Showcase mall, a bunch of neighborhood restaurants and, most interestingly, many of the city's recreational-vehicle parks. One, the Hitchin' Post RV Park and Motel, which opened in 1970, uses Verde's Wi-Fi technology to hook up its peripatetic residents for \$36 a month. "It's a huge asset that drives customers to my property," says manager Brent Childress. It's not, however, much of a moneymaker. Verde divides the revenues with clients based on how much they contribute to building the network. Childress says Wi-Fi "brings in a little bit, but probably not enough to pay the tire bill."

For a Safer England

LONDON, ENGLAND

Population: 7.4 million

Why: Crimefighting enters the wireless era

Fact: Soon, cops will watch over their entire stomping grounds on laptops and PDAs

Police Sgt. John Baldock had spent many evenings staking out the doorway of the family-run Italian eatery Rosticceria Rusticana, where drug dealers plied their trade away from the surveillance cameras that dot London's trendy-cum-seedy Soho neighborhood. His big break came when the Westminster City Council's nerdy information-network manager, Andrew Snellgrove, stuck a tiny wireless camera in a lamppost across the street. A week later Baldock had enough evidence to arrest several crack and heroin dealers.

Police are about to turn Soho into the first wireless law-enforcement district in London. Over the next six months, Snellgrove will install 50 wireless cameras and sensors around the neighborhood. They'll take videos good enough to be admissible in court, and sensors will monitor noise and send out alarms when levels exceed normal. Because the cameras won't be fixed, police will be able to move them constantly, creating the impression that every inch is under surveillance. Crooks, beware.

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