

# AIRLINES COMPETE WITH ONBOARD WIFI OFFER



Free onboard WiFi has emerged as the latest battleground among the world's leading airlines. Once considered expensive and unreliable, this service offers quality comparable to what passengers experience at home.

Recently, Delta, United, Japan Airlines, Air France, Turkish Airlines, and other global carriers have been competing to announce the arrival or extension of their onboard connectivity options.

**In striking contrast to the trend of charging passengers for services that were once included in the ticket price**—such as checked bags or seat selection—most airlines now promise that their high-speed onboard WiFi will be free.

The first experiments with in-flight connectivity began in 2004, involving Boeing and Lufthansa. Since then, companies like ViaSat, Panasonic, and Thales have developed products that are equipped with hundreds of aircraft.

Low-orbit satellite constellations, such as Starlink, have revolutionized in-flight connectivity. Starlink already provides service for Hawaiian Airlines and the U.S. domestic carrier JSX.

While traditional telecommunications satellites orbit at heights up to 35,000 kilometers from Earth, constellation satellites operate at just 600 kilometers. This lower altitude significantly reduces latency and enables video streaming.

Passengers are no longer limited to the movie selections offered by airlines; they can now access streaming platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix. For airlines, the challenge lies in finding a solution that provides free connectivity and ensures a positive passenger experience. Achieving this is considered the "Holy Grail" for client satisfaction and loyalty.

## How Free Is It?

Experts suggest that the term "free" can be relative. Airlines such as Delta, United, and Air France provide complimentary high-speed WiFi only to members of their loyalty programs. While signing up for these programs incurs no cost, the onboard WiFi offer creates new marketing opportunities.

In fact, by adding eight pieces of customer data and acquiring just one new paying customer through the Delta loyalty program—possibly via a credit card—the airline can more than offset the cost of providing WiFi to the other seven passengers.

However, since some travelers may prefer not to enroll in loyalty programs, Apex recommends that airlines continue to offer paid alternatives for those who do not wish to share their data in exchange for connectivity.

Air France plans to introduce free onboard WiFi in 2025, aiming to significantly enhance the experience for its customers. The airline acknowledges that the current service is unsatisfactory. Installing Starlink's WiFi on over 220 aircraft will take time and cost tens of millions of euros, but it

aligns with the airline's positioning as a premium carrier.

## **The Right Balance**

Onboard broadband presents new challenges for airlines and flight attendants, who often have to deal with unruly passengers. **Many travelers don't want to spend 12 hours on a transoceanic flight next to someone talking on Skype, and numerous passengers prefer being disconnected during their flights.**

Experts agree that airlines must find the right balance. Maintaining etiquette and decorum in the sky is essential, rather than allowing it to become a chaotic environment of connectivity and conversation.

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