



## Staying Connected at sea

By Susan J. Young

Many of today's cruisers can't bear to abandon their tech toys and connections to friends and family, even at sea. Increasingly, major cruise lines are fielding a barrage of high-tech guest options - from Wi-Fi hot spots to cabin data ports, from cell phone service to iPods and computer classes. Silversea Cruises reports 65 percent of its guests use some form of onboard Internet access, while 50 percent are using cell phones at sea.

Internet caf s at sea are now the norm, not the exception. Even small ships and some new riverboats have one or two computers onboard for guest use. It's good, though, to check with your cruise line before you sail about your technical options; they vary by ship and by line, and the landscape is changing daily.

### Check Pricing in Advance

If you can get connected, remember it may not be cheap. Internet access, ship-to-shore phone calls, and cell phone usage can be pricey. Calling from the phone in your stateroom may cost \$9.99 a minute or more. Cell phone users will get the bill for international roaming or other fees when they get home. One thing that has changed, however, is that many cruise ships have installed terrestrial cellphone antennae to satellite translators on their ships. This means that your cellphone that used to fail once the ship lost sight of land will now work. Expect the cost to be about \$4.50/minute, however. That is cheaper than your cabin phone, but still a bundle.

Check rates before using any tech devices. Cut Internet access costs at sea by buying a bundle of minutes from the cruise line, rather than paying as you go, minute by minute. For instance, Norwegian Cruise Line offers a package of 33 minutes for \$25 (75 cents a minute) or 250 minutes for \$100 (40 cents a minute). Remember that you almost always use more minutes than you think you need. At times, Internet connections at sea can be agonizingly slow, resulting in longer than usual times to load pages or send messages.

But consumers as a whole love the Internet access. Tim Rubacky, Oceania Cruises' director of corporate communications, says Oceania's Internet centers "experience very heavy usage." On most lines, it can sometimes be tough to find an open terminal, says Ruth Turpin, a luxury travel consultant with Cruises Etc., Fort Worth, Tex. She says that's caused by more baby boomers cruising: "These are people who are still very much involved in their business. They want to be connected 24-7." Turpin said her senior clients also feel it's imperative to keep tabs on their stock portfolio, even at sea.

### Internet Usage Tips

To beat the high demand for terminal use, and bandwidth, visit the Internet room during off-peak hours. The dinner period is a good one, while people are eating. Keep in mind that a lot of people using the Internet at once can slow down the connection. In addition, rough seas or a route where the ship makes many turns will cause the ship's communications to lose satellite connectivity, sometimes for several minutes. The web is always faster when the ship is not moving.

Or simply head for a land-based Internet café when in port. Internet cafés are ubiquitous in cruise ship ports and usually cost from one to four dollars an hour. Ask the ship's concierge, shore trip staff or other crew members if they know of a facility close to the pier. Local libraries are good bets, and some offer computer use with free minutes.

Yet, most cruisers still want to stay in touch at sea. Following is a quick snapshot of some of the razzle-dazzle, high-tech features from a sampling of major cruise lines.

### Line-by-Line Roundup

Carnival Cruise Lines features wireless Internet access aboard its entire fleet in areas adjacent to its 24-hour Internet cafés. Carnival Valor and Carnival Liberty offer 100%, bow-to-stern Wi-Fi service (including stateroom access). The new Carnival Freedom will also feature bow-to-stern Wi-Fi when it debuts in March 2007. A Carnival spokesman tells CruiseMates.com that it will offer fleet-wide Wi-Fi access by the end of this year, and fleet-wide cell phone service by early 2007.

All Celebrity Cruises ships offer Internet access and shipboard e-mail services in cyber cafés. Internet access is available in each stateroom on Celebrity's Millennium-class ships for those with their own laptops. Also, certain ships have Wi-Fi hotspots. On Celebrity's Century guests can access Wi-Fi in their stateroom. Internet access is available on the shipboard workstations 24 hours a day.

Costa Cruises' fleet also has fully wired Internet cafés. Internet access is also available in some staterooms, including all suites. Guests may bring their own laptops

or rent PCs from the line to use in staterooms with Internet access. Cell phone services are available.

Cunard Line's Queen Mary 2 offers 30 computer workstations with flat-panel monitors. Those are situated between the Computer Learning Center and the ship's library. Guests can take an eclectic mix of enrichment programs, including group computer learning sessions for Windows XP and Office XP. The liner also features 13 onboard Wi-Fi hotspots.

Crystal Cruises - In addition to 24/7 Internet cafes, features a Computer University@Sea program with up to 30 courses on a single cruise. Following the debut of the luxury line's wireless Internet service in September, Crystal launched cell phone service in October aboard Crystal Symphony and Crystal Serenity. Quiet-zone technology means certain areas of the ships are cell phone-free, so guests in places like the dining room are not disturbed.

Disney Cruise Line has Internet cafes on its ships. Travelers with wireless-ready laptops can access high-speed Internet Wi-Fi hotspots in most public areas. The Disney Wonder was in drydock in mid-October, and additional Wi-Fi stations were being added to its Cove Cafe. Disney offers Internet packages and the rates vary depending on the cruise length. There is no cell phone service, though, on Disney ships.

Holland America Line's ships offer high-speed Internet access in the 24/7 Explorations Caf  , as well as Wi-Fi zones throughout various public rooms for guests with their own laptops. Bulk Internet access packages are \$55 for 100 minutes, \$100 for 250 minutes. Shipboard e-mail accounts can be set up for guests who can't access their own e-mail domains. Currently, guests on Volendam can use cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) onboard; that service will be operational on all Holland America ships by March 2007.

MSC Cruises - Wi-Fi hotspots are available for guest use in several public rooms, including MSC Opera, MSC Lirica, MSC Musica and Monterrey; they will soon will be available on the line's other ships as well. Internet caf  s are available on many MSC ships, and balcony suites have Internet access aboard MSC Musica, MSC Opera, MSC Lirica, MSC Sinfonia and MSC Armonia.

Norwegian Cruise Line's (NCL) ships feature wireless Internet access in most public areas and some staterooms. All ships offer Internet centers and guests are provided with a personal "Cruise-email" address with their cruise documents. NCL has several Internet minute package plans. Guests may also use cell phones onboard across the fleet. If you want to rent a laptop on NCL, it will cost \$20 per day.

Oceania Cruises says Insignia is equipped for cell phone service, and Regatta and Nautica will be wired by year's end. "To date, we have not had a single complaint about guests using their cell phones onboard," says Rubacky. "As our ships spend the majority of their time in port, the majority of cell usage by guests is ashore. Cell usage onboard is fairly modest." Guests are requested to refrain from using their cell phones in Oceania's dining rooms and lounges. Guests can access the Internet at onboard centers, libraries and via stateroom TVs. Wi-Fi access is available in many places around the ships. Bulk-minute Internet packages are available for as little as 60 cents per minute.

Princess Cruises says Internet access is available on all its ships via Internet caf s and wireless networks. Travelers with wireless-enabled laptops can access the Internet from the Princess purser's lobby/atrium and surrounding lounges and bars. A Princess spokeswoman says the line is in the process of adding photo capability to its Internet Cafe computer stations so passengers can upload photos from their vacation and email them home, but that's not fleet-wide yet. There is no cell phone service onboard.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises' ships feature digital satellite feed and Wi-Fi hotspots in select public areas. Newly upgraded Internet bandwidth is improving connectivity fleet-wide. On three ships, suite PCs can be connected to phone jacks for modem Internet service. Cell phone access is available when ships are at sea, except on the Paul Gauguin. The line offers Internet usage packages as low as 25 cents a minute. Andrew Poulton, Regent's director of strategic marketing, says: "In the course of the next year, we will be increasing the wireless access across the fleet," although details are not yet available.

Royal Caribbean International - Cell phone service is already on 14 of 20 ships, and the entire fleet will have cell phone service access by year's end. Guests may also use their personal laptops to connect to the Internet from their staterooms. All ships have at least six Wi-Fi access hot spots in public areas, as well as computer workstations with 24-hour Internet access. The newer ships -- Freedom of the Seas and two ships under construction - Liberty of the Seas and a third Freedom-class ship - also will have Wi-Fi capability throughout the ship including staterooms.

Seabourn Cruise Line features Wi-Fi hotspots in most public areas and all suites. A new, improved satellite service has lowered connection costs. Telephone service that used to be \$12.50 a minute is now \$4.95 a minute, while Internet charges have dropped from 95 cents per minute to 45 cents. The three-ship fleet also features computer centers with desktop PCs and printers. Flat-screen TVs with DVD players in guest suites have access ports for input of digital photos/videos and game consoles.

Silversea Cruises introduced Wi-Fi access in designated public rooms for guests who bring their own wireless-enabled laptops. Shipboard Internet centers have also been

completely updated with state-of-the-art computer workstations that feature 17-inch, flat-screen monitors; when the centers were upgraded, more terminals were also added. The line offers several packages to reduce Internet costs. Earlier in 2006, the line introduced a cell phone at sea program.

Windstar Cruises features wireless Internet service on its three ships. Wi-Fi access is possible in all public areas and cabins. iPod Nanos are available for complimentary use, and laptops are available for rental. The line's Wind Surf has an Internet facility with eight computer workstations to surf the Internet.

Many other ships also offer tech options, so check with your individual line.