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TRAVEL

World's most wired airports

Beth Breidenbach calls it the "vulture hover." It's a maneuver familiar to anyone looking to use a laptop in an airport—the circling, swooping dance to locate and secure access to wireless Internet (Wi-Fi) and power outlets.



No. 12: France's Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris. Barry Cronin / ZUMA/Corbis



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By Elizabeth Woyke

Beth Breidenbach calls it the "vulture hover."

It's a maneuver familiar to anyone looking to use a laptop in an airport—the circling, swooping dance to locate and secure access to wireless Internet (Wi-Fi) and power outlets.

Breidenbach, a Spokane, Wash.-based senior data architect for IBM Global Business Services, is on the road an average of 45 weeks a year. To cope, she's memorized plug locations in her favorite airports—she's found them by the main poles in the seating area in Denver International Airport; by the workstations at Chicago's O'Hare and New York's LaGuardia; still others near particular restaurants in Minneapolis, where she can grab a bite while charging her laptop and Palm handheld.

The seasoned traveler is doing less vulture hovering these days as airports ramp up their Wi-Fi service. "I tend to assume that Wi-Fi will be available in an airport until proven otherwise," Breidenbach says.

In an increasingly data-dense world, travelers will soon be able to surf the Web from the skies. Until then, however, the next best thing may be to fly out of Denver or Las Vegas: They represent two of fewer than 10 major airports around the world that offer free Wi-Fi Internet access throughout their public areas. That's landed them at the top of Forbes.com's first ranking of wired airports.

Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International grabs the No. 1 slot. It doesn't have free Wi-Fi, but does boast airport-wide coverage with at least five major providers. Atlanta also got a boost from its sheer size—with nearly 85 million passengers per year, it's the busiest airport in the world.

Of course, most airports are wired to some extent, in spots such as their elite members' lounges or the in-house Starbucks. But to grab a spot on our list, an airport must offer broad Wi-Fi access to regular passengers—for free, or at a reasonable price.

To compile the list, we looked at the top 50 airports around the world, measured by passenger traffic. (The more passengers, the more Wi-Fi usage.) That knocked out some smaller airports with robust networks, including Albuquerque, N.M., and Sacramento, Calif.

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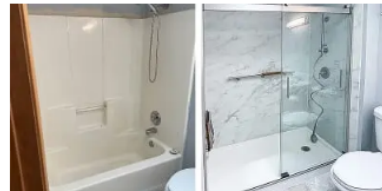
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world, measured by passenger traffic. (The more passengers, the more Wi-Fi usage.) That knocked out some smaller airports with robust networks, including Albuquerque, N.M., and Sacramento, Calif.

We then rated airports based on three criteria: the breadth of Wi-Fi coverage, whether they charged for the service and how much, and how many providers they offered as options. Finally, we looked at the comfort and convenience factor. That included checking out whether the airport offered workstations, adequate seating and electrical outlets, as well as facilities like computer rooms and business centers for travelers looking to get online without their own laptops.

Those filters gave us a list of 48 airports—21 in the U.S. But since travelers regularly head across international boundaries, we capped the U.S. airports at nine—both to shorten the list and to make room for more overseas airports.

Travelers agree: Well-equipped terminals make a difference. A 2007 survey by SITA, a Geneva, Switzerland-based provider of IT and communications services for the air transport industry, found that 25 percent of passengers carry Wi-Fi-enabled laptops. Of that group, 42 percent associate a Wi-Fi connected terminal with a "pleasant trip."

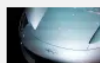
A well-wired airport isn't just a boon for multi-tasking road warriors. As more people invest in smart phones and cellular data plans, airports are becoming increasingly important networking zones for leisure travelers, too.

Airport managers are heeding the calls for more data. Many airports are adding Wi-Fi. Some see it as a revenue source, but a growing number are making it free throughout all the terminals.

Denver International Airport has offered fee-based Wi-Fi since September 2002. Service provider AT&T originally charged \$7.95 for a one-day pass Wi-Fi. Last November, the airport itself took over as operator, and began offering the service *gratis* to travelers.

"It was one of the things that kept coming up on complaint cards: 'Why isn't your Wi-Fi service free?'" says Jim Winston, the airport's telecom chief.

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Usage has since shot up from around 600 connections a day to more than 4,500. "A lot of people just didn't bother before," says Winston.

To offset the cost, Denver started running ads. A 30-second video from companies including Ford Motor, Microsoft, Toyota and Charles Schwab greets users when they log on. Banner ads top the Internet sites they visit. Winston expects the ad revenue to match—and eventually exceed—the amount previously generated from the paid service.

Other airports on our list that provide free Wi-Fi are shifting toward advertising, too. McCarran airport in Las Vegas has hosted a free network since January 2004, as a form of customer service. Searching for additional revenue, the airport will incorporate ads by the end of the year, says Sam Ingalls, McCarran's director of information systems.

"There is [consumer] pressure for airports that charge to go free," says Rich Bogen, managing director of FreeFi Networks, a Los Angeles-based company that offers ad- and content-supported Wi-Fi networks. "We've even heard travelers say that they book tickets so they'll have layovers where there is free Wi-Fi." Bogen, who works with Denver on its ad-supported network, says he's in talks with a number of other U.S. airports to make the same changes.

Some leading airports simply offer numerous connection options. At London's Heathrow (No. 7), Tokyo's Narita (No. 10), Paris' Charles de Gaulle (No. 12) and Munich International (No. 19), as many as 11 Internet providers compete side-by-side for business.

Though European and Asian countries often rank ahead of the U.S. in private broadband adoption, experts say international airports sometimes lag in offering Wi-Fi. Christian Gunning, marketing director for Wi-Fi service provider Boingo, attributes the difference to more expensive connection fees overseas. In the U.S., a day pass is usually \$8 to \$10. In Europe, where access is often charged per minute, having a day's worth of access can cost between 20 and 30 Euros (or \$30 to \$45 a day). "People in Europe tend to get on, use it and get off. In the U.S. it's more of

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But above maintenance and equipment concerns are security issues. Experts say airport networks are on par, security-wise, with other public Wi-Fi networks. Waivers reminding users of potential risks pop up before a user can sign on. Airport IT heads ensure public users can't hack into the airport's private data networks. "There are different levels of security," notes Ingalls. "It's not one big, open system."

Travelers willing to pay for faster access can invest in airline lounge memberships. Delta runs more than 40 Crown Room Clubs in airports around the world. For an annual fee of \$250 to \$400, members get free T-Mobile wireless service. Non-members can pay \$25 per visit, plus a service fee to T-Mobile. T-Mobile also provides service to American Airlines' Admirals Club. Members get complimentary service and access to workstations; one-day passes are \$50 each.

Of course, even seamless wireless access feels like less of a gift when you're forced to use it on the floor. A spacious new terminal with plenty of power ports, comfortable seats and workspaces, including PC stations, netted South Korea's Incheon International Airport the top ranking in wired facilities in our survey.

Other airports are upgrading their facilities along with their networks, or coaxing advertisers to sponsor workstations and power stations. Breidenbach says Minneapolis-St. Paul International's Wi-Fi connection is erratic, but she gives the airport high marks for the number of seats and electric outlets it offers. LaGuardia, she says, desperately needs to add such facilities. Las Vegas' McCarran builds plugs into seating areas every time it remodels. It has also converted phone booths into re-charge zones with seats and shelves; the costs were underwritten by Verizon. Detroit Metropolitan Airport has a similar program, called "Laptop Pitstops."

The multiplying number of Internet gadgets, from iPhones to Nokia tablets to Sony Portable PlayStation game consoles, is shaping the way airports deliver Wi-Fi. The convenience of accessing the Web from a mobile device means travelers are increasingly logging on after they deboard the plane. That's pushed some airports to improve network coverage in baggage claim areas.

Airlines are also working to bring connectivity to the skies.

increasingly logging on after they deboard the plane. That's pushed some airports to improve network coverage in baggage claim areas.

Airlines are also working to bring connectivity to the skies. American Airlines is testing in-flight Internet service that will support Wi-Fi-enabled devices (for \$12.95) on select flights, sometime in the first half of the year.

Eventually, says Ingalls, airports will be covered with "umbrella" wireless networks that will support passengers, air carriers, vendors and other airport workers. "In the future, for any major airport, wireless will be taken for granted." 

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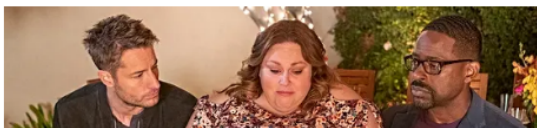
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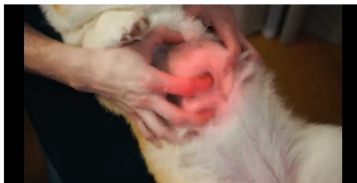
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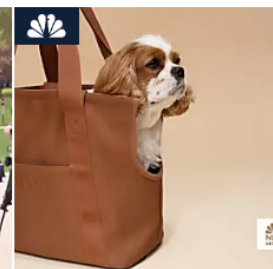
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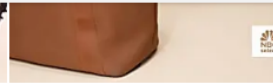
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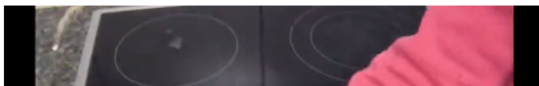
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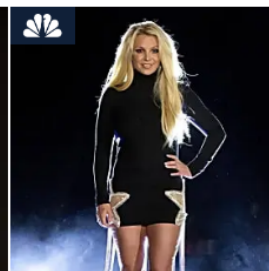
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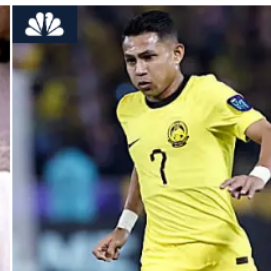
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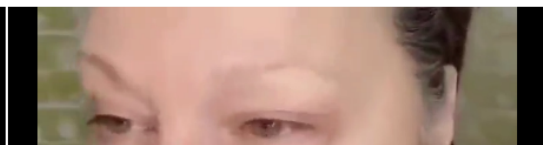
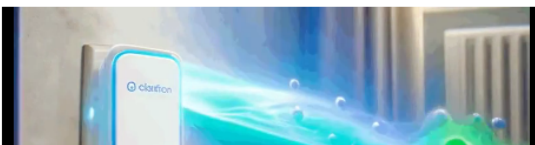
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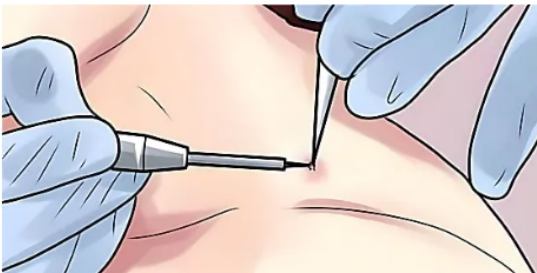


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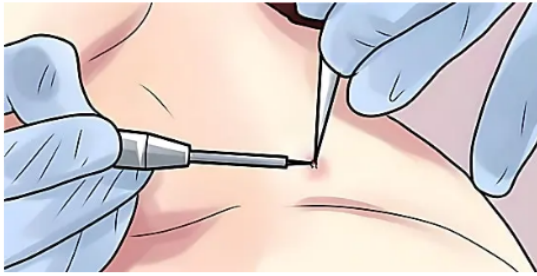
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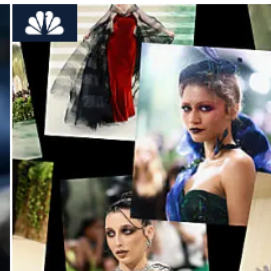
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