

With a little help from wi-fi



Caught out ... experts warn free wi-fi can be costly if security is breached. *Photo: Louie Douvis*

As our lives become increasingly connected, we are becoming more dependent on the internet than ever. Even when just out for a coffee, some people can't resist checking emails, the sharemarket, or what their friends are up to on Facebook.

But an "always-on" lifestyle comes with a price tag if you rely on your phone's or wireless dongle data connection all the time. This is where free wi-fi hot spots come in handy. Wi-fi hot spots are becoming ubiquitous. In fact, some people are able to move around the city purely connected to free wi-fi, without paying any mobile data charges.

Often the effort [to connect] isn't really worth it.

Beau Giles, IT student

Fast-food outlets such as McDonald's and Hungry Jack's have offered free wi-fi to customers for some time now, and cafes and bars soon followed. Last year, Sydney Ferries introduced free wi-fi on its vessels, while access points are now commonplace at most airports around the world. When Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art

(MCA) finished its renovations this year, it introduced free wi-fi for visitors. On average, more than 300 people a day connect to the MCA's wi-fi for personal browsing and to engage with gallery experiences.

There is a range of websites, blogs, forums and apps that keep track of free public wi-fi hot spots in your city or town, such as laptopfriendlycafes.com. Their associated iPhone app uses GPS to find nearby eateries with free or cheap wi-fi, and gives directions to them.

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Some might think that finding a hot spot, reading through terms and conditions and clicking "accept" is a lot of effort just to save a few bucks in data charges, but if you are travelling overseas, for instance, you could save hundreds in data roaming fees.

Sam Henry, a 22-year-old business graduate from the University of Colorado, did just that while interning in Sydney.

"Since I didn't have an Australian data plan, I relied on hot spots for all my internet needs," he says. Henry used his iPhone to read emails, browse Facebook and make calls. With apps such as [Skype](#) and [Viber](#), it is possible to place free calls over the internet on wi-fi and avoid not only data but all charges from telephone and internet service providers. With Apple's inbuilt iMessage app, and others such as [WhatsApp](#), text, picture and video messages can all be sent over the internet, too.

But while public wi-fi is convenient, it can be slow and cumbersome.

IT student Beau Giles connects to public wi-fi on his MacBook laptop and iPhone to check emails, but the 18-year-old says the connections are often too slow for more intensive use, such as browsing YouTube and listening to music on Spotify. "It's fiddly having to connect, agreeing to terms and conditions, just to check an email," he says. "Often the effort isn't really worth it."

Security

Is free wi-fi secure? "There are some risks associated with public access points," says the head of technology for Asia-Pacific at security software company Sophos, Paul Ducklin. A security adviser at AVG AU/NZ, Michael McKinnon, says: "The best assumption is you're not secure."

But both specialists say you can still use public internet if you keep a few things in mind. Here are some simple rules to follow to connect safely.

1. No password, no go. Security depends largely on whether the network is open or secure. Basically, does it have a password or not? "When you are using an access point, you need to be using a secure connection for everything," Ducklin says. "If it's not an encrypted access point, then anybody can see what you're doing." If the network doesn't have a password, find one that does.
2. No sensitive content. "I certainly wouldn't be using any sites that required a credit card," McKinnon says. Even if a public network has a password, it is best to save internet banking or credit card payments for private home or office networks.
3. Browse securely. Wherever possible, use sites that are secured with SSL encryption. This can be achieved by typing "https" before the website address, rather than just "http". Be sure to physically type this into the browser, not click on a link that claims to be secure, as these can often be false.
4. VPN. If you are on the go but need a constant, secure connection, a mobile virtual private network, or VPN, is a good option. The software will encrypt your traffic but maintain your login session as you move across different access points.
5. If all else fails, use 3G. If you do need to conduct sensitive browsing, such as internet banking, while out and about, your safest option is to either find a private network or revert to 3G mobile internet. "A 3G connection is inherently encrypted by default," McKinnon says. "[It] does tend to be a little more secure than an open wireless network."

Beyond this, the general rules of internet security apply. Make sure your software is up to date and use an antivirus program (yes, even Macs can get viruses).

"Nothing's perfect," Ducklin says. "It's like going to a street market rather than a well-run shopping centre - you can get some great bargains, but sometimes you're on your own."

With this in mind, you might just be able to save yourself a few bob.

Favourite hot spots

freewifi.com.au

laptopfriendlycafes.com

jiwire.com/iphone

whirlpool.net.au/wiki/free-wifi-hotspots