

Wave Lengths

Wi-Fi Internet access
tries out its sea legs

By Autumn C. Giusti
Staff Writer

A TECHNOLOGY LONG associated with high-rises and coffee shops is venturing out to the high seas.

After successfully connecting cruise ships to the digital world, wireless Internet providers are now setting their sights on the oil and gas industry. Wireless ISPs want to make it possible for people to log on to the Internet even when they're thousands of miles from the nearest phone line.

"Nobody wants to be away from e-mail for three to five days," said Rob Marjerison, director of business development for Maritime Telecommunications Network, a Miramar, Fla.-based company that provides ship-to-shore voice and satellite communications for cruise ships and oil and gas companies.

High-speed wireless Internet connections, also known as Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity), allows laptop computers

and other devices to log on to the Web as long as the user is within range of an antenna. At sea, the antenna is on the ship or platform, which transmits via satellite to provide the Internet connection.

Cruise ships have offered computer terminals and Internet access at cyber cafes and through in-cabin dial-up since the late 1990s. But Wi-Fi makes it possible for passengers and crew to use their own laptops to surf the Web, check e-mail or monitor stocks while sipping a drink by the pool or enjoying the ocean view.

Vacationers who cruise from the Crescent City can take advantage of the technology on several New Orleans-based ships, including Norwegian, Carnival and Holland America cruise lines.

The sea-friendly technology first started making waves in 2002, when Maritime installed Wi-Fi equipment on Norwegian's entire fleet, making the company the first cruise line to offer the technology.

To use Wi-Fi, cruise passengers pay \$10 a day to rent a wireless network card, which pops into most laptops. Customers can then pay by the minute or buy 30-, 100- or 200-minute

blocks, starting at 40 cents a minute.

The catch is Wi-Fi works only at designated "hot spots" — places on the ship such as cyber cafes, poolside stations or crew areas — where wireless equipment is installed.

Maritime has installed about 90 hotspots on about 45 existing and new vessels and adds an additional access point each week on average, Marjerison says.

Once Norwegian took off with the Wi-Fi concept, other cruise lines quickly followed suit. Maritime now serves most of the world's major cruise lines.

Wireless is particularly useful for crewmembers who spend months at a time at sea with limited communications.

"The price of laptops is dropping like a stone and a lot of crewmembers have them," Marjerison said. "This gives them a chance to stay in touch with families."

A main benefit of having Wi-Fi at sea, Marjerison said, is tens of thousands of Americans can do their jobs while away from their cubicles — even if it means filing reports from the

Caribbean.

"In dual-income families, it's difficult to coordinate a vacation," Marjerison said. "This makes it an option."

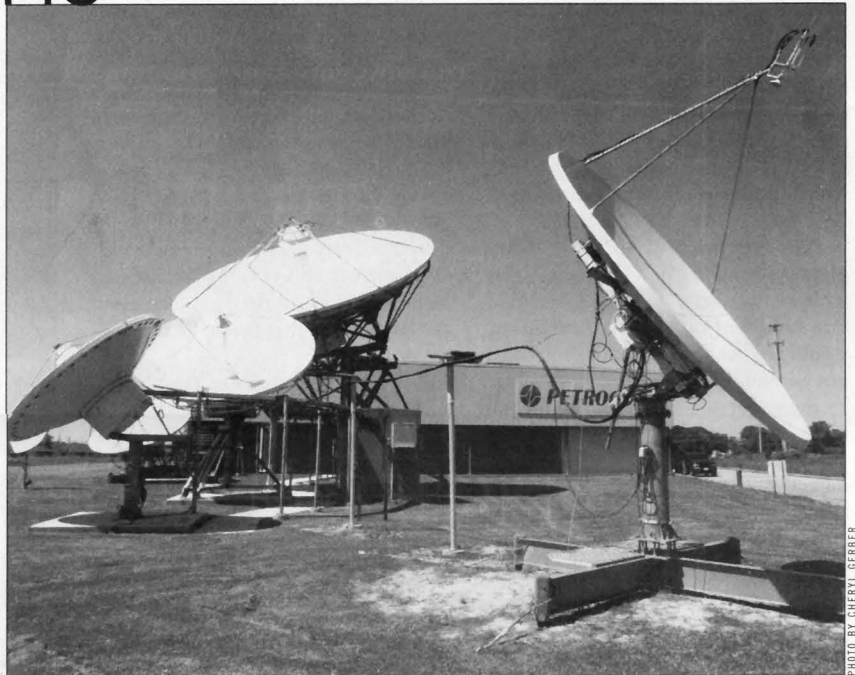
With Wi-Fi making it easy for cruise passengers to stay connected, cruises have become a more attractive option for business groups who normally book big-city convention centers and hotels.

"In America, there's a multibillion-dollar convention and conference business," Marjerison said. "The minimum requirements (for these conventions) typically include fast Internet connectivity. The cruise industry really hasn't been able to go after that market. In the past year, they've been doing that."

Marjerison said the effect on the cruise industry will be significant, but in New Orleans, where conventions bring in millions of dollars a year, it is likely to be minimal.

"Las Vegas and New Orleans aren't even going to notice," he said.

So far, the Crescent City hasn't, said



Petrocom's bank of satellite dishes in Harahan helps connect everything from offshore oil platforms to cruise ships to the the outside world. Wireless connections have spread to the high seas in the latest expansion wave.

PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER



PHOTO BY DAVID RAE MORRIS

Leandra Grobler, manager of the Internet cafe on board the Holland America cruise ship *Holiday*, shows off wireless computer equipment during a stop at the Port of New Orleans.

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Beverly Gianna, spokeswoman for the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau. Cruises have made “little, if any impact” on local convention business, Gianna said.

One area where New Orleans might cut its own slice of the Wi-Fi pie is the oil and gas industry, and one company already exploring this area is Harahan-based Petrocom Communications Inc., which delivers offshore communications for the oil and gas industry.

Petrocom provides about one-third of Louisiana’s oil and gas companies with satellite service. Mark Littlejohn, vice president of sales and marketing, would not list any companies by name, but he estimates about 35% — primarily the major and independent companies — are using Wi-Fi.

And Petrocom isn’t stopping with oil and gas.

“With the success of the major cruise lines sailing from the Port of New Orleans and Galveston, (Texas), we are introducing our expertise to

these ships,” Littlejohn said.

The company plans to retool its business model for cruise ships, offering what Littlejohn said is a more financially feasible plan for the ships to install Wi-Fi.

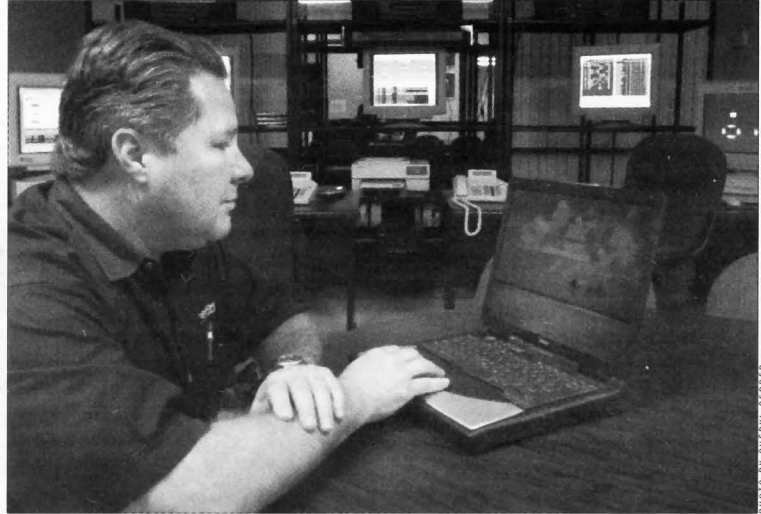
“We also pay more attention to network security,” he said. “In the corporate world, security is everything.”

Also jumping on the local Wi-Fi bandwagon is Northrop Grumman Ship Systems Avondale Operations, which has been installing the technology on its commercial tankers. Then there’s Reston, Va.-based Telesea Wireless Services, which provides private wireless networks for yachts and casino ships along the East Coast and is planning an expansion to the Gulf region.

The company wants to tap into the offshore oil and gas industry, said Tim Freeman, president and CEO of Telesea, a division of Wheat International Communications Corp.

“That would certainly be our target audience,” Freeman said.

Wi-Fi already has thousands of users on land, Littlejohn said. As Wi-Fi



Dennis Groome operates Petrocom’s Harahan-based satellite banks with his laptop, which is connected through a high speed Wi-Fi wireless connection.

becomes more commonplace, Littlejohn predicts “the aftermath will be the near limitless coverage offered by the major wireless (telephone) carriers.” That way, people can log on to the Web from the side of the road or Little

League practice if need be.

And aside from concerns surrounding network security — “the one barrier to this technology exploding,” Littlejohn said — there are oceans of possibilities ahead. •