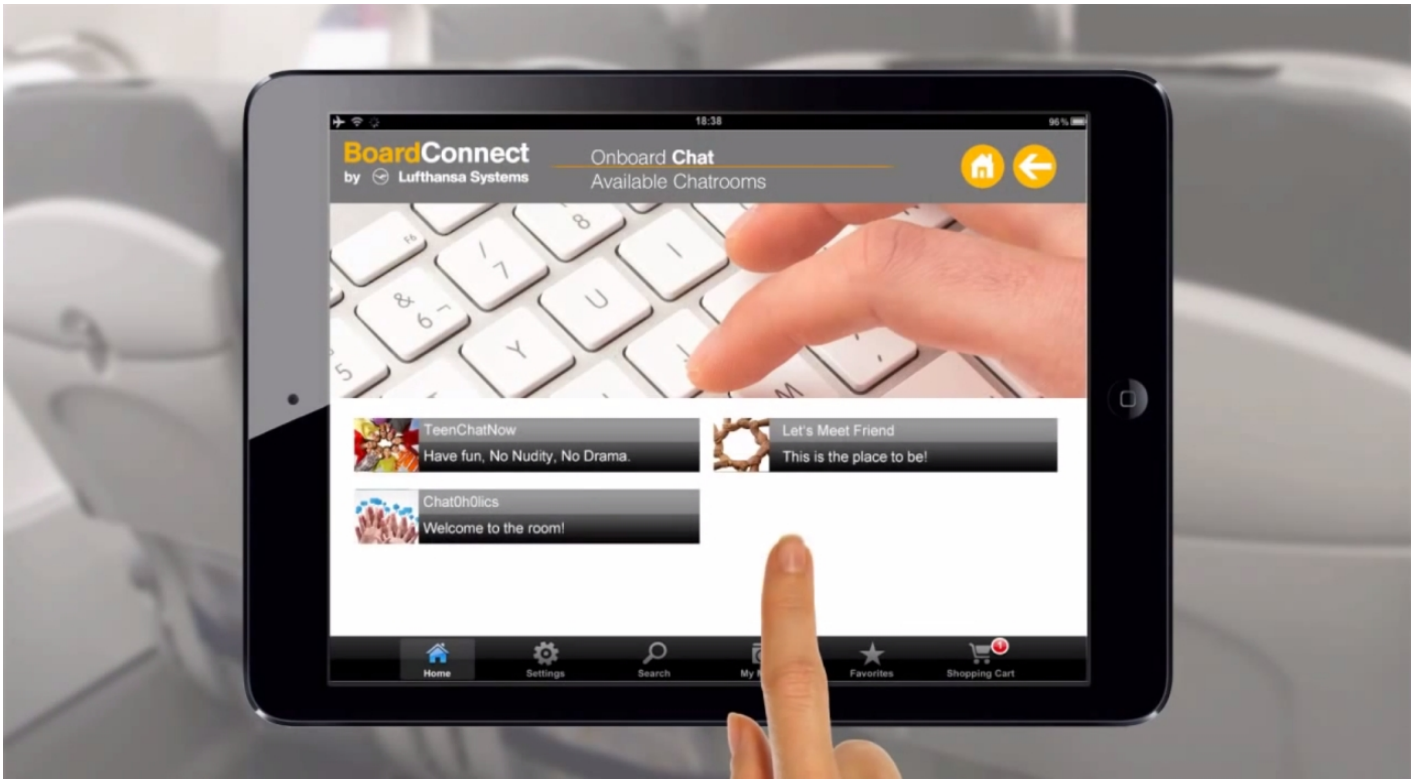
WORLD'S FASTEST IN-FLIGHT BROADBAND COMING TO LUFTHANSA

News / Airlines



For those who cherish escaping the constant deluge of emails that flying 35,000 feet above ground affords, peace and quiet might soon be shattered.

British satellite company Inmarsat has partnered with Deutsche Telekom to bring super-fast Internet to fliers in Europe, enabling them to use their smartphones at same speed in the air as they do on the ground.

The service will be the fastest on the market, delivering a peak speed of 75 megabits per second - that's way above the 30 megabits that passes as super-fast fiber broadband in some cities.

Inmarsat hopes to achieve this by launching the world's first commercial satellite and ground system called the European Aviation Network, which will be a hybrid between the two technologies currently used for in-flight connectivity.

The first airline to trial it, from 2017, will be the German carrier **Lufthansa**.

"There's been quite a lot of anticipation for this announcement, it's definitely significant," says Jason Rabinowitz, data research manager at Routehappy, an online product comparison platform for air travel.

"When it comes to speed, 70 megabits per seconds is quite high. The prospect seems realistic

enough that Lufthansa has signed up its narrow-body fleet to the technology."

Connected Above Clouds

The airliner says its passengers will be able to update social media, send emails and texts, and also stream music and films glitch-free.

Those worried they'll be stuck listening to a chatty neighbor's phone conversation for hours can breathe a sigh of relief - Lufthansa says it's drawing a line at Skype or voice calls.

"We conduct frequent surveys and there was a significant and clear vote among our customers against in-flight phone calls," says Martin Riecken, Lufthansa's director of communication, adding that it will block voice communication on board.

Executives have not yet decided the pricing system for their new service, but say the cost may depend on the travel class of the ticket.

The question remains how the network will cope if everyone on board decides to upload their pictures of cloud formations to Instagram at the same time.

"We don't really believe that it will be a problem," says Riecken.

"It's relatively unlikely that everyone will access the Internet at the same time -- you download your emails and then you start reading them, and then you're not using the data anymore," he adds.

Lufthansa will be te first airline to trial super-fast in-flight broadband from 2017.

Leo Mondale, president of Inmarsat aviation, says that intertwining satellite and ground connection will help deliver a more powerful and consistent service, which he claims will be able withstand times of high demand, especially in busy areas around airports.

Once the aircraft reaches 10,000 feet the ground network will be combined with satellite connectivity, with the switch automatically managed by the cabin systems in hope that it will avoid any potential disruptions to the service on board.

Speed Race

In spite of the latest announcement Rabinowiz says that most of the world has a long way to catch up with the United States when it comes to the sheer number of Wi-Fi enabled airplanes.

Passengers in the U.S. have a chance of accessing Internet on nearly two thirds of all flight miles, whereas in Europe only Norwegian offers free Wi-Fi on all but two of their Boeing 737-800 short-haul aircraft.

"In the U.S. we were pioneers of on-board connectivity," says Rabinowitz. "Even regional jets have Wi-Fi on board."

However, speed remains sluggish.

Gogo, a major U.S. provider, currently goes up to 30 megabits per second on its top-tier service, but the majority of commercial planes which carry its technology only reach 9.8 megabits.

Rabinowitz says that in the real world that speed is closer to 3 to 5 megabits.

But in August Gogo received approval from the Federal Aviation Administration to start testing a next-generation satellite connectivity service which should deliver peak speeds of more than 70 megabits per second -- very close to its European rivals.

"It's clear that passengers not only want Internet in the air, they want it to be fast and they want it to work without glitch," says Rabinowitz.

"We will come to this point where if they're on an airline that doesn't provide Wi-Fi, passengers will ask, 'why isn't this aircraft connected?'"

Going offline above clouds might soon be just a distant memory.

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