AIR FRANCE IS FINALLY BRINGING IN-FLIGHT WI-FI TO INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

News / Airlines

The French, renowned champions of the work-life balance, are about to lose one of their last sanctuaries from the connected world: the aircraft cabin.

Air France-KLM Group will finally introduce wireless Internet on international flights later this year, after about half of clients previously suggested they'd prefer to remain unplugged, Chief Executive Officer Alexandre de Juniac said Thursday. Only now will it make the leap amid demand from younger people.

"Many of our passengers weren't interested in the service because it's the only place left where they can really have peace," the CEO said on a conference call with analysts. He added that there's still no way the carrier would countenance voice calls on longer flights as they're "very disruptive, especially at night."

Being removed for hours from the hustle of ring tones and e-mail pings has become an arcane luxury for travelers. Still, in-flight Internet access is emerging as a service signifier for leading airlines, especially on shorter routes over land where it's technically easier, with even low-cost

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champion Ryanair Holdings Plc plotting to link-up its frugal passengers.

Bandwidth Squeeze

On Air France-KLM flights, Asian customers have led the call for connectivity, as well as some business passengers, De Juniac said. The new system will tap satellite links, helping to resolve the problem of reduced bandwidth when only modest numbers of people want to use the Internet at once, he said.

Even without Web access, passengers don’t need to resort to such antiquated pastimes as reading a book or leafing through on-board magazines; airlines offer hundreds of movies via their at-seat entertainment systems, as well as in-flight bars in the more luxurious classes.

On its Airbus A380 superjumbo service, Air France lets customers download flight schedules, travel guides and children’s games onto portable devices — or enjoy the view with the help of panoramic cameras transmitting live images of the countryside below. Business and first-class clients can also peruse a digital art gallery on the plane’s upper deck.

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