

## Delta to introduce free WiFi on flights

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- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 08 January, 2023

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More than 4 years after first making the promise to deliver free WiFi to passengers, Delta Air Lines announced that the pledge is about to become a reality.

The airline will offer what it describes as “fast, free” WiFi on most of its domestic Delta-owned and operated flights starting Feb. 1. More than 700 planes will have the service by the end of the year, and plans call for international and regional aircraft to be equipped by the end of 2024.

The company says passengers will be able to use the high-speed internet for things like playings shows or movies from streaming services, scrolling social media, using apps, sending emails, searching the web and more. Voice or video calls, however, will still not be allowed because of federal regulations. Travelers will need to be members of SkyMiles, the airline’s frequent-flier program, to access the free service.

Delta says it will be “the first major U.S. airline to offer free WiFi as a core element of its customer experience.” JetBlue, a smaller low-cost carrier, has offered free onboard internet for several years, and Hawaiian Airlines announced last year that it would introduce free high-speed connectivity at an unspecified date.

American Airlines was running trials on some planes last year, letting passengers watch an ad to get about 15 to 30 minutes of free internet access, while other carriers, including Southwest, have upgraded their paid WiFi.

T-Mobile customers are also able to access free WiFi on several airlines; the communications company is partnering with Delta to offer the service more widely on its flights.

The Delta announcement came at CES in Las Vegas, the trade show dedicated to consumer electronics. At the same event in January 2020, Delta CEO Ed Bastian said

that free WiFi remained a goal, but would likely not be realized for the next couple of years, according to media reports at the time.

Delta has been running WiFi tests for several months, with 200 planes piloting free service for frequent flier members since Nov. 1 to make sure it could stream at scale, according to Ranjan Goswami, the airline's senior vice president of customer experience design. By Feb. 1, 540 planes will have the free WiFi.

"As you can imagine, if we're going to show up on the CES stage and talk about free WiFi as a member benefit, it better work," he said.

In a news announcement, the airline said it had worked with satellite internet service provider Viasat to offer "best-in-class in-flight connectivity."

"We didn't just want free WiFi to offer base-level service — we wanted it to be transformative for the entire onboard experience," Bastian said in the announcement. "It is imperative all customers onboard can enjoy their favorite content just as they would at home, and we've put this system through meticulous tests to make that possible."

Delta is hoping to grow its base of loyalty members through the WiFi offering; Dwight James, senior vice president of customer engagement and loyalty, said more than half of travelers on the airline now are SkyMiles members.

In the spring, the airline will roll out a new hub for loyalty members called Delta Sync Exclusives that includes access to entertainment and partners like the Paramount Plus streaming network, New York Times games or content about destinations from Atlas Obscura.

"What you can see is not only a growth strategy but customer engagement strategy as well," James said.

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