
Skiers in Calif. surf slopes, Net with high-tech wireless service:[All Editions]

Risa Weinreb. **Boston Herald**. Boston, Mass.: Feb 1, 2004. pg. 051

Full Text (612 words)

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OLYMPIC VALLEY, Calif. - One recent morning at Squaw Valley USA, Justin Mostes of Los Gatos, Calif., checked his e-mails to review an urgent Power Point presentation he was expecting. Minutes later, he was snowboarding the powder of Siberia Bowl.

"It was great," said Mostes. "Otherwise, I would have had to wait around at home to get that message or look for an Internet cafe. At Squaw, I knew I could shoot off that e-mail right from the mountain."

Now there's no need for skiers and snowboarders to let their business go downhill just because they're going downhill. In December, Squaw Valley USA installed the first wireless network of its kind at a U.S. ski resort.

The system provides high-speed access to the Internet from wireless (Wi-Fi-enabled) laptops, PDAs and cellphones. Hotspots cover the resort base area, with communications antennas set on top of the lift huts.

Network users can read and send e-mails, surf the Internet for weather forecasts and grooming reports and message friends on the slopes ("Hey dude - where's that powder stash?"). As many as 100 people a week use the system.

"Very convenient," said Rob Coneybeer of San Francisco, who has three children on the ski team at Squaw Valley. "I can drop off the kids, open up my e-mails while sitting at the base, then put the laptop back in the car and go skiing or snowboarding."

The setup is provided by Exwire, a telecommunications and data services company based in Truckee, Calif.

"The dream grew with the realization that at Squaw Valley, we could put up a complete wireless network that would not only let skiing guests connect anywhere on the mountain, but that could also help the resort scan lift tickets, track visitors' vertical feet and more," said Exwire founder and CEO Devin Koch.

Wi-Fi works 20 times faster than a dial-up modem, a swiftness appreciated by John Paul Young of Bethesda, Md., who recently vacationed at Squaw. A chief technology officer for a research company, he needed to fix a major payroll crisis while he was away. Young made his connection sitting at a table on the plaza at night, all bundled up. "People didn't even want to ask what I was doing. They probably figured I was just some hard-core geek."

To log on, users choose Exwire's network in their Wi-Fi-enabled device and then launch their Web browser. Instructions then guide them through the payment process. Rates run \$2.50 per

hour, \$8 per day, \$23 per week or \$29 per month.

Starting in February, Exwire will begin testing additional applications at Squaw Valley that will allow skiers (such as parents with skiing children) carrying PDAs to check others' locations at the resort, get real-time ski area information (such as lifts reporting short lines) or receive store and restaurant discounts. Future plans call for starting a rental program for PDAs and expanding Wi-Fi service to the entire mountain.

"In the past, you couldn't stay in touch easily if you were out skiing," Koch said. "Now with the Internet on the mountain, you don't have to go home (to your hotel room or condo) at lunch or worry about being reliably connected to the office. It's freeing - people can do whatever they need to, wherever they need to."

So freeing that one Wi-Fi user declined to be interviewed for this article. "I don't particularly want to advertise that at times I work from a ski area," he said.

Caption: GGING ON: A skier accesses the Internet on her laptop computer while riding a chairlift at Squaw Valley USA in California. The resort's system also supports PDAs and cellphones. Herald photo by Peter Schroeder

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People: Mostes, Justin
Companies: Squaw Valley USA
Section: *TRAVEL*
ISSN/ISBN: 07385854
Text Word Count 612