

TRAVEL

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PAGE 13

The high price of staying connected

Free in-room Internet access was picked as the most desired guest-room amenity in a survey of moneyed travelers in the US, yet the hotels that still require payment for the service are overwhelmingly at the high end

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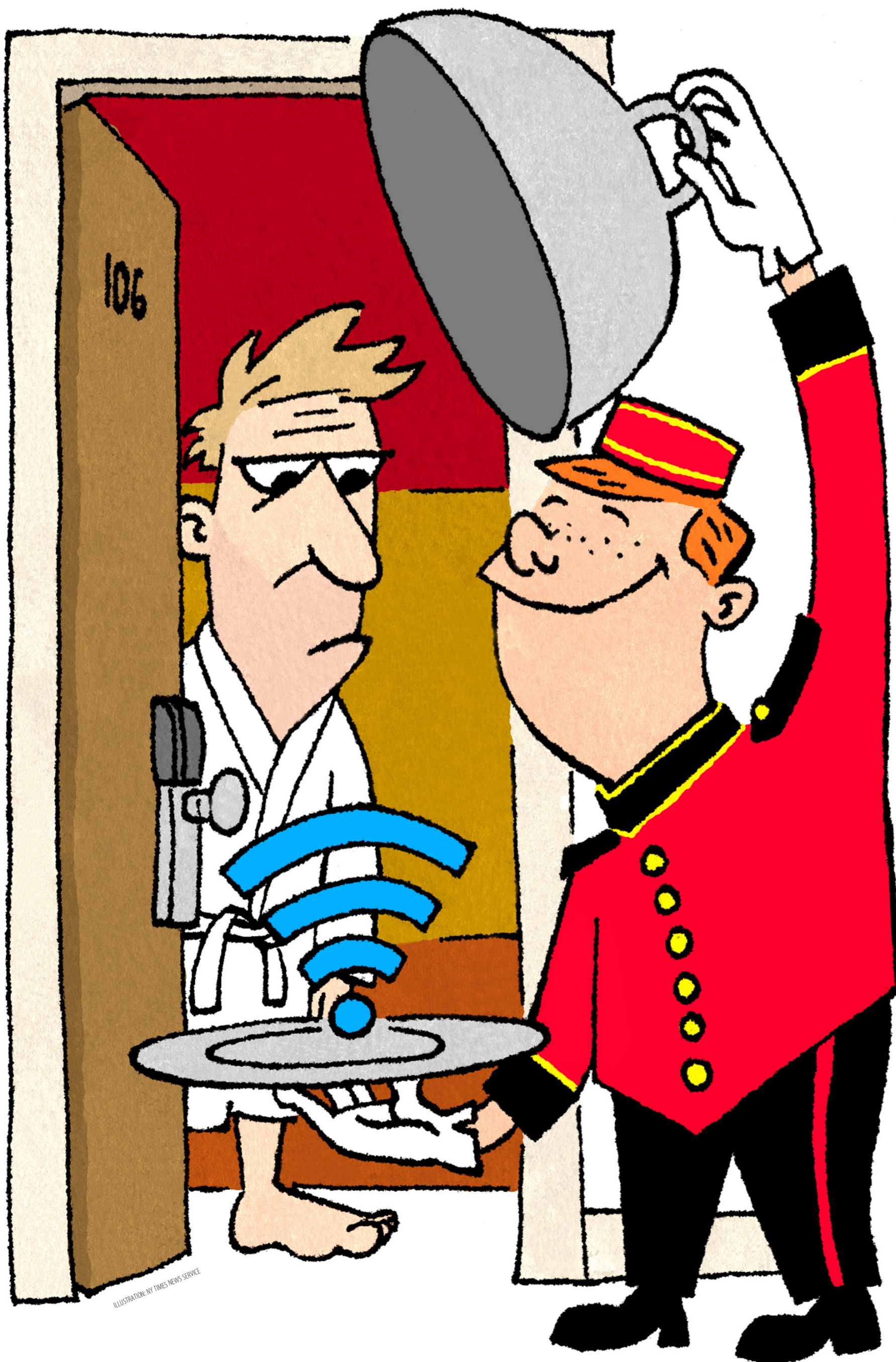


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Wireless Internet access is no longer a rarefied luxury. It's free in cafes, parks, fast-food chains, campgrounds and gas stations — yes, gas stations.

Yet in some places travelers still must pay for Wi-Fi access, and perhaps nowhere is that more disturbing than in an upscale hotel room.

While many budget and midscale hotel chains have largely given up on charging guests for Wi-Fi, fees persist at more luxurious sister hotels — typically about US\$9.95 to US\$19.95 a day.

Wi-Fi is free, for example, for travelers staying at Starwood's Aloft. At Starwood's W Hotels, the service costs roughly US\$12.95 to US\$16.95 for 24 hours. This disparity has long perplexed travelers. But in this economy, with expense accounts drying up and vacationers increasingly looking for deals, having to pay to use the Internet at your hotel seems increasingly absurd.

"As far as I am concerned, it is one of the most annoying of hotel charges," said Randall Stempler, a lawyer in New York who travels often on business. The fee is "exorbitant," he added, considering the time he usually spends logged in to check e-mail or go online. "It should just be built into the rate, like electricity."

Many guests agree. Free in-room Internet access ranked as the most desired guest-room amenity in a national survey of 800 affluent travelers conducted in August by Ypartnership, a travel-marketing firm in Orlando, Florida. That was above premium bedding and flat-screen TVs. A January survey of 6,300 people across 10 countries by the research firm Synovate found that 47 percent of respondents said a hotel must cater to their technology needs before they book it, with wireless access a top priority.

"We are finding that it is now no longer an added feature to have wireless Internet in hotels, but rather it is expected," Sheri Lambert, a Synovate senior vice president for travel and leisure research, said in a statement. "Travelers, whether for business or leisure, need to be connected."

Budget hotels, which have been offering free Wi-Fi for some time, are increasingly calling attention to the service as a way to stand out from more expensive hotels as travelers look for bargains in the recession.

Starwood's new extended-stay brand, Element, has been highlighting its free Wi-Fi in local advertising campaigns for recently opened hotels in Las Vegas and Lexington, Massachusetts. Homewood Suites by Hilton is running an advertisement that lists "all the little extras that would otherwise eat into your expenses," starting with high-speed Internet access.

Recognizing the resentment, a few upscale hotels have begun to drop Internet charges — at least for some of their guests.

Hyatt announced last month that it would waive the charge for in-room Internet access for members of its loyalty program at platinum and diamond levels. In March, the luxury Liberty Hotel in Boston did away with the US\$10.99 fee it had been charging for Internet access and began offering free Wi-Fi throughout the hotel.

Some hotels, however, have taken the opposite direction. Thompson Hotels, a small group of boutique hotels that used to boast about free Wi-Fi, started charging US\$10 per 24-hour period earlier this year. "As rates of all of the hotels have decreased," said Jennifer Walters, a publicist for the hotel group, "certain services that don't affect all guests had to be altered — one such item being Wi-Fi. Not all guests use it, so to include it complimentary in the rate no longer makes sense with the consumer wanting the most attractive rates."

Yet on the whole, more hotels do seem to be moving away from the fees. Overall, 15 percent of hotels in the US charge for Internet service in a guest room, down from 22 percent in 2004, according to a survey last year by the American Hotel and Lodging Association. Those that still require payment for the service are overwhelmingly at the high end: 49 percent of luxury or upscale hotels charge for in-room Internet service, compared with just 16 percent of economy or budget properties. Only 5 percent of midprice hotels require payment.

Some major chains that charge for Internet service in guest rooms have been offering free Wi-Fi in lobbies, but travelers say it's not the same.

"Everyone has to line up in the computer room, and the hotel lobby becomes an Internet cafe, which is rather unappealing," Kevin Leibel, president of a brand strategy company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, wrote in an e-mail message from the business center at the Westin Palace in Madrid, Spain, while on vacation. For in-room Internet, that hotel charges about US\$24 for 24 hours, but users are allowed 30 minutes at a time free in the business center.

So why do many upscale hotels continue to charge for Internet access while more affordable brands do not? The guest bending over a keyboard could be forgiven some impatience at hearing one explanation: the role of hotels' legal agreements on branding.

"In the management contract scenario, the brands would like to maximize revenue because all of that is subject to base management fees," said Bjorn Hanson, an associate professor at the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University. When the ownership is through a franchise, as is typical with less expensive hotels, the hotel brands "let the owners pay for installation and providing the service."

Hotels say Internet charges are driven by what the market will bear. Because travelers have been willing to pay extra at high-end properties, those hotels continue to charge. But that doesn't much change the experience for travelers who have paid for in-room Internet service at a Hilton, for example, but received it for free at a Hilton Garden Inn.

"That's the big disconnect" said Juliana Shallcross, senior editor at HotelChatter.com, where hotel Wi-Fi has become a frequent topic. HotelChatter issues an annual Wi-Fi report detailing hotel policies across various brands. This year, the report focused not just on which hotels were charging and which weren't, but also on reliability.

"What brings out the most ire," Shallcross said, is finding that not only is there a fee for the Internet connection, but also that "it's not working." She recently paid US\$14.99 for in-room Internet at the Mirage in Las Vegas. First she tried using the wireless option, but the connection was "so terrible," she said in a post on HotelChatter, that she tried using the Ethernet cable she found in a drawer. Still no luck.

"After trying for about an hour to send an e-mail," she wrote, "we got on the horn with the technician, who said the modem looked zapped and that a technician would arrive to fix it. We waited for 45 minutes, and no one came. At 11:30 at night, we decided we could not afford to wait for someone to come, as we needed to be up and working by 5:30am. We called the front desk and asked for a different room."

At checkout, the Mirage removed the Internet charge from her bill.