

Surf city's wireless wave

Free internet access is readily available in Athens, with potentially hundreds of more hotspots coming soon to the rest of Greece

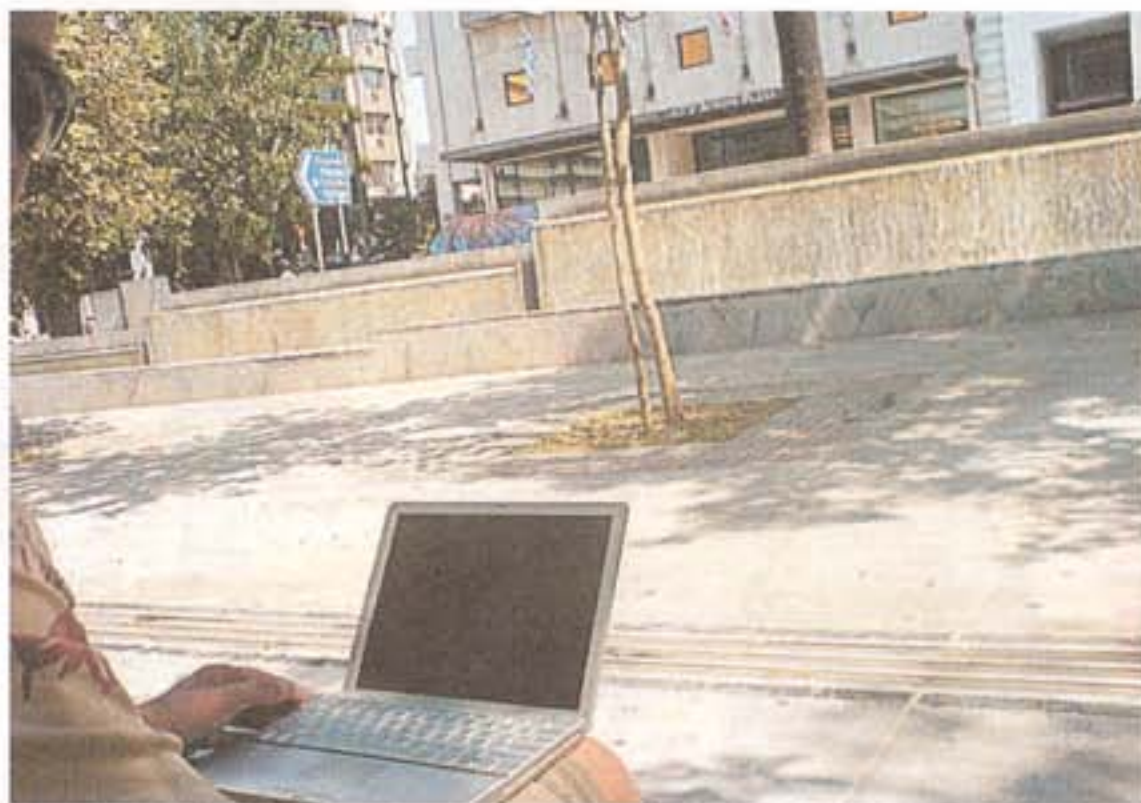
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BILJANA from Skopje kept the blog entry short.

"Chilly Sunday morning at Syntagma," Biljana blogged. "After an early morning jog, a no-sugar latte macchiato ... nice way to start the end of this weekend ... Hugs and kiss(inger) from Wi-Fi Syntagma!"

Anybody with any sense of perception walking through Syntagma Square has seen plenty of Biljanas. They're the ones sitting on the park benches staring into opened laptops, checking email or uploading their latest, sometimes obscure, updates from Athens onto the web.

It turns out that Biljana is one of almost 42,000 internet users who have availed themselves of the three free Wi-Fi hotspots in the Greek capital, clocking up a total of 175,000 connections and transferring 7.24 terabytes of data in the process.



One of the thousands of internet users browsing from Syntagma Square

Nectarios Koziris, the project's scientific coordinator, says about half of users are tourists, the remainder live in Greece.

Internet users outside Athens may soon see public-access Wi-Fi arrive in their areas. Before the end of the year, 160 hotspots are to be created in large

cities and towns, Koziris says. At a recent conference, Vassileos Asimakopoulos, special secretary for digital planning at the ministry of finance, pledged funds for an additional 300 hotspots across the country.

The northern city of Trikala already has a free Wi-Fi hotspot in operation.



Map of the Wi-Fi coverage of the Thiseio hotspot

Hot stuff

The Athens hotspots are the work of athenswifi (www.athenswifi.gr/en), the public high-speed wireless internet access network. Operations in Syntagma Square began in June 2006. Within its first year, more than 30,000 users had made over 120,000 connections through the network.

By October of the following year, the service had been extended to the general area of Thiseio, covering the metro station, the pedestrian walkway along Apostolos Pavlou Ave and Asomaton St, as well as in Kotzia Square, by city hall.

The free network is open to all and operates around the clock, seven days a week.

The project is funded by the special secretariat for digital planning of the finance ministry and has been run by the Institute of Communications and Computer Systems (ICCS) at the National Technical University of Athens.

Originally, the network was to remain operational until the end of 2008, a timeframe meant to familiarise users with wireless broadband.

However, Koziris says that the project is currently awaiting approval from the ministry of finance for an extension. Meantime, the free wireless network will continue "for the foreseeable future", he said, meaning until at least the end of the year.

Koziris added that "by the end of the summer" three new hotspots will be added to the athenswifi network: at Korai and Kolonaki squares, as well as the area around the Law School on Solonos St.

At present, there is also another free hotspot, not part of athenswifi, at the Hellenic Research Foundation on Vassileos Konstantinou Ave.

Asked whether the Wi-Fi network could someday blanket Athens, Koziris says this has failed when it has been attempted in other cities.

"We cannot compete with the reliability of fixed broadband networks," said the National Technical University of Greece professor, "so we see ourselves as offering a complimentary service, targeting specific public spaces such as squares where people congregate".

How to connect

ANYONE with a laptop or handheld computer (PDA) with wireless broadband capability can connect to the athenswifi wireless network.

Simply open up your computer in any of the three Wi-Fi areas and launch your browser. Try to load any page, such as Google's. The athenswifi homepage will appear. On it will be a number the user must type into a box and hit return to log on.

English speakers who do not read Greek will be pleased to find the opening page is bilingual.

The speed is fast. Each of the three Wi-Fi hotspots connects to the internet through a 4Mbps line, provided by OTEnet.

What does it cost?

Access to athenswifi and a number of other Wi-Fi points in Athens is free.

Wi-Fi itself, however, sometimes costs money. Some wireless networks, particularly in hotels, are for the use of guests only. However, many of the non-free networks are available to subscribers of international wireless communication services such as Boingo or iPass.

Access to pay-as-you-go Wi-Fi networks in Greece can be considerably more expensive than in other countries, as Mike Elgan, a US-based writer and blogger on computer issues, recently wrote on his blog.

Elgan found that the cost of accessing

Wi-Fi in Starbucks, Greece, is more than double that in the US.

"A 24-hour day pass for in-Starbucks access costs 10 dollars [13.30 euros] in the US, and \$22 [29.20] in Greece," Elgan wrote.

However, Elgan notes coffee competitor Flocafe does offer free Wi-Fi access.

The Digital Greece website (www.psiftakiellada.gr) contains a map showing the free Wi-Fi hotspots in Greece. Free and commercial Wi-Fi hotspots in Greece and abroad may be found through websites such as JiWire Wi-Fi finder (v4.jiwire.com/search-hotspot-locations.htm) and *Free-hotspot.com*.