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Much has been discussed in the past about [the 'global network'](#) that tourism officials need to increasingly consider. Whether it is app-based concierge services, real-time information, mobile bookings or digital suitcases, we have truly become a generation defined by its ability to connect to the masses within a few seconds with the swipe of a smartphone screen.

And as tourists continue to check themselves in at locations, upload memories on social media platforms and give instantaneous feedback to hoteliers, the demand has dramatically risen for Wi-Fi accessibility; so much so that it is now seen as a necessity rather than an additional feature. But as the debate continues to roar on about whether holidays should be a chance to escape our digital lives or not, investment in wireless technology continues to thrive, and with consumer demand being more of an expectation than anything, the future is bright.

Australian accessibility

To look at this further, we need to shift our gaze towards Australia. The latest International Visitor Survey carried out by Tourism Research Australia (the year ended June 2014) has highlighted that tourists coming to the region are demanding free Wi-Fi not just to tap into what is going on back home but more to discover new destinations and attractions. In total, 4.8 million foreign travellers accessed the internet during their trip to Australia, a rise of 13 per cent from the year before, and while this may not seem like many people, it is actually 78 per cent of all international arrivals over the 12 months.

Dissecting the data further, it has emerged that access to the web was mostly made from smartphones (risen by 43 per cent to 3.3 million), while iPads came in at second (up 34 per cent to 1.2 million) - if anything, the use of laptops and netbooks actually fell by three per cent, while getting online through a PC at accommodation plummeted by 23 per cent to just 753,000.

It is obvious that people are wanting to log in when on the move. But why? Well, this really depends on what it is they want to do once they connect. A staggering 83 per cent were using the net to obtain maps to get around, 44 per cent found information guides for attractions, 37 per cent looked for restaurant guides and 16 per cent searched for language translations. Surprisingly, only 53 per cent were using the internet to share experiences on social media, pointing to the fact that Wi-Fi accessibility is more than just offering visitors the chance to get onto Facebook, it is all part of the wider customer experience.

The user experience

It is therefore not surprising that online service Hotel Wi-Fi Test has teamed up with the likes of Expedia and TripAdvisor to give customers the chance to see a property's internet speed before they book their accommodation. The service measures the quality and speed of the connections, with much of the data coming from tests done by the hotels themselves. Interestingly, wired connections won't be accepted as the demand for Wi-Fi has risen so much over the past decade.

Speaking to OZY, Hotel Wi-Fi Test's president Yaroslav Goncharov said: "Some hotels with poor Wi-Fi are really angry. Hotels that provide good Wi-Fi are happy that now results of their investment to the network infrastructure is visible to travellers looking for accommodation."

An issue of economics

It goes beyond just customer satisfaction, however - it is an economic issue. While data costs can be high, business models have sprung up across less developed markets, such as Project Isizwe in South Africa that aims to bring free Wi-Fi to the country, and they are developing public-private partnerships to bring costs down. Project Isizwe, which has established hotspots in Pretoria, Atlantis and Robertson, hopes to give the whole province affordable broadband access by 2030.

The maths behind this only fuels the need for broadband further. Experts are keen to compare free Wi-Fi to even the road network, and with research from mobile brand Ericsson suggesting that for every ten per cent rise in the number of people online a country's GDP can grow by one per cent, this goes beyond just disgruntled travellers. And then there is the lengthier periods of time that people will spend in public spaces, restaurants and hotels due to Wi-Fi access, and therefore their potential spending power. All of this results in limitless opportunities in increasing tourism revenues for regional economies.

It's a fact: we now live in a digital world. Whether we are learning about art festivals on apps, downloading food recipes, posting pictures of monuments on Twitter or asking for tips on WhatsApp, the internet has become intertwined and ingrained within the tourist experience - it is no longer additional but essential, and businesses lagging behind are at risk of facing the

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consequences. The future is bright, the future is connected.

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