CHINESE AIRLINES BEGIN TO INSTALL WI-FI BEYOND TRIAL BASIS

News / Airlines



As airlines based in the United States are wrapping up their inflight Wi-Fi rollouts – and eyeing nextgen upgrades – and many European airlines have finally decided on equipage plans, there's one massive country with a booming aviation industry that remains largely disconnected. Connectivity in China is complicated, and those complications extend all the way up to 36,000 feet.

We are now starting to see a few Chinese airlines install inflight Wi-Fi beyond just a trial basis. China Eastern recently launched Wi-Fi service on its fleet of new Boeing 777-300ERs and select Airbus A330s and heavily markets the feature in its promotional materials. But just how well does it work, and how easy is it to use? The short answers are not very well, and not at all.

China has strict rules relating to Internet use, and must know exactly who is accessing what. On a recent China Eastern flight, I was determined to figure out how to use this system, and if it is reasonable for a normal passenger to figure out. To use the inflight Wi-Fi, passengers must register on China Eastern's site beforehand, which is far from an easy task.

Instructions on how to register are complicated, contradictory, incomplete, and partially in Chinese. Before you can even register for Wi-Fi access, you must join China Eastern's frequent flyer program, Eastern Miles.

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Domestic flights	Opened (Part)	Shanghai-Kunming-Shanghai	FM9451/FM9452
		Shanghai-Sanya-Shanghai	MU591/MU592
		Shanghai-Chongqing-Shanghai	FM9423/FM9424
		Shanghai-Guangzhou-Shanghai	FM9301/FM9306 Every Tues.Fri.Sun.
			FM9313/FM9314
		Shanghai-Xi'an-Shanghai	MU5009/MU5010 Every Tues.
		Beijing-Guangzhou-Beijing	MU5181/MU5182
		Beijing-Shanghai-Beijing	MU5104/MU5111
			MU5120/MU5159
		Beijing-Hangzhou-Beijing	MU5147/MU5148
International flights	Opened	Shanghai-New York-Shanghai	Full list
		Shanghai-Los Angeles-Shanghai	Full list
		Shanghai-San Francisco-Shanghai	(Part)
		Shanghai-Toronto-Shanghai	Full list
	In plan	Shanghai-Chicago-Shanghai	From Mar 18
		Shanghai-Vancouver-Shanghai	TBD

Naturally, that is even more complicated than signing up for Wi-Fi. It took several days and a whole lot of Google Translate for me to complete the process, which results in a one-time use code (emailed in Chinese, of course) for use in-flight. Information such as name, flight number, and even passport number were recorded. China Eastern says this registration is limited to 50 passengers per flight, though I doubt even half that amount figure out this process.

Once in-flight, accessing the web should be as simple as entering your name, promo code, and last four digits of your passport number. However, that doesn't work if your flight crew enters the wrong flight number into the system. The crew had input 288 as the flight number instead of 289, so my registration never authenticated. Even though the crew corrected the flight number, the Wi-Fi portal never updated. The crew attempted to generate me new Wi-Fi codes, but that did not work either. There goes 15 hours of connectivity because of a single digit mistake.

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