

## Almost here: Cell phones at 37,000 feet

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"Did you get it?" I whispered to the guy on 43rd Street. "Mruzzichwatzlbzft," he replied. "I can't hear a word you're saying," I said. "I'll call you right back."

I was at 37,000 feet, somewhere over Wyoming, desperate to reach my editor, having dispatched a column from a shaky Internet connection in an airport lounge just before running to board a plane.

I tried again, sliding my credit card through a slot on the seat-back airplane telephone, a gizmo approaching the size of the walkie-talkies they hauled onto Omaha Beach in 1944. This time I got voice mail.

"I'll call you back in 15 minutes," I muttered.

Charges so far: \$18. Yield: An earful of static and a two-second voice mail message, perhaps garbled.

Meanwhile, alarmed that a cell phone lout was working up a head of steam and getting ready to start braying, people in the seats around me tensed visibly when I fumbled to make my third call. This time I got through long enough to learn that the column had arrived. A fourth call, no more than a minute long, followed in a little while.

Grand total in credit card charges to achieve all of this: \$45. No wonder you never see anyone using those in-seat phones on airplanes.

Still, for those who need to make telephone calls in flight and don't want to sell the second car to finance them, help is on the way. But for those who dread the day when airplanes become like trains, with cell-phone idiots prattling away at game-show-host decibels, misery may be right behind.

After years of uncertainty based mostly on fears that in-flight cell-phone use might interfere with electronic navigational systems on airplanes, but partly on concerns about the demands wide-ranging airborne cell-phone calls would place on multiple land-based systems, the kinks are being slowly worked out. The airplane and the personal cell phone are about to link up.

"It doesn't look like there's any way we can stop it," said John Bergan, an urban planner from Pawling, N.Y., who has done studies on noise pollution.

The clearest indication yet that cell phones and airplanes are getting into sync came in mid-September, when Airbus, the European aircraft manufacturing consortium, announced the completion of an in-flight trial of an onboard personal cell-phone system.

The trial, which Airbus said was a "major milestone" on the road to general cell-phone use on airplanes, took place over France, aboard an Airbus A-320. Airbus said the system, which relays signals from a picocell unit on the plane to a Globalstar satellite for distribution to ground-based GSM networks, will be ready for installation on commercial aircraft in early 2006.

In the United States, in-seat phones are in their last stage before aircraft become widely adapted for all sorts of new consumer electronics applications, including broadband Internet service, instant messaging, and, yes, cell phones, industry experts say.

William E. Pallone, the president of Verizon Airfone Inc., concedes that those seat-back Airfones are falling out of favor quickly as travelers become more accustomed to fancy technology on the ground. "At one time, at prices comparable to where we are today, we had as many as 15 users per aircraft, six or seven times as much usage as we have today," he said, suggesting that seat-back phones have become like airport pay phones: useful when you really need them.

As personal cell-phone use ultimately spreads in the air, are we doomed to captivity beside a guy loudly discussing his business and social itinerary for the coming fiscal quarter?

"I think cell phones on planes are a great idea, long past due," said Michael Sommer, a technology consultant from Jacksonville, who flies 175,000 to 200,000 miles on business a year.

But a social contract is in order, he said. "You make your calls short, sweet, and to the point," he said. "You don't chit-chat up there with a captive audience." Otherwise, he said, "the airlines are going to need to designate quiet sections, like the quiet car they have on Amtrak for those who don't want to listen to cell phones."

Don't get your hopes up on that point, said Bergan, the urban planner with an interest in noise abatement, who thinks the questions to be addressed include cell-phone volume, not just cell-phone etiquette. He is especially worried about the popularity of new walkie-talkie speaker-cell phones that put out beeps and other sounds that can be heard literally a block away. Manufacturers claim that the devices are made to specifications that allow them to be heard on construction sites.

"A quiet section on an airplane won't solve the problem of a cell phone that puts out beeps that can be heard on a construction site," he said.