

Broadband internet for globe-trotters

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I "discovered" mobile data on the Eurostar high-speed train speeding between London and Paris soon after the service was launched in November 1994.

Using a then brand-new GSM-based Motorola StarTac mobile phone and a 9600 baud (bits per second) data card that plugged into my rather weighty Dell Latitude notebook, I was able to set up a data call and then watch excitedly as my copy trickled off the page and into the ether.

In spite of its snail-like progress it was, for me, a eureka moment and I have never looked back. These days I travel with two data cards, a SonyEricsson GSM/GPRS (general system of mobiles/general packet radio system) card for use mostly in Europe and a Novatel V620 EV-DO card for use on Verizon's 3G CDMA 1xRTT EV-DO network in the US.

Why two cards? Well the SonyEricsson card gives me coverage in Europe and other places dominated by GSM-based networks while the recently acquired Novatel card gives me the fastest data connection currently available in the US - up to about 1.5Mbps (Megabits per second) but typically around 500Kbps.

I have found another use for the EV-DO card. Used in conjunction with a clever little box from Seattle-based Junxion (www.junxion.com), the card provides home or office users with a wireless gateway to the internet. The EV-DO card plugs into the Junxion wireless router - a device that directs data "packets" around a network - to offer an alternative broadband Web connection.

The Junxion also works with GSM-based data cards but is for the moment only available in the US, though Junxion has plans to expand distribution elsewhere soon.

While the availability of third-generation GSM and CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) PC data cards has made connecting on the road much easier, such flexibility comes at a price. On top of my regular phone bill I pay \$80 (£43) a month for Verizon's "all-you-can-eat" data service.

Now, however, Sony (www.sony.com) has come up with an interesting alternative. This week the Japanese electronics giant unveiled a new model in its Vaio line of ultra-portable notebook PCs.

Building on its experience with SonyEricsson data cards, the Sony Vaio VGN-T350P, which costs \$2,300 in the US from Sony direct, claims to be the first notebook PC to integrate a 3G Edge wide-area network radio chip that works with Cingular, the largest US mobile network operator, and European GSM/GPRS/Edge networks.

The Cingular Connection Manager, a software program that is bundled with the machine in the US, will manage all of the Vaio's wireless connections, and, like its PC card counterpart, is very easy to use. The software handles not only any available Edge connection, but also the Vaio's built-in Wi-Fi wireless local area networking and Bluetooth capabilities.

Unfortunately the software does not automatically switch between types of network connection - this still has to be done manually.

While Edge-based networks cannot match EV-DO or HSDPA (high-speed data packet access) for sheer speed, the technology does deliver theoretical speeds of up to 256Kbps and typical speeds in the 120Kbps to 160Kbps range. The Sony Vaio Edge technology should deliver similar or better performance given its large built-in antenna.

Perhaps more importantly for international travellers, the Sony machine provides wide area network access virtually anywhere there is a GSM network. Effectively, therefore, it provides near-worldwide mobile data access without the need to carry a separate data card.

Activating Edge will cost \$79 a month for the subscription service, with a 30-day trial period. (The same subscription price would apply if you bought a PC card.) Of course, users can still plug a higher speed EV-DO PC card into the Vaio if an EV-DO network is available, or hook up to a Wi-Fi "hotspot" or office connection.

The new Sony Vaio is an elegant solution to a real need for globe-trotting business travellers. It provides the ability to check e-mail, tap into corporate applications And access the internet from virtually anywhere without the need for extra data cards, wires and connectors