

No more network guesswork

Getting connected across multiple networks will be easier with NetRoam, writes **KHNG EU MENG**

Wi-Fi roaming between Hong Kong and Singapore was launched early this month, thanks to Singapore's NetPower International.

And by the end of this month, Wi-fi users can also roam in Malaysia and the Philippines. The service in China is expected to follow later this year.

Employing its NetRoam, a global roaming and clearinghouse technology, NetPower allows subscribers to roam with their Wi-Fi-enabled laptops and PDAs across member networks in the Asia-Pacific region.

This means jetsetting professionals can connect to any network without having to buy local pre-paid Wi-Fi cards and wonder where they can be used.

Current customers of NetRoam include:

- Maxis of Malaysia,
- PLDT's Airborne Access and Globe Telecom of the Philippines,
- Y5 Zone and BeeNet of Hong Kong,
- Biznet of Indonesia,
- China's Great Wall Broadband Network Service and
- iCell and Blue Engine of Singapore.

They all own hot spots (locations where a wireless local area network is publicly accessible).

Mr Alan J Matthews, 56, NetPower's chief executive officer, said that the company will be "adding more countries to the list", given users' increasing mobility.

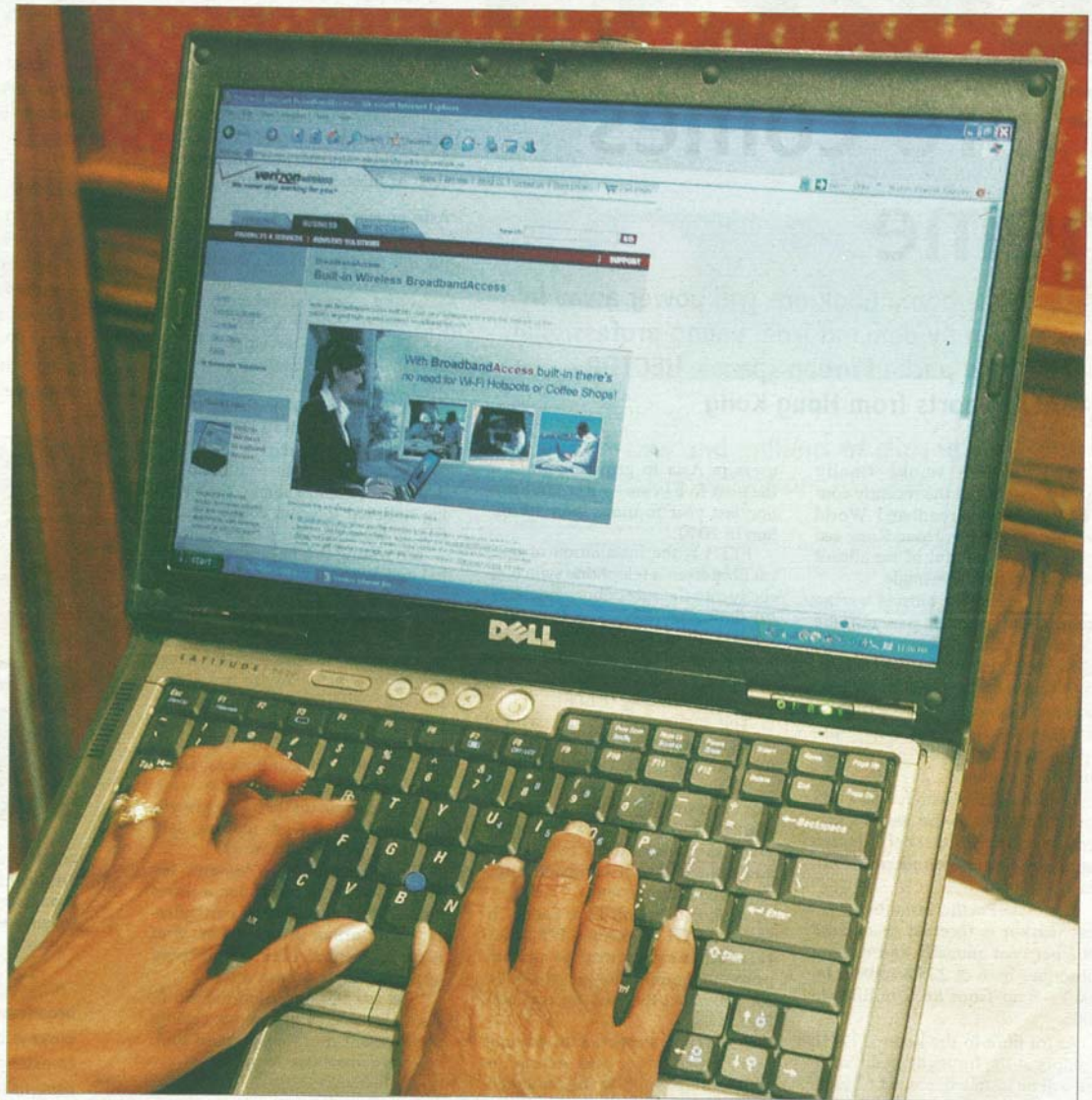
"The many new mobile devices cry out for true mobility. And that's where we come in," he said.

Another attraction of NetRoam is that end users will receive only one consolidated bill from their home-based service provider.

"With NetRoam, there's no need to sign up with local service providers or buy specific pre-paid connection cards, which also removes the guesswork on whether the cards can be used," added Mr Leonard Chong, 43, NetPower International's chief operating officer.

While Wi-Fi roaming is also available via the Wireless Broadband Alliance (WBA), NetPower considers itself different in that it is totally agnostic.

"Just like Visa Card, which is offered by various banking and financial institutions, we are in the back end business and we do the clearing for the service



Users of NetRoam will receive only one consolidated bill from their home-based service provider. PHOTO: AP

providers who have signed up," said Mr Chong. "The WBA can do this but they aren't because service providers don't like working with their local rivals in the same organisation," he added.

The NetRoam technology is able to provide "vertical" roaming across many types of infrastructure — not just Wi-Fi but also emerging technologies (Wi-Max 802.16, 802.1x). It is also capable of global voice roaming (VoIP).

NetRoam supports Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption between the mobile device and the Internet.

At any member location, end users can use their username and password as provided by their home-based service

provider to roam across member networks.

The end user can select a pay-as-you-go billing mode for his roaming session or choose to receive a consolidated monthly bill from the service provider.

"There is no additional software required and no need for any reconfiguration of e-mail client to allow end-users to connect back to the office network or to any network," said Mr Chong.

NetPower plans to offer a pre-paid system under which it will sell pre-paid cards that can be used at any NetRoam location.

"The cards will be sold in Singapore

dollars and the monetary value will be converted to the local currency (when used abroad) for local usage," Mr Chong said.

NetPower International, set up early last year, counts the Economic Development Board among its investors, and is currently rolling out what is possibly China's largest network of wireless broadband hot spots.

The US\$150 million (S\$240 million) project for one of China's biggest telcos, Great Wall Broadband Network Service, will cover 4,000 locations across China's six biggest cities.

Khng Eu Meng is a freelance writer