

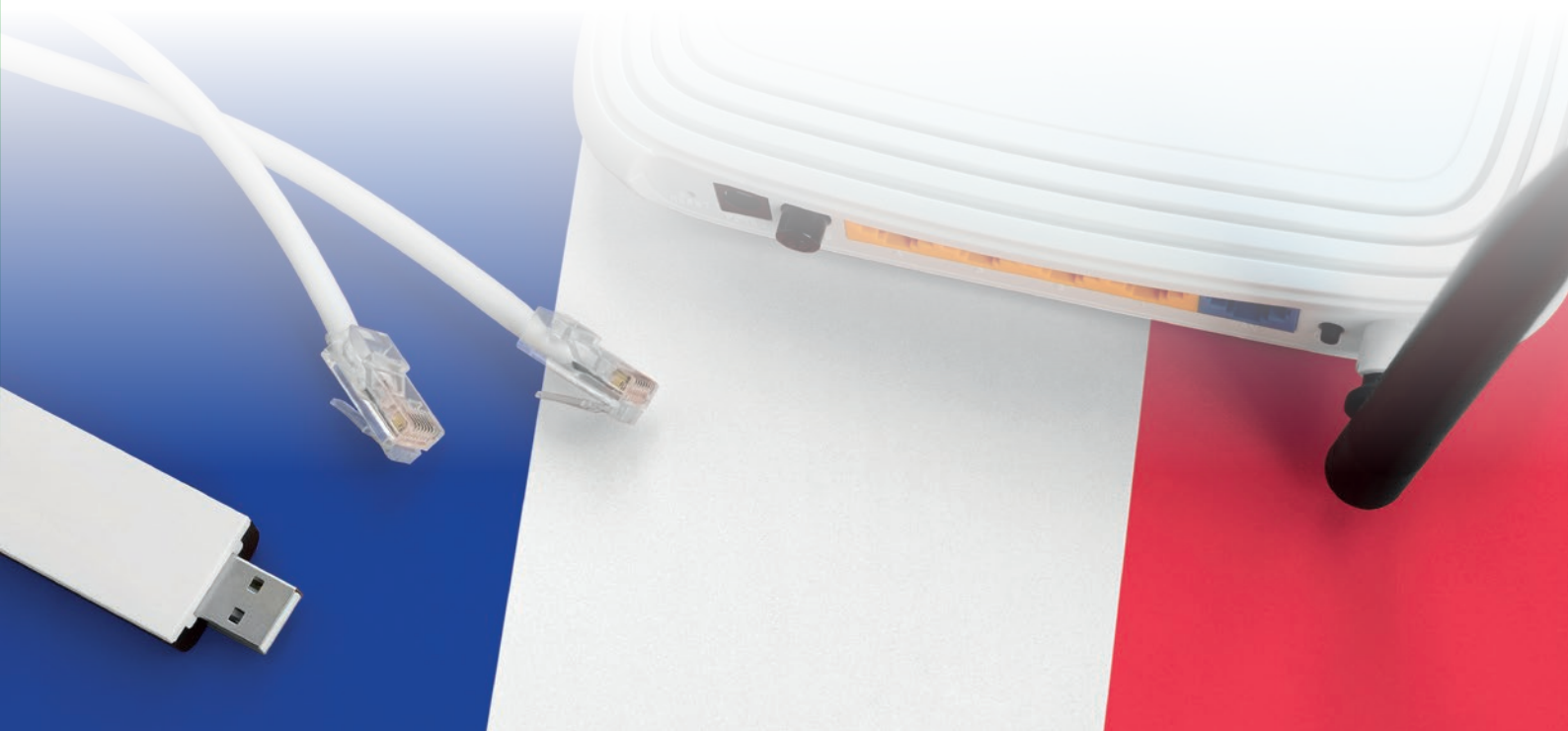
Où est l'Internet, S'IL VOUS PLAÎT?

BY CHRIS KEEPING, WRITER AND EDITOR



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ONE THING WE ALL TAKE FOR GRANTED IN 2024 IS HAVING ACCESS TO THE INTERNET WHEREVER WE GO. ISPS FREQUENTLY BOAST ABOUT THEIR 90% NATIONAL COVERAGE, SO AS A CONSUMER IT IS NATURAL TO ASSUME YOUR CONNECTIVITY WILL CONTINUE WHEREVER YOU LAY YOUR HAT.



When you're staying in the French Alps all winter, the very least you expect is decent snow, a hearty tartiflette, cheap wine, a roaring fire and a half-decent broadband connection.

As I have recently discovered, these aren't all possible.

Just before Christmas, I made my annual pilgrimage to Châtel in Haute Savoie and found a great pad in the centre of town. With views to die for and close to work and nightlife, it was perfect. The last thing I asked the owner of my apartment was whether the place had Internet access.

"Er... non. Not at ze moment."

It was mid-October when I asked the owners to look into it. By the time I arrived on 10th December, Orange Fr still hadn't made the 'treacherous' 20-mile journey up the hill and they seemed in no particular hurry.

Through Christmas and New Year, I used my iPhone to tether my Mac via UK Vodafone for all/some of my internet needs. One thing you aren't told when you are on an "unlimited data" deal with any network in the UK is the small print that actually only allows you 25 GB per month of "fair usage" whilst in Europe.

"Fair usage", I learned was an agreement between the major network providers in Europe to limit the amount of data available to foreign consumers. Something about hoovering up all the data for the locals, which is fair. The font size of this fairly pivotal intel on any ISP website however is miniscule, almost illegible in fact.

Watching a few frames of snooker one snowy evening, I'd consumed my so-called 'unlimited data' allowance. I called up Vodafone but was informed I wasn't even able to buy any more data. EU regulations won't allow any more, however much you're willing to spend.

I now had no phone. I considered my options.

1. WhatsApp didn't work unless I was in a WiFi area. Little use when you're running guests to and from the slopes in a ski resort and need to be in comms throughout the day, even when walking the dog 2000m up the hill.
2. Orange Fr advised their technician might make it to Châtel to connect me on 2nd of January. I could hold on until then but that didn't solve my immediate need for mobile communication.

3. Vodafone's pay-as-you-go deal ensures you can only buy data abroad in extortionate 8-day increments (a post-Brexit initiative). I could get a better deal if I committed to a monthly package, but for reasons I still don't understand it involved sending me another SIM card.

As I lay there in silence one Sunday morning wishing I had at least the wireless to listen to, I was struck by a lightbulb moment Archimedes would have been proud of. I walked down to the Tabac to buy a French SIM card. Within minutes I had a phone and data. Eureka indeed.

I loaded up the phone with credit and settled back home to see if I could even listen to one of Steve Wright's last Sunday Love Songs. It worked! I almost felt an ancient Greek hand pat me on the back.

Whilst watching the final session of the snooker on Sunday night I ran out of data. I soon found myself in a sort of Gallic, cyclical hellscape; Orange Fr won't allow you to use their app when you run out of data as you've run out of data. They won't let you call them because you've run out of credit.



I then heard of a 4G router from SFR. It's what they used to call a dongle a few years ago. A simple device that you put a SIM card in loaded with data credit. Picks up a signal from the nearest 4G masts. Then connect as you would do a WiFi box. In theory, you could then stream movies and sports and do anything you require the internet for. You only buy data - no calls or SMS so the packages are reasonable. Within five minutes I was sorted. I could even use a smart speaker for the first time in seven weeks. Remarkable.

When I say I had Internet, it was good enough to use the computer but it wasn't strong or fast enough to scroll through a social media reel let alone stream a movie or surf the net.

Whingeing about this incessantly to whoever would listen, eventually I heard about Starlink. During the tranquillity and tedium of lockdown, we all marvelled at the trail of satellites crossing the clear night sky wondering what Elon Musk had in store for them and indeed us. Now I knew.

Starlink is a pretty impressive piece of kit that essentially delivers high-speed internet wherever you may be. It's very simple to set up too; just plug the router in, run the cable and dish outside to a clear area with as much sky available as you can, download the app and away you go. Honestly, no more than a 15-minute job.

Initially designed for use in rural areas, it has a clever square dish (remember the Squarial?) that moves itself to collect as much data from as many satellites as possible. Delivering impressive speeds of between 100-200mbps, the tech has gone from strength to strength and, according to a recent article in PCMag by Brian Westover, *"Now, with improvements to upload speed and reduced latency, the day-to-day experience of Starlink satellite internet is just that much better, speeding up the slowest aspects of internet use and giving you a faster, more responsive experience, whether you're browsing, streaming, chatting or gaming."*

Like a kid at Christmas, I joyfully unpacked the impressive Apple-esque packaging and ran out to the balcony to set up decent internet for the first time in two months.

Apartment blocks in the Alps are designed to prevent snow falling on the deck. They therefore tend to have a huge overhang. Starlink satellite dishes are awfully clever but they need to see most of, if not all, the entire sky. Sadly my new toy couldn't see enough sky to achieve more than a few Mb of download speed. It had to go.

Apart from simply bad luck, I can't think of any cons to having a Starlink system. The initial outlay is a little pricey (though half-price deals are being promoted aggressively online), the set-up is simple and the kit is pretty, cool and futuristic. Especially when it spins and tilts around searching for the best connection for you. Once you've bought the kit, you aren't tied to a contract either. You pay a monthly subscription you can cancel at any time. Radical.

I seemed to spend most of my free time this winter trying to find the Internet, dealing with French bureaucracy and testing my patience. It's been quite a journey but educational at the same time.

I'm now back in the UK where I haven't any internet either. I won't need it for long. My travails in sourcing a suitable and possibly temporary internet connection/solution here will be relayed soon, where I hope to compare and contrast the vagaries of French and British Internet access for your education and entertainment.

Stay tuned.

Chris Keeping is a travel writer and blogger based in Brighton.