



Into the Net

Has all the talk about the Internet made you yearn to join the surfers? We compare some popular Internet Service Providers to give you an idea of what to look out for in your quest to get connected

These days, you can't even walk down the street without seeing something to do with the Internet. Almost every part of our popular culture has been influenced by it, from feature films to soap operas, and there can't be a single magazine that doesn't mention the words 'World Wide Web' at least once a month. If all this media attention has made you desperate to get on the Internet, or if you just want to see what all the fuss is about, then you need four basic things – a computer, a modem, a telephone line and an ISP.

ISP stands for Internet Service Provider, and it's a company that provides you with a connection to

the Internet. Using an ISP is not the only way to get onto the Internet but for personal (rather than business) users, it's the cheapest and by far the simplest.

So what exactly does an ISP do? You may already know that the Internet isn't a single computer but thousands of separate ones all linked together (either directly or indirectly) to form a vast global network. To have access to the Internet you need to be a part of this network – you must have a 'gateway' onto the Internet.

You can spend several thousand pounds on computer hardware and dedicated high-speed telephone lines and maintain your own Internet gateway but unless you've recently come up trumps on

the National Lottery, it makes far more sense to use someone else's. This is where an ISP comes in. An ISP maintains its own Internet gateway with a 24-hour-a-day connection to the Internet. It also has hundreds of modems so that you can dial a telephone number from your PC, connect to the ISP's gateway and hence the Internet.

Unfortunately, maintaining an Internet gateway and racks of modems is an expensive business and ISPs don't do it out of the kindness of their hearts. Instead, you must subscribe to their service by paying a regular fee. Some ISPs also charge for time spent using the gateway but most provide at least a few hours free each month as part of the deal.

What is the Internet?

'Internet' is really a catch-all term that covers a variety of things. Most people who talk about the Internet really mean the 'World Wide Web' or WWW.

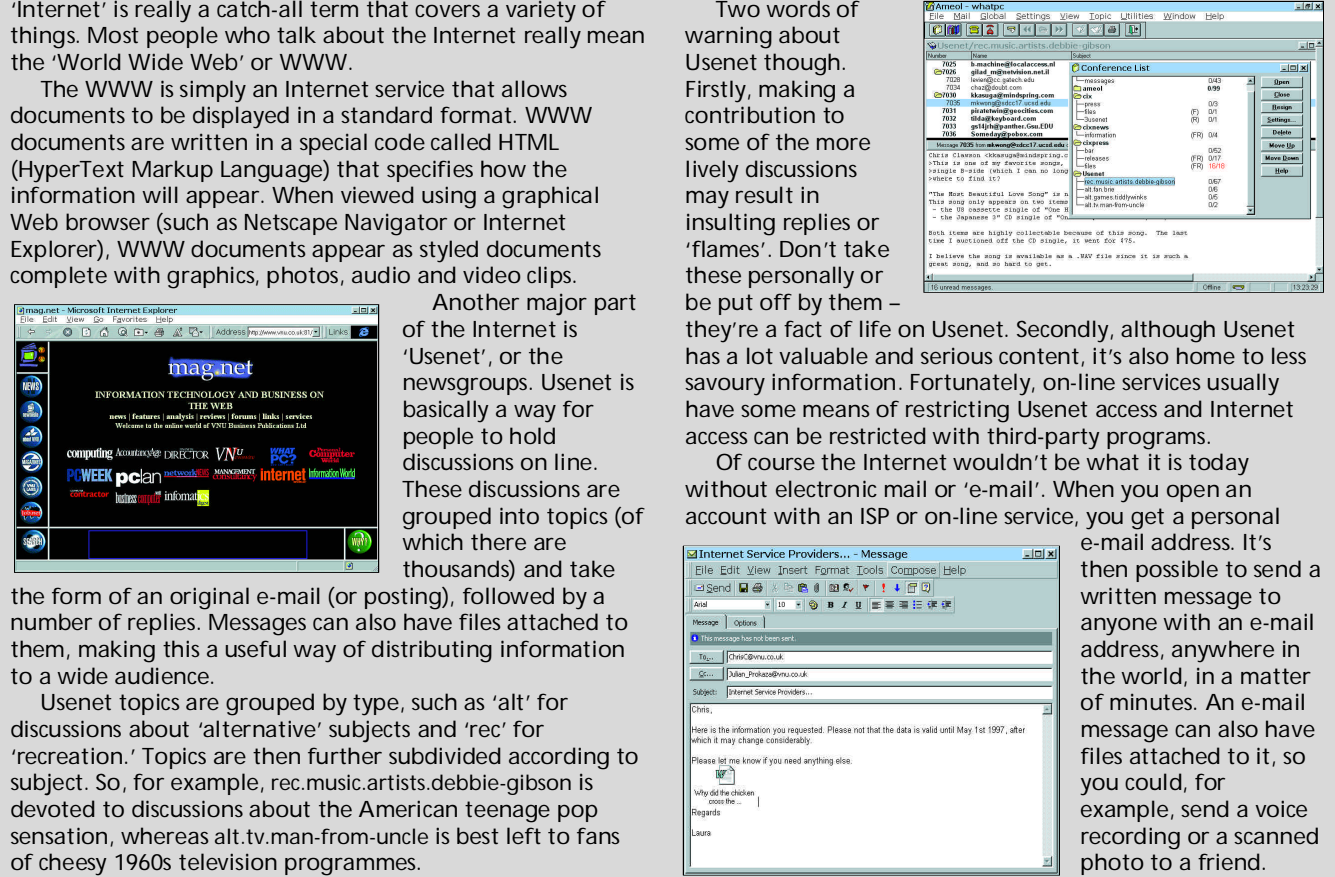
The WWW is simply an Internet service that allows documents to be displayed in a standard format. WWW documents are written in a special code called HTML (HyperText Markup Language) that specifies how the information will appear. When viewed using a graphical Web browser (such as Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer), WWW documents appear as styled documents complete with graphics, photos, audio and video clips.

Another major part of the Internet is 'Usenet', or the newsgroups. Usenet is basically a way for people to hold discussions on line. These discussions are grouped into topics (of which there are thousands) and take the form of an original e-mail (or posting), followed by a number of replies. Messages can also have files attached to them, making this a useful way of distributing information to a wide audience.

Usenet topics are grouped by type, such as 'alt' for discussions about 'alternative' subjects and 'rec' for 'recreation.' Topics are then further subdivided according to subject. So, for example, rec.music.artists.debbie-gibson is devoted to discussions about the American teenage pop sensation, whereas alt.tv.man-from-uncle is best left to fans of cheesy 1960s television programmes.

Two words of warning about Usenet though. Firstly, making a contribution to some of the more lively discussions may result in insulting replies or 'flames'. Don't take these personally or be put off by them – they're a fact of life on Usenet. Secondly, although Usenet has a lot valuable and serious content, it's also home to less savoury information. Fortunately, on-line services usually have some means of restricting Usenet access and Internet access can be restricted with third-party programs.

Of course the Internet wouldn't be what it is today without electronic mail or 'e-mail'. When you open an account with an ISP or on-line service, you get a personal e-mail address. It's then possible to send a written message to anyone with an e-mail address, anywhere in the world, in a matter of minutes. An e-mail message can also have files attached to it, so you could, for example, send a voice recording or a scanned photo to a friend.



AOL

AOL began in America (AOL stands for America Online) but it's now available in several countries. Like all on-line services, it has a content all of its own that is entirely separate from the Internet. Information is loosely grouped into channels (entertainment, finance, sport, learning, and so on) and is accessed using a proprietary and highly graphical interface.

Each AOL subscription provides up to five accounts, each with a unique e-mail address. The master account holder can set restrictions for the other four, preventing such things as on-line chat or Usenet access, so AOL is a good choice for family users. Unfortunately, you can't restrict access to Web sites.

The AOL software is 16-bit and uses a SLIP connection. For most purposes, this doesn't really matter but it does mean you can't use a 32-bit browser like Internet Explorer for Windows 95 (you can still use the 16-bit version, though). Fortunately, AOL's built-in browser can handle frames and tables and is perfectly usable until the 32-bit version of AOL is released later this year. Although the cheapest of the ISPs, extended use of AOL can soon make the monthly charges mount up. For family users though, its five accounts, access restrictions and broad content make it an attractive proposition.

AOL
Features
Value for money
Overall

○ AOL: 0800 279 1234
www.aol.com

CIX

CIX (or Compulink Information eXchange) started out as a European conferencing service where users could hold discussions and exchange files within a closed community. This is still the case but CIX now also includes full Internet access.

The conferencing side of CIX can still be accessed using a terminal emulation program but it's much simpler to use a program called Ameol. This is an off-line reader and it is used for composing e-mail, uploading and downloading files, and accessing both CIX conferences and Usenet – all without needing a CIX connection. This done, connections to CIX are automatic and swift, whereupon all the necessary information is exchanged. You can then browse the updated information at your leisure, without worrying about the telephone bill mounting up.

Using the Internet still requires a constant connection and the CIX package allows for around 12 hours of surfing a month in addition to two four-minute Ameol connections each day. Closed conferencing and largely off-line access are probably more than many users want from their ISP but CIX fosters a strong sense of community and is strongly UK-centric.

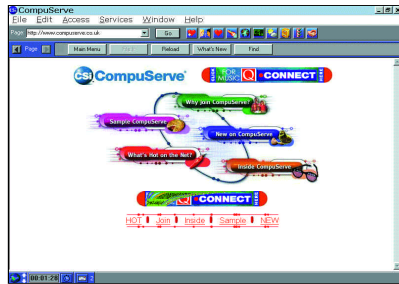
CIX
Features
Value for money
Overall

○ CIX: 0181 255 5000
www.cix.co.uk



CompuServe Interactive

CompuServe used to be a proprietary on-line service but it was completely overhauled last year. Now, CompuServe Interactive is completely Web-based.



CompuServe Interactive uses Windows 95's Dial-up networking to make a PPP connection. This means that users can now do such things as download a file and read e-mail at the same time, something which was infuriatingly impossible before.

The CompuServe 3.0 software is essentially a customised browser but with CompuServe services at least, you wouldn't know it. Good use is made of graphics and since most parts can be accessed through buttons and menus, you need never know you are actually 'surfing'. The switch between a CompuServe service and a true Web site, however, is seamless.

CompuServe Interactive's weakness is with its e-mail. Subscribers only get one e-mail account and a baffling numeric e-mail address. *What PC?*, for example, is 70007.5417@compuserve.com.

CompuServe Interactive combines the best of both worlds – an on-line service with PPP access. It's more expensive than AOL though, and only offers one cryptic e-mail address.

○ CompuServe:
0800 289378
www.compuserve.co.uk

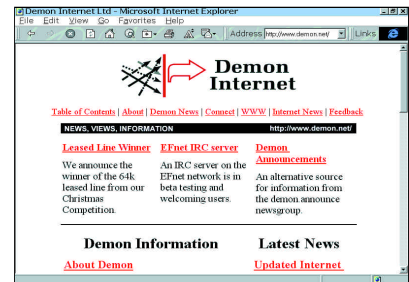
CompuServe Interactive	
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Demon Internet

Demon Internet, set up in 1992, is the UK's largest dial-up ISP. Of all the ISPs included here, only Demon Internet provides a comprehensive set of documentation, the Demon Internet Suite. The novelty of having a quartet of Day-Glo orange manuals soon wears off though, when you realise that you have to use them to get on line.

The Demon Internet installation and registration is the least polished of all the ISPs. Whereas some ISPs take care of all the messy business of configuration for you, Demon has you do some of it yourself. It's not particularly difficult and the technical support line is helpful, but it's still daunting for novices.

Demon Internet hinges around the Turnpike application. This is used to make either a SLIP or PPP connection and then acts as a program launcher for the Web browser, e-mail, and so on. Turnpike doesn't use dial-up networking for PPP connections and works with both Windows 3.1 and Windows 95, making it slightly more versatile than other ISPs' systems. Demon Internet's over-involved installation and registration procedure may put off less technically-minded users but it's worth it. The cheap monthly fee and unlimited e-mail addresses are attractive and the powerful utilities will appeal to techies.



○ Demon Internet:
0181 371 1234
www.demon.net

Demon Internet	
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

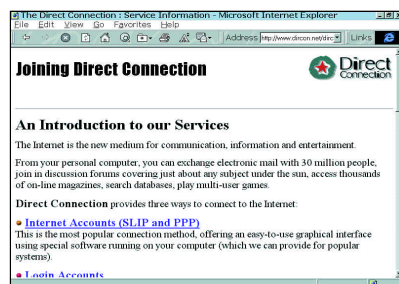
Direct Connection

Direct Connection has been around since 1988 and started offering Internet access and e-mail to the general public in 1989. An account can be set up in a number of ways, including through the Direct Connection Web page and, once you've provided your details, the necessary software will be posted to you.

Unlike other ISPs, Direct Connection doesn't offer a 30-day (or equivalent) trial account for new members. While this may deter some users, Direct Connection reckons that it also keeps its system clear of sneaky users taking up space on the system for free and then clearing off after a month. If you try the service and don't like it though, Direct Connection will make every attempt to resolve any problems you may have and the company prides itself on the quality of its customer service.

Direct Connection uses Microsoft's Internet Explorer and a PPP connection (for Windows 95). The installation and registration routine is very simple and connecting for the first time sensibly takes you to the ISP's Web site for some handy snippets of information.

Direct Connection is reasonably priced and offers a good service but there isn't much to distinguish it from the crowd.



○ Direct Connection:
0181 297 2200
www.dircon.net

Direct Connection	
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Global Internet

Global Internet doesn't open accounts over the telephone but instead, sends its software by post on request and all registration is done on line. If you're a little intimidated by setting everything up yourself, then Global Internet has a handy solution. It has over 100 dealers throughout the UK and if you take your PC to one of them and hand over £35.24, they will install the software and set up your account for you.

There are plans afoot to bundle Microsoft's Internet Explorer (16- and 32-bit versions) with Global Internet accounts but at the time of writing, the Web browser is Super Mosaic. This works but is a little clunky and only supports a SLIP connection, made using a separate Trumpet Winsock program. Again, this works but means you can't use Internet utilities that rely on a PPP connection.

We had a problem making an initial connection with Global Internet but technical support eventually got us up and running. This did involve manually editing an INI file but this is the fault of the existing software rather than the service. Although reasonably priced, the dated browser and lack of free Web space mean that Global Internet's service can be bettered elsewhere.



○ Global Internet:
0181 957 1000
www.globalnet.co.uk

Global Internet	
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



Mistral Internet

Like many ISPs, Brighton-based Mistral charges a flat rate for Internet access and doesn't charge a sign-up fee. Some ISPs charge a low monthly fee, provide a few free hours of usage each month and then charge for extra hours. For occasional Internet use, this is probably fine but if you plan to spend a lot of time on line then flat-rate charges may work out cheaper in the long run.

Mistral Internet can set up an account over the telephone within an hour or so, with the software following in the post. If you already have a suitable browser though, you can make a PPP connection and use the service straight away. Internet Explorer is supplied as the default browser. Installation is straightforward and takes care of everything, including the access telephone number, to get you up and running.

The software CD-ROM also has an assortment of shareware Internet utilities, including such things as e-mail programs, Internet phone software and various browser plug-ins. None are particularly essential but they at least give you the chance to do something other than look at Web pages. Mistral Internet offers a good service at a price that compares favourably with other ISPs – definitely one to consider.



○ Mistral Internet:
0181 641 4111
www.mistral.co.uk

Mistral Internet

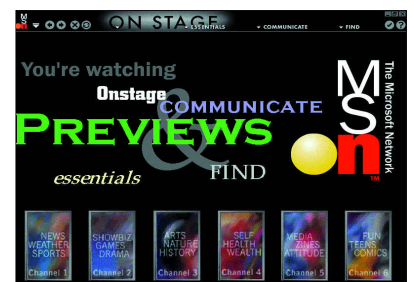
Features ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

Microsoft Network

The original Microsoft Network (MSN), launched together with Windows 95 back in 1995, was pretty dire. So dire, in fact, that Microsoft decided to start all over again and relaunch MSN as a Web-based service.

The New MSN is a vast improvement. It can be accessed using a normal Web browser (using Windows 95's Dial-up networking) but looks much more interesting with the supplied custom browser. MSN's content is split into six channels for such things as news and sport, entertainment and health. Despite the use of a browser, navigation through MSN is solely through buttons and links, without a URL in sight (non-MSN sites can also be accessed, though).

MSN is a visually rich environment, with animations, photos and sound clips at every turn. The effect is almost like sitting in front of a 'virtual' television (complete with adverts for the various parts of the service) and MSN is certainly the best-looking of all the on-line services. It's on the pricey side but MSN looks great and has content to match. The only downside is the single e-mail address and lack of personal Web space. A service more suited for watchers than doers.



○ Microsoft:
0345 000111
www.msn.com

The Microsoft Network

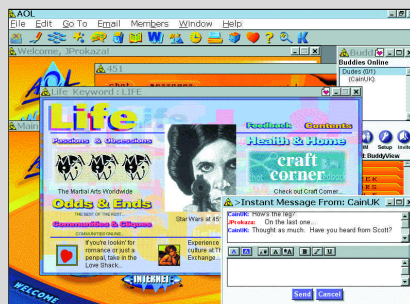
Features ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

On-line services

Although most ISPs now offer access to it, on-line services are not strictly a part of the Internet. Instead, they're a separate computer system, only accessible by people who subscribe to the service.

The big advantage of an on-line service is order. Unlike the Internet, the content of an on-line service is maintained largely by the on-line service provider. Information is usually screened before being made available and the service is structured in a logical and coherent fashion.

AOL is the biggest on-line service, with eight million or so members world-wide, at the last count. Most of these are American but 100,000 of them are in the UK and AOL has done a good job of anglicising the service, to the extent that the welcome screen displays up-to-date UK news, there are



UK magazines available on line and even UK-specific chat rooms.

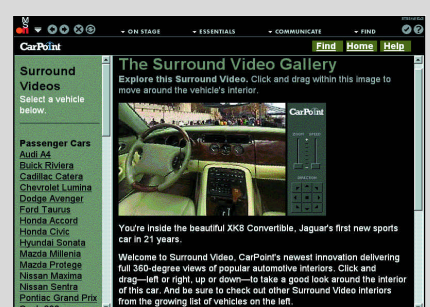
Incidentally, chat is one of AOL's strong points. Almost every area has a message board for holding Usenet-type discussions, but there are also chat areas where you can talk to other members 'live'. AOL even has an entire area which is devoted to chat, where you can talk to other members from around the world in one of any number of rooms.

With over five million world-wide members (400,000 of whom are in the UK), CompuServe offers a better chance of bumping into someone on line who lives in your town. The old CompuServe service was looking a little dated but this is no longer the case, thanks to its relaunch last year as CSI (CompuServe Interactive). Apart from being Web-based, CSI is just the



same as before. Like AOL, CSI caters for UK users very well and has on-line versions of magazines such as *Q*, *Empire* and *New Woman*.

MSN (the Microsoft Network) is a relative newcomer to the world of on-line services. The original MSN (now called MSN Classic and still accessible) has been updated to an entirely Web-based service and the new MSN is a much more impressive affair. Microsoft obviously has the lead on other services when it comes to making MSN a part of Windows 95 and it has really done a good job. One of MSN's most appealing aspects is its 'original programming' content. This takes the form of on-line 'shows' and programming is a good way to describe it – the effect isn't quite TV but it's a vast improvement over most Web sites.



Internet Service Providers compared							Internet Service Providers compared							
Provider	AOL	CIX	CompuServe Interactive	Demon Internet	Direct Connection	Global Internet		Mistral Internet	MSN	Netcom	Internet for Learning	UUNET Pipex	Virgin Net	Provider
Service type	On-line service & ISP	On-line service, ISP and conferencing	On-line service & conferencing	ISP	ISP	ISP		ISP	On-line service & ISP	ISP	ISP	ISP	ISP	Service type
Local call access	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	Local call access
Connection fee (inc VAT)	n/a	£29.24	n/a	£14.69	£8.80	£11.75		n/a	n/a	n/a	£29.38	£23.49	n/a	Connection fee (inc VAT)
Fee (inc VAT)	£5.95 monthly	£17.61 monthly	£6.50 monthly (first month free)	£11.75 monthly	£13.50 monthly	£11.74 monthly		£14.04 monthly	£14.95 monthly	£14.95 monthly	£176.25 annually	£15 monthly	£10 monthly (first 3 mths free)	Fee (inc VAT)
Payment options	Credit card, direct debit for business accounts	Credit card, direct debit	Credit card, direct debit	Credit card, direct debit	Credit card, direct debit	Credit card		Credit card,	Credit card direct debit	Credit card,	Credit card, direct debit	Credit card, business account	Credit card direct debit	Payment options
Hours free each month	5	Approx.16.6 (1,000 minutes)	5	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited		Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited	Hours free each month
Additional hours charged at	£1.85	£0.71	£1.95	n/a	n/a	n/a		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	Additional hours charged at
Number of mailboxes	5	1	1	Unlimited	1	1		5	1	1	1	5	1	Number of mailboxes
Additional mailboxes	n/a	£35.24 per year for unlimited	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		n/a	n/a	n/a	£47.00	n/a	n/a	Additional mailboxes
Web space provided	10Mb (2Mb per mailbox)	1Mb, £2.35 per extra Mb	5Mb	5Mb	5Mb	£1.95 per month for 1Mb		5Mb	n/a	1Mb	Unlimited	2Mb	10Mb	Web space provided
Full Usenet access	●	●	●	●	Restricted	●		Restricted	Restricted	Restricted	Restricted	Restricted	●	Full Usenet access
Technical support	Mon-Fri 7.45am-10.30pm; Sat 9.00am-5.30pm	Mon-Fri 9.00am-12.00am; Sat 12.00pm-6.00pm	Mon-Sat 8.00am-12.00am	24hrs	Mon-Fri 9.00am-9.00pm; Sat-Sun 10.00am-5.00pm	Mon - Fri - 9.00am-9.00pm, Sat-Sun 10.00am-6.00pm		Mon-Fri 9.30am-6.00pm; Sat 10.00-4.00pm	Mon-Sun 9.00am-9.00pm	24hrs	Mon-Fri 8.30am-5.15pm	Mon-Thu 9.00am-8.00pm; Fri 9.00am-5.30pm; Sat 10.00am-6.00pm	24hrs	Technical support
Software supplied	AOL 3.0i	Ameol	CompuServe 3.0	Internet Explorer, Turnpike, HoTMetal Light	Internet Explorer	Super Mosaic (16-bit)		Internet Explorer, assorted shareware	MSN	Netscape Navigator	Internet Explorer	Netscape Navigator	Internet Explorer, CyberSitter	Software supplied
Operating systems supported	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95		Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Windows 3.1 & Windows 95	Operating systems supported
Maximum modem speed	28.8Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s		33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	33.6Kbits/s	Maximum modem speed
ISDN access	○	Conferencing only	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	○	●	ISDN access
x2 support planned	●	●	●	○	○	●		●	○	●	○	●	●	x2 support planned

● = Yes ○ = No

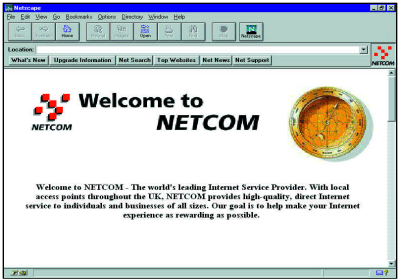
NetCom

NetCom was launched in the UK in May, 1996. Like many ISPs, NetCom has 100 percent local call access but a recent agreement with the Global Reach Internet Connection (GRIC – an international alliance of ISPs) means that NetCom subscribers can go on line almost anywhere in the world for no extra cost. This allows users, for example, to pick up e-mail in Japan with a local, rather than an international, call.

NetCom is one of the few ISPs to supply Netscape Navigator as the default browser. Unfortunately, this is still the 16-bit version of the software and the NetCom dialler makes a SLIP, rather than a PPP connection. Once connected to NetCom, a window appears that has launch buttons for various supplied programs – Netscape Navigator, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), and so on.

Like many ISPs, NetCom will support US Robotics' x2 modems when they become available. The NetCom Web site goes a step further, though, by offering a test for your telephone line's x2 compatibility – useful if you want a worry-free upgrade to x2.

NetCom's monthly fee is a little steep and it doesn't buy you much in the way of Web space. Worth a look but by no means the best value.



○ NetCom: 0800 973001
www.netcom.net.uk

NetCom

Features

Value for money

Overall

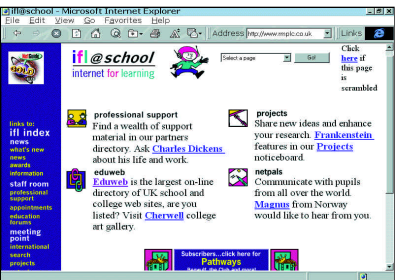
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★

Internet for Learning

Research Machines' (RM) hardware is a prominent feature in UK state schools but it also provides an Internet access service. Internet for Learning is really geared to the educational sector (from schools, all the way to teachers and parents) but accounts are open to anyone. Subscribers get unlimited Internet access and, more importantly to schools, unlimited Web space. This does have to be for educational purposes though, so the service is not really suited to commercial ventures.

Once installed from the 'Internet for Learning' CD-ROM, starting up Internet Explorer takes you to the RM Web site. Again, this is aimed at educational users and has links to various educational Internet resources. RM doesn't provide completely unrestricted access to the Internet. Web sites deemed unsuitable for minors are blocked (RM has a list of around 1,000), as are inappropriate Usenet topics. The list of blocked sites is by no means exhaustive but it at least means that concerned parents have some control over what appears on their PC's screen.

With an equivalent monthly cost of just under £15, Internet for Learning is no more expensive than other ISPs and the optional multiple e-mail addresses and unlimited Web space is a boon for schools.



○ Research Machines:
01235 826868
www.rmplc.co.uk

Internet for Learning

Features

Value for money

Overall

★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★

UUNET Pipex

Getting on line with UUNET Pipex is very straightforward. Accounts can be opened over the telephone but account packs can be bought off the shelf in Dixons and Waterstones stores. The boxed pack comes with all the necessary software and a Penguin paperback entitled *The Rough Guide to the Internet and World Wide Web*. The book covers pretty much everything a beginner would want to know about the Internet and has a directory listing ISPs and cyber cafés (cafés where you can drink coffee and surf the Internet).

UUNET Pipex is based around Netscape Navigator and a SLIP connection. Connections are made using the Pipex Dial control window, which then displays icons for various Internet programs – the Netscape browser, e-mail, and so on. This is ideal for beginners with basic Internet requirements as all the software is fully installed, configured and clearly presented. For software that requires a PPP connection, however, things are not so simple. Pipex Dial supports PPP connections but requires the user to get his or her hands dirty writing scripts for Windows 95's Dial-up networking – something not for the fainthearted. UUNET Pipex is worth considering if you're looking for an ISP but there are cheaper services available.



○ UUNET Pipex:
0500 474739
www.dial.pipex.com

UUNET Pipex

Features

Value for money

Overall

★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★

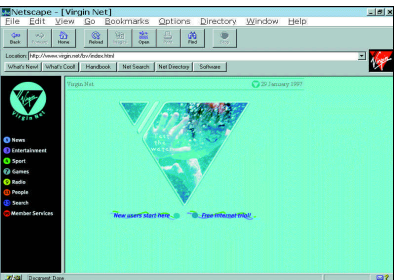
Virgin Net

The Virgin brand name has appeared on various things over the past few years, from balloons to PCs. The latest area of technology to bear its mark is the Internet and the Virgin Internet service, launched in November 1996, is called Virgin Net.

Virgin Net's rates are attractive. It's keen to get people to use the service so new members get three months' access free (at least for the moment) and are then charged £10 a month. Apart from call charges, that's all there is to pay as Virgin Net doesn't charge for on-line time.

Virgin Net uses Netscape Navigator as the standard browser and the CD-ROM also includes a couple of browser plug-ins and CyberSitter. Virgin Net uses a PPP connection and once you've gone through the straightforward registration routine, you're connected.

CyberSitter is a so-called Net-nanny utility. Using filters downloaded (and regularly updated) via the Internet, the program can block access to inappropriate Web sites and Usenet topics and can even record attempted access violations. As usual, Virgin seems to have got it right first time with its Internet service. The low monthly fee, three month's free usage and generous amount of Web space make it excellent value for money.



○ Virgin Net: 0500 558800
www.virgin.net

Virgin Net

Features

Value for money

Overall

★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★
★★★★★



What does an account give you?

A telephone number

The most important thing an ISP account gives you is a telephone number. When the ISP's software dials this number using your modem, your PC is then connected to the ISP's gateway onto the Internet. Most ISPs provide a telephone number that is charged at local rates, no matter where in the UK you call from.

Internet access

Once your PC is connected to the ISP's gateway, you are then connected to the Internet. There are, however, different types of connection and the one you have can be important.

The best type of connection is PPP (via Windows 95's Dial-up networking) as this supports TCP/IP connections. A PPP connection is the standard expected by most Internet software and 32-bit browsers require a PPP connection, as do many Internet utilities.

Some ISPs haven't yet moved to PPP and only offer SLIP connections, made using a separate program. SLIP is an older standard than PPP but it still allows you to use the Internet in the same way as PPP.

An e-mail address

An ISP account provides you with a

unique e-mail 'address', usually in the form of username@ISP_name.com. E-mail sent to this address will then be stored on your ISP's computer system until you make a connection and download it to your PC.

A domain name

If you want a more personalised e-mail address, then most ISPs offer the chance to register your own domain name, usually for an annual fee. If you run a business, for example, this allows you to have e-mail addresses in the form of username@business_name.co.uk.

So, for example, you could be jbloggs@bloggs-plumbing.co.uk. Apart from looking more professional, this also means that you can have unlimited e-mail names with similar addresses and the address won't change, even if you change ISPs.

Personal Web space

Most ISPs provide a megabyte or more of free Web space with each account. You don't have to use it but it allows you to maintain your own Web site, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for no extra charge.

Depending on the type of account that you open, some ISPs

may restrict Web sites to personal, rather than business use.

Usenet access

Most ISPs offer access to Usenet. However, not all ISPs offer complete access to Usenet, due to its often controversial content and some only provide access to ISP-specific topics.

Payment options

Most ISPs offer different ways to pay, such as by credit card or direct debit. Payment is usually by a fixed monthly fee but some ISPs can also charge annually. Some also provide free hours each month and then charge for extra hours, whereas many provide unlimited monthly access.



The Internet Service Provider that is best for you depends on exactly what you want. Obviously, value for money is

a prime consideration and to that end, you should be looking for a low monthly fee and little or no charges for time spent on line. If you plan to be a part of the Internet, rather than just use it, then personal Web space is also worth thinking about. The amount an ISP provides can vary but if you have ambitious plans, then more is better. Finally, unless you really know what you're doing on line, there will come a time when you get stuck. If this happens, you'll need technical support and an ISP that offers it beyond the regular office hours is a definite plus.

Of all the ISPs reviewed here, we feel that one stands out as fully meeting these criteria - Virgin Net. At a tanner a month with the first three months free, Virgin Net represents fantastic value for money.



Its free Web space is the most generous of all at 10Mb and if anything does go wrong, then the 24-hour technical support will come in very handy.



If you're interested in doing more than just surfing the Internet, then Demon Internet is seriously worth

considering. Again, reasonably priced with no limits on usage, it offers an unlimited number of e-mail addresses - perfect for family or business users. It also comes with powerful software that will meet the needs of more demanding on-line users.

If you want more than just Internet access, then you should be thinking about an on-line service. Of the ones looked at here, AOL offers the best value. It's not the flashiest or the most up to date (though 32-bit software is due later this year) but it is the cheapest and has a highly varied content.

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