

HSDPA - 1.8Mbps available now in the Med!

In February of this year the boss and I headed over to Barcelona for one of these telephone gadget shows. It's the kind of thing where you get shown some really futuristic gear only to be told it won't be available for another twelve months. There was a lot of incredibly trick stuff on show but we were really looking for the next generation of communications devices for voice and data. So before being eventually physically removed from the WRC rally car simulator we had been touched by the future of mobile data and telephony.

Each year for the past several there has been a new plug in data device for your laptop and a new phone purporting to offer fast data transmission. GPRS is still out there, old enough to not be promising anything anymore but still providing sterling service with Blackberry and email by phone. For the last couple of years the long awaited 3G has been available. The first users enjoyed what seemed like lightning speed on the notebook and we all enjoyed those psychedelic live video calls. No, you had to be drunk to enjoy those! But soon it seemed that the option these devices had to switch back to GPRS was option number one in areas of high usage or poor coverage. ('It still is' I hear you crow!)

This year's bright young thing is HSDPA. It's the next generation, it's what 3G wanted to be when it grew up. It is fast. Now, when we were in Barcelona, there was that much radio frequency interference that all the demo devices had to be connected directly to servers. 'Gosh, that's fast' we would observe. Of course it was, we were in Cisco country. With this introduction we estimated that HSDPA would be a commercially viable product next year, maybe. Not so! With all the phone manufacturers, network operators and infrastructure builders showing impressive 'product to market' cohesion, it's available now. In fact, it has been available for a while.

One day I was testing some new Vodafone PCMCIA cards in one of the electro-magnetic signal free zones of our office when I had a Jodie-Foster-in-'Contact' moment. After spending the last two years trying to tease one bar of signal into a flicker I was amazed to see a full five bar signal. I clicked on the 'connect' button and a millisecond later read the words 'connected at 1.8Mbps'. I knew that they had it in Madrid, but here in Mallorca! Right then, www.bbc.co.uk/football. Straight in.

Either 'soon to be' or 'already' introduced HSDPA coverage is available in Italy, all over Italy, the French Riviera, and many parts of Spain. Up in Northern Europe it is everywhere (Latvia, Lithuania, everywhere). Vipnet has it in Croatia from 27th April 2006, ahead of many other countries. There are now over 100 networks either deployed or in deployment in 49 countries.

So that's all great for portable computing but what about the phone? The new phones will have 6Megapixel cameras at least, quality video streaming, TV, huge hard disks and games for maniacs. You will absolutely not, ever, drop this one in the drink. Models to look out for are the Samsung Z560, Motorola Razr MAXX, BENQ Siemens EF91 and neither Nokia nor Sony Ericsson will be left out. This will be THE must have Christmas present this year.

(HSDPA stands for High Speed Downlink Packet Access)

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