Molecaten is a Dutch campsite operator. It has 17 sites in the Netherlands and one in Hungary. The company plans more openings and acquisitions in the coming years, and will build a new resort in 2018 – its first greenfield, resort build in 52 years.

Despite camping’s laid-back image, Molecaten customers are as demanding as 5-star hotel guests when it comes to wireless access. “Guests may take an hour to complain if the hot water runs out, but they’ll call in us within five minutes if they have a poor wireless connection,” says Rutger Lueks, ITC manager, Molecaten.

FIBRE OPTIC BACKBONE PLUS HUNDREDS OF OUTDOOR ACCESS POINTS

Tim Slager, Molecaten CEO, says access to connectivity is now a fundamental need for guests: “It’s your decision to switch it off, but you need that option.”

He says Molecaten wants guests to be able to explore the local environment, and for many, that exploration starts online. “As a business we want guests to experience the local area, we don’t just want to keep them on the resort. If we can help guests find local attractions, make bookings, confirm opening times, then there’s a better chance they’ll experience the area as if they’re a local.”

TAKING CONTROL OF WIRELESS SERVICE PROVISION

The company had installed wireless access to its sites through various third parties in 2010, with guests paying the service provider for access. However, the service had grown increasingly unfit for purpose. As guests connected to more devices, and these devices demand more bandwidth for data-hungry apps, connectivity performance collapsed. To compound matters, Molecaten had no control over the network, yet was the first to bear the frustration of unhappy guests.

“Long term 4-or 5G might be an option for some users,” says Slager. “But for most users, especially those who have to pay for their own data consumption, wireless is going to be best. The tourism sector understands that 70% of holiday choices are driven by children and children don’t pay for data!”

By the end of 2015, says Lueks, it was clear the business needed to invest in its own solution: “However, we recognised that campsites have unique challenges.”

Firstly, it is not straightforward to wire a heavily wooded forest or beachside resort. Digging is tricky, expensive and disruptive. Molecaten wanted a solution in place over the offseason, ready for the start of 2016.

With Aruba, we finally have a network we can manage. We see the wireless network as a platform for continued improvements across the business.

TIM SLAGER
CEO, MOLECATEN
Fibre optic backbone plus hundreds of outdoor access points

Working with 4IP Solution, a networking specialist in the Netherlands and Aruba partner since 2010, Lueks developed a solid plan for an extensive wireless network deployment across 10 of its sites. Consequently, through this collaboration between Rutger Lueks, 4IP and Aruba, a robust, scalable and future-proof architecture was rolled out.

“Our first step was to install a backbone of fibre optics, and connect switches in strategic locations to this backbone,” says Lueks. “Each switch is connected in a star formation to the masts with an Aruba AP-275 access point.”

In addition, Aruba AP-215 and AP-204 access points are used for indoor areas, including reception and restaurants. Aruba ClearPass Policy Manager ensures secure guest access with Aruba AirWave for seamless and centralised network management.

“We started with a configuration of Instant AP clusters but later found that we had a better result for our bigger parks when we used controllers,” says Lueks. “In total we installed more than 30 km of fibre optics and we have now more than 1,000 access points, 900 of which are outdoor.”

In challenging outdoor environments, rogue guest APs or reflections from trees and other obstacles, make it more difficult to get Instant AP mesh or clusters to work. In these cases, deploying centrally controlled APs with Aruba Mobility Clusters offers optimum stability and availability.

IMPROVED WI-FI, NEW REVENUE STREAM

The 2016 roll-out went to plan, with the remaining six sites (along with the Molecaten head office) upgraded to Aruba ahead of the 2017 season. The business was able to offer guests high-performance wireless, for a fee. With prices starting at €5 per day per device it represents a new revenue stream. Guests are happy to pay this price if they receive a robust service.

Molecaten web developers have made extensive use of the Aruba ClearPass APIs in order to integrate their guest access service with their billing and e-payments application from Ingenico Group. “We now have very few complaints,” says Lueks. “We can easily manage access through ClearPass Policy Manager – guests can either buy access in advance or pay on site, and I can see if there are any network issues through AirWave Network Management. Even our non-technical staff are able to access the floorplan and check where potential problems are occurring.”

In 2017, during the high season, Molecaten had more than 5,500 devices on its Wi-Fi network, jointly using 1,5Gb of bandwidth. The 2017 off-season will be spent fine-tuning the network, adding, upgrading or moving access points where there are dips in coverage.

“Campsites remain a challenging environment for Wi-Fi,” says Lueks. “Trees cause interference, as do microwaves, TVs and all the other electronic devices people bring with them. We will continue to improve the service.”

Optimising a challenging environment

CEO of Molecaten, Tim Slager, says Molecaten now has the best wireless service of any Dutch campsite: “We’ve had other sites contacting us and asking how we do it. As a business, we don’t want to be on the edge with new technology, but we do want to be in the frontline as a leader and innovator. I’m happy we’re ahead of the market on this.”

The plan for 2018 is to use the wireless network to improve facilities management, with cleaning crews, PoS, Digital Signage and CCTV all utilising mobile connectivity. Site management can switch off heating and lighting in empty bungalows, or have a bungalow warmed ahead of a late-arriving guest. This will lead to increased efficiencies, optimised cost management and enhanced guest experiences.

“We can use analytics to determine where guests are, and how they’re using the site,” says Slager. “For instance, if our site shops open at 8am but we can see guests up and using the network at 6am, we could open our shops earlier. We can also send push notices as guests move around the site, letting them know of special offers.”

Molecaten will also improve guest services through a new app, where guests can order food, check if a restaurant has a free table, or book site facilities.

“With Aruba, we finally have a network we can manage,” says Slager. “We see the wireless network as a platform for continued improvements across the business.”