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Here's the skinny on Levi's new high-tech stadium

S lated to host Super Bowl 50 in February 2016, Levi's Stadium, the new home of the San Francisco 49ers, has been called the "future of the NFL" — a \$9 billion league that has plans to grow even bigger over the next decade.

But is this high-tech, lavish and meticulously designed stadium all that the owners are touting it as — a cutting-edge experience for fans? Or will it turn out to be a high-priced distraction rather than an enhancement for fans' live-game experience?

The stadium amenities

Levi's Stadium is a multi-purpose facility with the ability to host a wide variety of events, including football games, domestic and international soccer games, motocross races and civic events. The open, airy and environmentally friendly venue was designed by HNTB and built by Turner/Devcon for the Santa Clara Stadium Authority. It boasts 165 luxury suites, offers 8,500 club seats and cost about \$1.3 billion to build.

Most NFL stadiums can't compete with the high-definition experience that fans get when they watch a game at home — but Levi's Stadium can. The end zones each have massive high-definition TV screens that measure 48 feet tall and 200 feet long.

Situated in the hub of technological innovation — Silicon Valley — the stadium is a "sports and media entertainment center" with sponsors and ad partners such as Intel, SAP, Yahoo and NRG.

Mounted throughout the 8.5-million-square-foot space are 2,200 flat screen TVs. In addition, the stadium is equipped with Wi-Fi networks and enough bandwidth so that the roughly 68,500 fans can use smartphones, send texts and access Twitter and Instagram during a game — all at the same time.

As fans in the "cheap seats" reportedly say, the Wi-Fi access allows them to watch the game live and on their iPads, giving them a close-up view of the action. Fans can use monitors on seat backs to

"punch up" any game they want and keep tabs on their fantasy teams in real time, or they can visit the Yahoo fantasy lounge to keep up with their league standings.

Levi's Stadium and the 49ers also recruited a team of 25 engineers from tech companies such as Facebook and Google to develop a game-day stadium app that features instant replay and team and player statistics feeds as well as in-seat ordering and delivery of concessions. This app and the electronic stadium gate scanners make the 49ers' new home a pioneer of the "cashless, ticketless" game-day experience.

High-end tailgating

During the 49ers' preseason game against the Denver Broncos, the stadium debuted "a brand new tailgating experience." Renowned San Francisco chef Michael Mina — a die-hard 49ers fan and longtime season ticket holder — had a tradition of throwing lavish tailgate parties at Candlestick Park. When Mina heard about the new stadium, he proposed bringing his tailgate party indoors for the fans.

Advertised as the "ultimate game-day experience," 49ers season ticket holders have the option to purchase a \$5,000 membership to Mina's Bourbon Steak & Pub Restaurant, which includes food, drinks and exclusive access to the space before games and through halftime. After halftime, the tailgate party ends, and Mina's restaurant opens to the public.

Tailgate members also have other perks, such as options to travel to road games with the team and to attend chalk talks with 49ers coaches.

The home opener

On Sept. 14, Levi's Stadium hosted a packed crowd of 70,799 people, including celebrities such as Jerry Rice, Joe Montana and Barry Bonds. Rice was the first VIP to blow the stadium's red foghorn situated under one of the end-zone video boards, a new tradition signifying the start of the action.

With that many fans in house, crowd noise was expected to be off the charts, and at times, the place

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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"rocked." But penalties, a shoddy second-half performance by the team and curiosity about the stadium's many amenities reportedly took the crowd away from the game. In fact, the new stadium seemed to be distracting fans, as those who had spent significant prices for tickets spent time checking out the 49ers' new home rather than focusing on the play on the field.

Just how much are people spending to attend a game at Levi's Stadium? The 49ers have the third-most expensive secondary market ticket price at an average of \$391.22 — a 45 percent increase from last season.

Netsuite, a Chicago-based marketing company, recently released its annual Fan Cost Index, and Levi's Stadium is ranked as the most expensive NFL venue to take a family of four. The estimated cost of \$641.50 (four tickets, four hot dogs, four soft drinks, two beers, two programs, two adult hats and a parking pass) represents a 38 percent increase from the 2013 family ticket price at Candlestick Park.

StubHub reports that the average fan paid \$373 for a ticket to the home opener. At that price, people apparently expected to be more impressed. While many fans reportedly were struck by the newness of it all, some felt the tech features weren't everything

they were cracked up to be.

A critic with the San Jose Mercury News wrote: "The high-priced food ran out, and the Wi-Fi was slow."

Both critics and fans also seemed to agree that the 28-20 loss to the Chicago Bears and the pre- and post-game gridlock were the cause of much frustration and disappointment that day.

The day after the game, 49ers head coach Jim Harbaugh addressed the lack of fan engagement, indicating that "the crowd was good at times, but also could be improved."

Stadium management is making adjustments to address the traffic problems, and the Santa Clara Transportation Agency also is adding trains and buses. But as one source said, "people should expect to wait" even though officials are "trying to keep the wait down."

A brighter future

Just a few games later, on Sept. 28, the 49ers avoided a three-game losing streak, securing their first win at Levi's Stadium in a 26-21 game against the Philadelphia Eagles before another packed house. In the post-game interview, Harbaugh said the win would be "good for morale" but that the 49ers have "got to keep going."

That advice resonates for the owners and management of Levi's Stadium as well.