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Generated on 15/11/2026 00:09

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What a CDN is, and when it makes a difference (and when it does not)

CDN Basics

CODE	VERSION	COUNTRY · LANGUAGE
RLX-AO-KB-490	v2026.10.18	Angola · English

Interweb Angola
RLX Angola, Lda. · Group RLX Holdings
Tax ID (NIF) 500 260 5724 · Commercial registration no. 26464-25/250724

https://www.meu.interweb.ao/knowledgebase/490

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CDN Basics Created on **September 27, 2026** Updated on **October 18, 2026** 4 min read



A **CDN** (content delivery network) is a set of machines spread around the world that keep copies of your site and hand them out from whichever machine is closest to the visitor. The site still lives on your hosting: the CDN sits **in front of** it.

We do not sell a CDN.
There is no CDN product in our shop, no plan includes one, and there is no button anywhere in the panel that switches one on. This article is about the CDN you **can** use: **Cloudflare**, an outside company with a free plan. The account is yours, opened directly with them, and it goes neither through us nor onto your invoice.

The problem it solves is distance

Every file a visitor downloads is a round trip to the server. An ordinary page is dozens of round trips: the page, the stylesheets, the scripts, the images, the fonts. The further away the server, the longer *each one* takes, and the delays add up.

Where our servers are, and what that means for the people visiting you, is in **where our servers are**. That distance is what a CDN shortens: the visitor stops talking to the server and talks to a machine near them that already holds the copy.

A CDN does not make the server faster.
It makes the *journey* shorter. If PHP and the database take four seconds to build the page, it still takes four seconds on the first visit. A CDN cuts delivery time, not build time.

When it genuinely helps

1. **Your visitors are far from the server.** The clearest case, and the only one where the difference shows without instruments.

2. **The site is heavy on static files.** Lots of photographs, catalogues, custom fonts, short videos. These are exactly what a CDN caches best.

3. **You get spikes.** A campaign, a news item, a launch. The CDN absorbs most of the spike without the server noticing.

4. **You are under attack.** Automated traffic that never reaches the server spends none of your account resources. For what we already do at our end, see **what we do about security**.

5. **You want the server address out of sight.** With a CDN in front, a lookup on the domain returns its addresses and not your hosting one.

When it changes nothing at all

Symptom	Does a CDN fix it?
The WordPress dashboard drags	**No.** The dashboard is never cached, anywhere. The usual culprit is a plugin.
The page is slow even on the very first load	**No.** That is build time. See **what actually makes a difference**.
A photograph of several megabytes on a page	**Barely.** The CDN delivers the file from closer, but the file is still enormous. Shrink the image first.
The account hits its resource ceiling every day	**Partly.** It relieves whatever is static and nothing else. See **the limits nobody advertises**.
Nearly all your visitors are close to the server	**Barely.** The journey was already short. You gain the filtering, not the speed.
E-mail is slow or missing	**No.** Mail does not go through a CDN, and it should not. See **why your e-mail is not sending or receiving**.

What a CDN does not replace

This trips people up often enough to be worth settling before you start.

Not a replacement for	Why
Hosting	A CDN does not hold your site: it holds temporary copies. Switch the server off and the CDN has nothing left to serve.
Backups	A cached copy is not a backup. See **making and keeping your own backup**.

Not a replacement for	Why
The certificate on the server	You need one at each end. Ours is issued automatically and stays that way. See **what an SSL certificate is**.
Keeping the site updated	An out-of-date WordPress behind a CDN is an out-of-date WordPress. See **protecting the WordPress login**.
Tidying up what is badly built	If the page loads forty files it never uses, it now loads forty faster.

Measure before you decide

1. **Open the site from another network.** Mobile data, for instance. If it is quick there, the site is not the problem.
2. **Notice whether it is the first visit or every visit.** Only the first being slow means the page is being built. All of them means delivery, and that is where a CDN comes in.
3. **Look at consumption** in cPanel, under Resource Usage. See **how to monitor your site performance**.
4. **Write the numbers down.** Without the before, the after means nothing.

If the answer is still yes after all that, the concrete road is in **putting a CDN in front of your site, step by step** and in **Cloudflare: when it helps and how to switch it on**. And if the conclusion is that the plan is the problem rather than delivery, see **what to measure before you change plan**.

Before deciding, it is worth knowing exactly what you gain: **what a CDN does for you**. The questions we get most often are in **frequently asked questions about CDNs**, and what changes and what does not is in **Cloudflare: what changes and what stays the same**.

NEED A HAND?

Not sure a CDN would fix your case? Send us the address and tell us where your visitors come from.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **Hosting plans and what each one includes** →

Support Policy →

Frequently asked questions →

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RLX-AO-KB-490 · v2026.10.18 · Generated on 15/11/2026 00:09