

KNOW & GO

Without a plan, cellphone use abroad can sour your return

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Keeping connected by cellphone while outside the United States can be one of travel's most maddening experiences, and can quickly — and often unknowingly — blow your budget. Plan ahead and you can save a bundle and still stay (or be) in touch. Consider the following tips as you plan your foreign travels.

YOUR CARRIER'S INTERNATIONAL PLAN ...

For most US cellphone carriers, plans can be pricey. Find out what type of calling and data plan you can get through your local carrier, and what it covers at your destination. If you're a T-Mobile customer, check out the company's new rate plan, Simple Choice, which offers unlimited data and text messaging in more than 120 countries, and incoming

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Sending your Paris cellphone photos home could cost an ocean of money.



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PAMELA WRIGHT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



ISTOCK PHOTO

Smartphones need smart users to plan for use abroad

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or outgoing calls at 20 cents per minute while outside the country. Data transfers at 2G speeds internationally, but you can pay extra for increased speed.

UNLOCK YOUR PHONE

Buying a local SIM card at your destination can be one of the most affordable ways to stay connected. But to use a foreign SIM card, you need to make sure your phone is unlocked and compatible. Some carriers will unlock your phone within a month of purchasing it; others make you satisfy a long-term contract first. Also make sure your phone works on the right cell frequency band for your destination, or has dual-band capability. Carriers such as AT&T and T-Mobile, for instance, operate on GSM technology, whereas Verizon uses CDMA.

“Most of the rest of the world (with the notable exception of Japan) operates on GSM technology, so if you are traveling internationally, you must have a GSM-capable phone or it won’t work with local SIM cards,” says Barbara Weibel, a globetrotter currently traveling in Thailand.

BUY A LOCAL SIM CARD

After landing at your destination, buy a prepaid SIM card, often for just a few dollars, and add credit. You will

generally pay less if you purchase a card outside the airport. To avoid frustration (it’s not always a smooth and glitch-free process), go to a local cellphone office or department store and find a knowledgeable salesperson who can help with setup, and who may let you return the SIM card on the spot if it doesn’t work. Once you’re up and running, cards can typically be topped up at a phone store, service station, newsstand, post office, or other local spot, or by calling a toll-free number.

BUY A UNIVERSAL SIM CARD

Companies like Telestial and Belmont-based OneSimCard sell SIM cards that work in about 200 countries. A big benefit: You keep the same card, and the same cellphone number, as you travel from one country to the next. OneSimCard excels if you’ll be receiving more incoming calls, and it offers highly competitive rates for outgoing calls, but you really need to shop around, based on your destination, since rates vary.

A company called Know Roaming has just launched an intriguing device: a little sticker that you affix to your existing SIM card that essentially eliminates roaming charges. It enables you to automatically connect to a local network as soon as you arrive in a country, so you pay local calling, texting, and data rates, rather than roaming rates through your home carrier. Even

better, your regular cell number appears on the caller ID, whether you ring someone locally or outside the country. The sticker remains on your SIM card when you get home, but only activates when you travel internationally. The caveat: You must have an unlocked phone.

GET A LOCAL PHONE

In many countries, you can buy or rent an inexpensive phone that comes with a working SIM card, meaning you don’t have to fuss with getting a foreign SIM card to work in your handset, and you don’t have to worry if your phone doesn’t accept SIM cards.

The downside: You won’t have all of your contacts, apps, and other info handy on the phone.

PURCHASE A DUAL SIM CARD PHONE

Companies like WorldSIM and Telestial offer cellphones with dual SIM-card slots, so you can keep your home SIM card in one and your travel SIM card in another. Therefore, you don’t have to continually swap cards or worry about losing one as you travel. Telestial’s new dual-SIM JT smartphone has a GSM slot for its SIM card and a voice-only slot for your home SIM, meaning you can’t accidentally rack up data charges through your home cellphone provider. The SIM also assigns you US and United Kingdom numbers for this Android device,

and has a cool travel app with a customizable screen that displays world time zones, weather, a currency converter, and other handy info in one spot.

EMBRACE WI-FI

It’s hard to go anywhere these days and not be within easy reach of free Wi-Fi. Sit in the lobby of a fancy hotel, sip a latte at a local java joint, or chill out at your boarding gate and you can use your smartphone to call home using one of the many free apps and voice-over-Internet (VoIP) services. Download the app for Rebtel, Viber, or Skype, for instance, before leaving home, make sure your mobile network is turned off on your phone (look under Settings), get online, launch the app, and start calling. You can even pull out your SIM card to ensure that you aren’t accidentally using your phone’s mobile network (just ignore any error messages). It’s free to call other members using the same app, and super cheap to call others.

Stéphane Fouché, a sociology major at Harvard University, uses Rebtel to keep in touch with his family in Haiti and Canada, and his Cambridge classmates while on a Japanese study abroad program. He has also used the service while in China, Vietnam, Taipei, Korea, and Chile.

“The best part is that my personal phone number shows up, making it

easy for people to recognize that it is me calling,” says Fouché. “The company also has a PC version of its application, so when I lost my phone at the airport in Japan, I just switched to my laptop and contacted the people who were to supposed to greet me.”

Boston-based Republic Wireless also offers the Motorola X smartphone, which provides talk, text, and data services on Sprint’s network in this country, and lets you make Wi-Fi calls to the states while traveling internationally. Prices for the no-contract plans range from \$5 a month for international Wi-Fi access to \$40 per month for unlimited 4G talk, text, and data in the United States. Even cooler, you can change your plan anytime you want, on the phone itself, mid month, and the charges get prorated.

FIND CHEAP DATA PLANS

Data costs can blow your travel budget. Snap a selfie at the Tower of London and it could cost you \$40 to upload it. Big US carriers can charge more than \$20 per megabyte, so if posting photos or downloading hefty e-mails or movies is important to you, find a good data plan. A company like Telestial, which is known for its low data rates, may charge as little as 39 cents per megabyte in parts of Europe, so you can upload a snapshot for less than a cup of coffee.

SAFEGUARD AGAINST BILL SHOCK

If you use your own phone on the road, you may worry about coming home to an exorbitant cellphone bill, even if you believe you’ve been careful about usage. Download the Tangoe rTEM app and let it track your cellphone, texting, and data usage in real time, rather than relying on your carrier’s billing system, which can be three to four hours behind.

“If you have 4G LTE speed, you can download a two-hour movie in approximately 20 minutes,” says Tangoe founder Dan Rudich. “In some countries, you can spend up to \$50 per megabyte [for downloading], so if that movie is 2GB or 3GB, it could turn into tens of thousands of dollars. We know someone who went to Israel and downloaded the first season of Seinfeld [using a cell rather than Wi-Fi network] and was billed \$75,000 for that.”

The Tangoe app, which works with BlackBerry, Android, and Apple devices, helps you monitor your usage, and it send alerts when your phone is roaming or approaching its data usage limit. For instance, you can set 40MB as threshold for data use, and the app will warn you when you have used 50 percent of this amount.

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR APPS

Finally, turn off apps that push information to your phone, often without your realizing it, such as e-mail, Facebook, or your Web browser.

“You can launch an app to check the sports scores and forget to turn it off, and it can continually be updating scores or refreshing all the highlight videos in the background, and you’re paying for this,” says Rudich.

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