

5 ways to save money making calls abroad

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Imagine spending three beautiful weeks traveling in Italy, wandering the cobblestone side streets of medieval villages, spending nights in Rome and mornings on the Amalfi Coast...and then coming home to find you've amassed a \$230 cell phone bill.

Not a pretty thought.

But that's just what happened to my neighbor, who told me recently how making a couple of calls and sending some text messages meant she went from roaming the Tuscan hills to dealing with roaming charges.



Had I met her before she left I could have given her some simple, money-saving phone tricks that would've saved her a bundle.

1. Leave American phones behind: As a general rule, don't use U.S.-issued cell phones in foreign countries. Travelers get hit with sky-high roaming rates that add up fast, no matter what your provider. And even if you wanted to, technology standards vary from country to country, making it hard to figure out if the phone will even work in the first place. (For example, Sprint, Verizon and Bell phones use CDMA technology that rarely works outside North America, while T-Mobile, AT&T and Rogers' GSM networks allow their phones to function in more countries.)

2. Buy a local cell and SIM card—don't rent: Many companies offer international cell phone rental. Skip renting altogether. It's less expensive to buy a new or used phone when you arrive at your destination. On a recent trip to Peru, I purchased a used Nokia for \$25 at a market in Lima and a local SIM card for \$10. (SIM cards are removable memory chips that identify each wireless subscriber.)

The vendor "unlocked" the phone, which allowed me to use SIM cards in multiple countries, as you'll see in a moment. Then I went to a newsstand and bought \$5 worth of minutes that I activated by entering a PIN code. With this phone in hand, I could call locally within Peru. And anyone in Peru could call me, too, a perk if you make local friends. The whole process took about 30 minutes.

After hiking Machu Picchu, I traveled south to Copacabana, Bolivia, where I bought a new SIM card issued by a Bolivian company. Because the phone was "unlocked," I swapped out the Peruvian SIM and put in the Bolivian one. I had a new number, but I could call anywhere within Bolivia for pennies per minute.

The prepaid SIM card system is a bit foreign to those from the U.S. used to having a cell-phone plan. To change SIM cards, take out the phone's battery, remove the stamp-sized SIM behind it and swap in the new card.

3. Buy with Telesial or CellularAbroad: Some travelers aren't comfortable buying a phone in a foreign country. Language barriers can be an issue. Convenience is an issue for others. If this sounds like you, buy a phone from Telesial.com or CellularAbroad.com. These companies offer a range of phones for any budget—and the sales reps speak English.

4. Try Skype: If you can do without a cell phone, try Skype. Skype is cheap, it's easy and it's free when

connecting computer-to-computer with other Skype users. To call landlines and cell phones, rates usually cost 2.3 cents per minute. All you need is an Internet connection and the free Skype software. I advise investing in a headset (\$10-\$50) prior to travel, which improves the Skype experience—especially in noisy Internet cafés.

5. Prepaid calling cards: If you don't fancy Skype, then look into prepaid international call cards, which allow you to call home cheaply from any landline. To use a call card you must first call a toll-free access number and enter the card's PIN code. You'll then be prompted to dial the number of your friend or loved one back home. Rates range depending on the card and the country you're calling from, but generally cost between three to 25 cents per minute.

I'd recommend looking into the Fast World or Solaris cards available through Comfi.com, which can call the U.S. from over 95 countries worldwide. Keep in mind that these cards expire if you don't refill them within nine and 10 months, respectively.

