

SHORT TAKES

Using Your Cell Phone in Europe

Traveling without a cell phone seems unbearable these days. Here's our guide for avoiding pesky fees—because who factors "astronomical cell phone bill" into their vacation budget?

By JD Rinne, 2010-04-01 16:28:27

WHAT TO ASK YOUR SERVICE PROVIDER

"Will my phone work?"

Ask your service provider to be certain, but generally speaking, AT&T and T-Mobile operate on a wireless network that works in Europe (it's called GSM). Verizon and Sprint don't, with a few exceptions. A key question to ask about your device: Does it support quad-band frequencies? If the answer is yes, your phone will work in Europe. Also, be sure to ask if international roaming is enabled on your phone. If it's not, your provider can turn it on simply by hitting a button.

"Does it make sense to buy an international voice, text, and/or data plan?"

Think about how much you'll use your phone abroad. Is it just for emergencies? Or are you using it for local calls and texts, say with a group you're traveling with? If it's for emergencies only, going with your provider's per-minute charges is probably your best bet; that's \$1.29 per minute in Europe. If you're likely to use your cell phone more extensively, see the info below on rate plans, costs, and other alternatives.

"How do I turn off the data features on my phone (e-mail, etc.), so I don't get hit with a huge charge?"

If your phone connects automatically to the Internet, you'll pay data-plan rates whenever the phone downloads e-mail or connects to the Web. The result can be an astronomical bill you didn't know you were racking up. Every phone is different, so check the user manual or call customer service to turn off these features. AT&T has a [helpful guide for iPhone users](#) who are roaming internationally (and trust us—you can [get hit with major fees](#)). One overall tip: Use Wi-Fi on your phone instead of a 3G network to check e-mail; Wi-Fi is based in the local area (like the café you're in) and doesn't cost anything.

"What other fees should I expect?"

Your destination country may charge you applicable taxes and fees for using its networks locally. It's best to ask your provider.

"Should I buy a 'disposable' phone at my destination instead?"

Yes, if you don't want to worry about fees. You can get a phone at cell phone stores in touristy areas, at cell phone counters in department stores, and even at airports. Budget about \$40 to \$75 for a phone, which will usually include some prepaid calling time. You'll also have a local number, which means calls and texts within the country will be free.

"Will I get charged if someone calls my phone while I'm in Europe, even if I don't answer it?"

If your phone works in Europe, you can be charged for incoming calls, even if you don't answer them—and even if your phone is turned off! Normal international airtime rates apply (\$1.29 per

minute for all carriers), so tell people not to call or leave messages. You can also call your service provider to disable your voice mail, but note that setting it up again when you return will probably be a hassle.

PICK YOUR PROVIDER

AT&T

Will your phone work? Yes.

Costs \$1.29 per minute for voice, 50¢ per text. Data download (e-mail, apps, Internet usage) costs vary depending on the phone type.

Other options AT&T offers special [international rate plans](#) that bring the per-minute calling cost down to 99¢ and text messages to 20¢ (add the plan for about \$6 a month). Alternatively, you can swap out your SIM, the small card that acts as your phone's brain. It stores your number, your contacts, and other important info. A new SIM card will give you a local number, but your features (applications you've downloaded, namely) won't work. Buy a SIM card ahead of time from companies like [cellularabroad.com](#) and [telestial.com](#); prices range from \$20 to \$70.

You have to "unlock" your phone to replace the SIM. As a protection against theft, service providers "lock" phones (meaning the phone will work only with your specific SIM). AT&T will unlock your phone if you're a long-term customer in good standing. It will take a few days to get your phone unlocked, so plan ahead.

T-Mobile

Will your phone work? Yes (with a few exceptions, like Sidekicks).

Costs T-Mobile customers can call for \$1.29 a minute; texts cost 35¢ to send and 20¢ to receive. Download data for \$15 per megabyte.

Other options T-Mobile doesn't have any special rate plans. If you plan to make a lot of calls, try using a new SIM card. T-Mobile will unlock your phone if your account has been active for 90 days (it will take one to two days to get it unlocked).

Verizon

Will your phone work? Maybe. Verizon has [seven models](#) that use the GSM technology that works in Europe, such as the BlackBerry Tour and HTC Touch Pro2.

Costs If you have one of the seven models, voice is \$1.29 a minute. You can add a monthly \$5 plan to bring that down to 99¢ a minute. Texts always cost 50¢ to send and 5¢ to receive. Download data for \$20 per megabyte, or buy an international data plan that will offer a 100 megabyte monthly allowance (rates vary depending on the phone type).

Other options Verizon offers a free rental phone for up to three weeks. Standard calling rates apply. A new SIM card won't work in phones that are not GSM-compatible, so buy a disposable phone at the airport.

Sprint

Will your phone work? Maybe. Sprint has [five models](#) that are compatible with Europe's wireless technology.

Costs \$1.29 per minute for voice; 20¢ per text. Data download is about \$16 per megabyte.

Other options Sprint has a rental program that includes three phones that will work in Europe. One-week rentals range from \$29 to \$70, and insurance is suggested (starting at \$9 for a week's rental). Otherwise, buy a disposable phone when you get to your destination.



Your cell phone
may work perfectly
in Europe.

Here's how to
figure out what it'll
cost you.