



## Using Your Own Phone in Europe



By Rick Steves

Many travelers enjoy the convenience of bringing their own mobile phone to Europe. Some people also prefer to bring a tablet or laptop for emailing or blogging, uploading or editing photos, reading, and watching videos in their down time. Using your mobile device abroad isn't hard, and with a little preparation, you can text, make calls, and access the Internet without breaking the bank.

### How to Set Up (or Disable) International Service on Your Phone

Roaming with your own phone outside the US generally comes with extra charges, whether you are making voice calls, sending texts, or accessing data (going online over a cellular network rather than Wi-Fi, a.k.a., "data roaming"). If you plan to bring your own phone to Europe, start by assessing how you will to use it — whether you will be making a few or a lot of phone calls, sending and receiving text messages, and how freely and frequently you'll want to get online to check email, look up websites, access maps, get driving directions, or use other mobile apps.

Limit your data charges by taking advantage of Wi-Fi at cafés and other hotspots.

You can pay as you go on your normal plan for all three services. But the costs can add up (on average, about \$1.50/ minute for voice calls, 50 cents to send text messages, 5 cents to receive them, and \$20 to download one megabyte of data).

Travelers who want to stay connected at a lower cost can sign up for an international service plan through their carrier. Most offer some sort of global calling plan that cuts the per-minute cost of phone calls and a flat-fee data plan that includes a certain amount of megabytes. Your normal plan may already include international coverage, as T-Mobile's does. It's a fairly painless process:

1. **Confirm that your phone will work in Europe.** Nearly all newer phones work fine abroad (as do older phones purchased through AT&T and T-Mobile), but it's smart to check with your carrier if you're unsure.
2. **Research your provider's international rates.** Plan pricing varies wildly by carrier. Call your provider or check their website for the latest pricing.
3. **Activate international service.** A day or two before you leave, log on to your mobile phone account or call your provider to activate international roaming for voice, text, and/or data (whichever features you

plan to use), and sign up for any international plans.

4. **Cancel international service when you get home.** When you return from your vacation, cancel any add-on plans that you activated for your trip.

## Getting Online in Europe

With any laptop, tablet, or smartphone, you can get online via a Wi-Fi signal, which is usually free. If you have a mobile phone (smartphone or basic) or a cellular-enabled computer, you can get online over a cellular network, but you'll usually have to pay for it.

The most cost-efficient way to get online is to log on to Wi-Fi hotspots during your trip. Even if you have an international data plan, you're better off saving most of your online tasks for Wi-Fi.

If you plan to use any new apps on your device — such as language translators, ebook readers, or transportation or mapping apps — it's smart to download or update them before your trip, when bandwidth isn't an issue.

### Finding Wi-Fi in Europe

Most accommodations in Europe offer free Wi-Fi, but some — especially expensive hotels — charge a fee. In some hotels, Wi-Fi works great; in others, the signal is less reliable or doesn't work well (or at all) beyond the lobby (many European hotels are in old buildings with thick stone walls). Often it's good enough to shoot off an email, but too slow to stream movies or make a video call.

If Wi-Fi is important to you, ask about it when you book — and check that it'll be available in your room. As soon as I arrive at a hotel, I ask at the desk for the password and network name (in case several are in range), so I can log on right away.

When you're out and about, your best bet for finding free Wi-Fi is often at a café. They'll usually tell you their Wi-Fi password if you buy something. As in North America, most McDonald's and Starbucks in Europe offer free Wi-Fi.

You may also find Wi-Fi here and there throughout the day — for example at tourist offices, in city squares (for example, Marienplatz in Munich), within major museums (such as the Tate Modern in London), at public-transit hubs (such as many of London's train stations), and aboard some trains and buses (for instance, Austria's RailJet or on Portugal's long-distance buses). You may need to register or accept terms of service to get online, and some networks limit browsing time.

### Tips for Using Data Roaming Smartly

Using data roaming on your cellular network is handy for times when you can't find Wi-Fi. But while convenient, data roaming is also potentially expensive, depending on your international plan rates. You'll want to be conscious of how much data you're using, since you're probably paying for a limited amount of bandwidth. Still, data roaming can be worth it when you're out and about, need to get online, and don't want to waste your valuable vacation time hunting for a Wi-Fi hotspot.

Budgeting your data is easy if you follow these tips:

**Avoid using your cellular network for bandwidth-gobbling tasks.** Skyping, downloading apps, and watching YouTube all eat up megabytes and can wait until you're on Wi-Fi. (You're on a Wi-Fi network when you see the symbol for Wi-Fi in the corner of your screen — it looks like a half-rainbow.) If you use a navigation app like Google Maps, there are [ways to do so without using any cellular data](#). If you're lost and need to access a map and turn-by-turn directions, do so sparingly.

**Keep track of data usage.** Upon arrival in Europe, it's smart to start tracking how much data you're using. On your device's menu, look for an item like "cellular data usage" or "mobile data" and reset the counter at the start of your trip so you can see how many megabytes you've consumed. Some carriers automatically send a text message warning if you approach or exceed your limit and will let you upgrade your package without penalty.

**Limit automatic updates in your email and other apps.** By default, many mobile apps are set to constantly check for a data connection and update information. You can cut your data use by switching off this feature in your various apps. Start with your email: Go to your device's email settings and change them from "auto-retrieve" to "manual," or from "push" to "fetch." This means that you will have to manually download (or "fetch") your messages when you're on Wi-Fi rather than having them automatically downloaded (or "pushed") to your device. If you receive an email with a large photo, video, or other file, wait until you're on Wi-Fi to view it.

Other apps — such as news, weather, social media, and sports tickers — also automatically update. On some devices, you can select which apps are allowed to update via the cellular network. It's smart to disable these features in most of your apps so that they'll only update when you're on Wi-Fi.

**Disconnect from your cellular network altogether.** Because there are still ways that you can accidentally burn through data, I like the additional safeguard of manually turning off data roaming or cellular data (either works) whenever I'm not using it — check under "cellular" or "network," or ask your service provider how to do it. Then, when you need to get online but can't find Wi-Fi, simply turn it on long enough for the task at hand, then turn it off again. Another way to ensure you're not accidentally using data roaming is to put your device in "airplane" or "flight" mode, and then turn your Wi-Fi back on when needed (this disables phone calls and texts, as well as data).

If you're traveling with an unlocked smartphone, you can buy a SIM card that also includes data; this can be cheaper than data roaming through your home provider.

## Questions to Ask Your Carrier

If you're taking your own phone to Europe, look into your carrier's offerings for global calling, texting, and data. Call or look online to get these key questions answered:

- What are the **pay-as-you-go rates** for voice calling, text messaging, and data use for the countries I'm visiting? (If you don't plan to use your device much outside of a Wi-Fi hotspot, it may be cheaper to forego an international plan and simply pay the standard rates if you need to use your phone in an emergency.)
- How much would it cost to set up an **international calling plan** for the length of my trip?
- Under an international plan, how much would it cost per minute to **call from Europe to the US**? How much would it cost to make a voice call to a European number? (Rates may vary a bit depending on

- which countries you're visiting.)
- Under an international plan, how much would it cost to **send a text message**? How much to receive one?
- How much would it cost to get, say, 100 megabytes of **international data**? (For a ballpark figure, 100 MB lets you view roughly 500 websites, send/receive about 1,200 emails, stream about 30 minutes of standard-definition video, download about 150 maps — turn-by-turn directions eat up way more data, or upload about 150 posts to social media; keep in mind that you'll likely use far less data on the road than you do at home.)

## Resources for Staying Connected

- [Country Calling Codes](#) Dialing how-tos
- [HowtoCallAbroad.com](#) Dialing how-tos
- [This site's Tech Tips Forum](#) Tips from my readers

### Apps

- [Skype](#) Internet-based video and voice calls for most devices (and any computer it's installed on)
- [Google+ Hangouts](#) Internet-based video, voice, and messaging for Android and iOS devices (and through any computer's browser)
- [FaceTime](#) Internet-based video and voice calls between iOS devices
- [Viber](#) Video, voice, and messaging for mobile devices (and any computer it's installed on)
- [iMessage](#) Internet-based messaging between iOS devices (and Macs)
- [WhatsApp](#) Internet-based messaging between phones