

Staying Connected: Using Cell Phones Abroad

Studying abroad is one of the most rewarding and eye-opening experiences you'll have in your life. It is a wonderful time for making new connections and expanding your horizons; there's absolutely no reason why you should have to sever or ignore your connections to home because you're in a new country. It can be daunting to try and anticipate the needs you'll have internationally, so here's an easy guide to using your cell phone abroad without losing the connectivity to your loved ones that is absolutely crucial.

Exploring Options

1. Take Your Current Phone Abroad This may be your initial inclination, but it is not necessarily the most cost effective. The central benefit of it is that your family will still be able to call a local number at no extra charge, and if you are still locked into a contract you won't have to pay any cancellation fees. However, this will also limit you in terms of local contact (you'll need a way to keep in contact with all your new friends) and you will be heavily charged for international roaming.

2. Change Your SIM card Living in the US, there's actually a good chance you don't know what your SIM card is. It stands for Subscriber Identity Module and is a phone chip that identifies and stores your number and information so that it can be removed from a device; and this can often be a great option for bridging countries.

3. Buy a Local Phone and Number Don't forget the cost effective option of buying a cheap local phone when you get to the country!

1. Here is how to do it:

a) Check Your Phone.

To be able to go to the UK and Europe, phones need to be quad band enabled. This includes Blackberries, Razrs, and several other popular brands; in fact, most phones are going toward quad band status, so more are available than ever before. "Quad band" means that it operates on four different bands; different sections of the world broadcast cell phone signal on different frequencies, or bands, and a quad band will cover all four offered globally. If you're not sure about your cell phone, go to your cell phone provider's website; all of the major carriers have lists of phones that are supplied by their company and internationally compatible.

b) Check Your Provider.

T-Mobile: This is the best provider to take abroad, and arguably the best worldwide carrier. Their rates are just **\$.99 per minute** from all of the UK, Europe, and Eastern Europe, which is pretty impressive. On top of that, it's only 35 cents to send a message and 20 cents to receive one. All outgoing and incoming calls are charged at the international rate. Additionally, because they are such a major worldwide player, they have excellent international coverage. Activation

of the "Worldclass International Roaming" program is free and enables you to roam freely. Call 1 800 937 8997 to add it to your account.

ATT/Cingular: ATT/Cingular is a decent provider to take internationally. Their rates are **\$.99 per minute** from the UK and Europe, and **\$1.99 from Eastern Europe** if you participate in their World Traveler program at \$5.99 per month. If you choose not to participate in this program, prices jump to \$1.29 from UK/Europe, and \$2.29 from Eastern Europe. As far as text messaging goes, it's \$.50 to send a text and your home package rates apply for receiving texts, which is pretty good. To sign up for their program, simply call 1 800 331 0500.

Verizon Wireless: Verizon Wireless does not have a very good program at all. Their phones are only enabled to go as far as Canada and the Caribbean (and Asia, interestingly) but get absolutely no coverage in Europe or the UK unless you purchase one of three "Global Phone" handsets. With the Global Phone handsets and the Global Value plan (\$4.99 per month), your rates are \$.99 to the UK and Europe and \$1.49 for Eastern Europe, with \$.50 for every text sent and \$.05 for every text received. Without the Value plan, your rates go up to \$1.29 for the UK and Europe, and \$1.99 for Eastern Europe. Call 1 800 711 8300 to add this program to your phone or to discuss switching to a Global Phone.

Sprint Nextel: Sprint and TMobile are the only two providers to not require an additional fee for more cost effective traveling. Sprint offers rates of \$1.29 from the UK and Europe, and \$2.29 from Eastern Europe. Text messages are billed in a data package format at \$.016/kb; Sprint lists the average text message as 3kb, which makes it by far the cheapest available for texting. To enable international roaming on your Sprint Phone, call 1 888 226 7212.

With all of these plans, remember to enable services before you leave the country.

2. Change Your SIM Card Changing your SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) card is definitely one of the easiest and most cost efficient ways to go abroad. First you will need to locate a handset with a removable SIM. Because roaming and carrier-switching due to roaming is not as prevalent as it is in Europe and the UK, many phones will be "locked" meaning you cannot remove the SIM card and swap it with another because the SIM is actually integrated into the battery. If you talk to your provider, they will definitely point you to quad band and unlocked phones, especially a provider like TMobile, which as I've mentioned before is a major worldwide carrier with divisions in every country I've ever been to.

Here's how this plan works:

a) **Locate a Handset.** As mentioned before, this has to be quad-band (so that you can pick up wireless signal anywhere in the world) and unlocked. To check if your phone already is, remove the battery cover and locate a small plastic rectangle that appears as though one corner has been snapped off. If this is a sticker on the battery, your phone is locked. If it is a piece of plastic that you can slide in and out, you're good to go.

b) **Secure a Home SIM card.** Most likely at time of purchase you will have a SIM card from the phone carrier with your American cell phone number attached to it. If you do not have one, call

your carrier and ask them to provide you with one. Read the section above if you are unsure what carrier to go with.

c) **Secure a Second SIM.** When you reach your destination country, choose a provider (read the section below to determine a carrier). You will be able to buy the SIM separately from the phone in Europe, usually with only a "top-up", or deposit into a pay as you go account. Because you are unlikely to have credit history or need for a contract in your destination country, pay as you go is the most sensible idea.

d) **Set a Schedule.** Perhaps you will set a two hour block every night to call home, or to leave that SIM card in the phone so you can receive calls if necessary. During the day, it is most likely that you will want to be a text away from your friends, but to get the most out of the two-card system, set a schedule that most family and friends will be aware of to contact you. You can never use both SIM cards at once, so you will have to manually switch back and forth between cards.

3. Buy a Local Phone and Number Now of course, the final option is to get a local number in your destination country with an accompanying handset. If you have an eye out for frugality, you can get a phone starting at about \$20 USD (obviously it won't be in that currency, but it will be roughly equivalent). Most students get a pay as you go phone; despite the fact that contract phones are much more cost effective immediately, is unlikely that you will be able to get one (you aren't likely to have a viable credit history in your destination country) and most have minimum contracts of eighteen months now. This option does mean your family has to call long distance to contact you, but it is the most effective for local contact.

a) **Where to Buy them:** If you aren't near a dedicated cell phone store (always going to be your best bet) look into variety stores, like Woolworths in the UK, and large chain grocery stores. You can even often buy them online if you have internet access. Most phones will come with an accompanying SIM card so you do not have to buy it separately, but it can still be removed.

b) **What Provider to Buy:** If you intend to be traveling a lot, you should go with the larger providers that carry throughout Europe, or at least transfer onto affiliated satellites. As I mentioned, T-Mobile is a massive carrier, as are Vodafone and O2. Also, wait a day or two before you buy; it is worth asking someone who goes to your university or lives in your dorm what providers have worked out for them because this will give you the best idea of local coverage.

c) **Keep in Mind:** In Europe and the UK especially, because of the prevalence of pay as you go plans and the subsequent price difference between calls (more expensive) and texts (less expensive), most students will do most of their business via text. Keep that in mind when choosing a phone and a provider (though most rates are fairly competitive on pay as you go).

Additional Considerations

Keep in mind that as you travel throughout the UK and Europe, extended vacations will be most cost effective by buying a new local SIM card. Short trips will be best managed by swallowing the roaming costs on your pay as you go.

For keeping in touch with family back home, often a Voice Over Internet Phone (VOIP) is a very cheap and reliable option. [Vonage](#), for example, is a great option; if you buy a Vonage unit in the states and register it with a local phone number, you can then carry it overseas and connect it to an internet connection. It creates a very cheap (starting at 15 dollars a month for 500 minutes) way to talk to family and friends with a local home number. This incurs no additional charges on either you or your friends and family calling you, despite the fact that your US number is now overseas. [Skype](#) also offers a cheap VOIP option, with only your computer and a microphone as the additional required equipment. Both are great options to consider.

Recently Mobal has been getting attention, but you will both have to buy a new handset (or rent one by the day) and pay higher call fees than you would with international roaming plans on your US carrier. All in all, not worth the effort.

(Source: [Cell Phones.org](#))

Additional Resources

- **Piccell Wireless** (<https://www.piccellwireless.com/latest/index.php>)
 - ✓ Offers phones for sale or to rent, global SIM cards, and US virtual number.
- **Ekit** (www.ekit.com or www.myisic.ekit.com)
 - ✓ Offers prepaid international low cost cell phones, SIM cards, and global calling cards.
- **International Cellular** (www.internationalcellular.com)
 - ✓ ICS rents cell phones, blackberry, satellite phones, world phones, and even handheld GPS systems.
- **World Cellular Rental** (www.worldcr.com)
 - ✓ Offers short-term leases for international cell phones and wireless mobile devices to Americans & Canadians traveling to anywhere in the world.
 - ✓ International cell phone, satellite phone, or a Blackberry (RIM) can be mailed directly to you or you may pick-up at one of their many locations across North America.
- **Cell Hire** (<http://www.cellhire.com>)
 - ✓ Rents out country specific SIM cards, so any incoming calls are free.
 - ✓ Education abroad discount available that cancels out the rental fee for up to 20 weeks.