

How To Use A Smartphone And Data Plans Abroad

courtesy of the Savvy Backpacker

There is no denying that smartphones and data plans come in super handy when you're traveling — especially for things like Google Maps and getting restaurant recommendations on the go. Unfortunately, using your iPhone, Android, or other smartphones in Europe can be a little confusing, and *expensive* if you're not careful.

Things get even more confusing because each carrier handles things differently, so some charge a huge amount to use your phone abroad and some offer free service.

This guide should help clear up any questions you might have any help you find the best option for your travel style.

The Basics: Phones And Data Plans In Europe

Will Your Phone Work Abroad?

Short Answer: Yes. Any modern phone that's newer than an iPhone 4S *should* work in Europe.

Long Answer: Some carriers in the US use a different wireless technology than what is used throughout all of Europe — which means that some US phones simply won't work in Europe.

Europe uses a system called GSM (Global System for Mobiles) but two American carriers (Verizon and Sprint) use CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access). All the other major US carriers use GSM, so no worries there.

Luckily, most new phones offered via Verizon and Sprint can now connect to both GSM and CDMA networks. For example, anything newer than an iPhone 4S will work perfectly fine in Europe. If you have an Android or Windows phone through Verizon and Sprint, be sure to check if it's a "world phone" (i.e., it's GSM compatible) — most modern phones should be fine.

If your phone isn't compatible, check with your service provider as some will rent you a phone for a few weeks/months.

Ways To Use Your Phone In Europe

International Roaming (Easy But Expensive)

Most American carriers have partnerships with carriers overseas so your phone will automatically connect to that partner's mobile/data services. You don't have to do anything. It just connects.

The downside? International roaming, especially when it comes to using data, can be insanely expensive. You can easily spend \$50 sending a few emails and viewing a web page or two. Even a short call or a few text messages can cost you a lot.

Some carriers — Sprint and T-Mobile have free international roaming so you have nothing to worry about. Other carriers, like Verizon and AT&T don't have free international roaming so those charges can get expensive very quickly.

International Data Plan (Easy But Slightly More Affordable)

Your carrier undoubtedly has a few specific plans for international travel. These plans, which usually cost an extra fee on top of your normal bill, enable you to use data, voice, and text as a slightly more reasonable price.

You'll still pay quite a bit for data — around \$20 for 100MB-200MB of data. For reference, you can burn through 100MB of data by streaming a few Youtube videos, so it really isn't very much. However, if you just want to send a few emails and do very minimal web surfing, this could be a viable option. Voice and text are still fairly expensive but it isn't too outrageous — especially if you use them sparingly.

If you're on a budget and you're cool with trying to use free Wi-Fi as much as possible, this is a pretty reasonable option. Check your provider's website for details.

Pre-Paid SIM Card w/ Data (A Hassle But Most Affordable)

The cheapest option is purchasing a pre-paid SIM card in Europe from a European mobile carrier. To do this, you'll most likely need to “unlock” your phone so it can accept SIM cards from other carriers. The problem is that most phones sold in the US are “locked” to your mobile provider — which means that your phone won't work if you install a SIM card from another carrier (this is basically a way for mobile companies to keep you from switching carriers)

Before you do anything, contact your carrier to see if they'll unlock it. Tell them you're traveling overseas. A lot of times they'll do it. If you've paid off the phone or if you're no longer under contract then they're required by law to unlock it for you.

If your carrier is being a pain then you can technically work around this through a third party. There are a lot of online services that will do it for you — for a fee of course. The process is fairly simple — you enter some information into a website, pay, and then the company will email you a special unlock code for your phone. You just follow the instructions they give you. It's usually a pretty painless process. You'll have to do your own search as we don't have any specific recommendations.

Alternatively, many small, independent mobile phone shops in Europe will unlock your phone for about \$20-\$30.

Again, this method is a hassle unless you're traveling for a long period of time or you really need to use a lot of data.

Where To Buy SIM Cards

Once your phone is unlocked it's ready to accept any SIM card. It's best to purchase a SIM card once you get to Europe. Every country has multiple carriers, and they should all be fairly similarly priced. There are services in the US that will sell you a SIM card before you go but you'll pay a premium for the convenience.

Each country has its own laws about purchasing SIM cards. In some countries, you can buy them from grocery stores, kiosks, or even vending machines. In some countries, like France, you have to buy them from a mobile phone store (and be prepared to show your passport).

The SIM card will normally come with some credit (voice, text, and data) and you purchase more credits when needed. Additional credit can usually be purchased at convenience stores, grocery stores, or mobile phone shops. All you need to do is simply pay the cashier and they'll give you a code that you enter into your phone.

However, you should be aware of roaming fees between countries. For example, if you use a French SIM card in Germany, you'll get charged an inflated rate. The European Union has passed a law that prohibits this practice within the EU, but it's still waiting to go into effect. So, until then, you'll need to buy a new SIM card in each country in order to get the best price.

A Look At US Carrier Plans And Options

As stated earlier, each US carrier has different plans so we're going to try listing out the different available plans. As always, check with your carrier for the most up-to-date/accurate information as plans/prices change often. Let's be honest... it probably doesn't make sense to switch phone plans just because you're going on a trip to Europe. However, you should check out all the plans offered by your current provider to see what works for you.

T-MOBILE: T-Mobile made some headlines a few years ago when they started offering free and unlimited international data, and text, and cheap international calls on all their plans. This made T-Mobile a very popular choice for budget travelers. Don't expect blazing fast internet though as most of the time you'll only get a 2G or maybe a 3G connection. However, for basic stuff, it's usable. If you want more speed, you can buy an upgraded plan. Visit the T-Mobile website.

SPRINT: In response to T-Mobile, Sprint also started offering free unlimited international data and text, and cheap international calling (\$.20/min) on all their plans. Data speeds are always 2G but you can buy upgrades to boot your data to 3G speeds. Again, 2G will feel pretty slow if you're used to 4G but it's enough for basic things. Visit the Sprint website for more information.

If you want 3G speed, you'll need to upgrade to the Sprint Global Roaming Speed Pass plan which is:

- **1 Day** — 100MB for \$15.
- **7 Day** — 200MB for \$25.
- **14 Day** — 500MB for \$50.

VERIZON: Verizon doesn't really have any affordable options for international travelers. All their plans are expensive and you don't really get much data. Visit the Verizon website for more information.

TravelPass - For an extra \$10/day you can basically take your normal plan and use it in Europe. You do get 4G speed on the first 500MB of data but then the speed is throttled down after that.

Monthly International Travel Pricing - The monthly international travel plan is an extra \$25/month or \$40/month depending on the plan. However, you only get 100MB of data for the entire month — which is next to nothing. Additionally, phone calls and texts are still expensive on the \$25/month plan.

Pay as You Go pricing - You can also pay as you go but it's still really expensive. Data is \$2.05/MB and texts cost \$.50 each.

AT&T: AT&T is much like Verizon so don't expect cheap international data or talk/text. Check out the AT&T website for more information.

AT&T International Day Pass - For an extra \$10/day you can take your existing AT&T plan and use it in Europe. There are some conditions so read up on those. Also, make sure you don't accidentally use any data when you don't want to because that's an automatic \$10 daily charge.

AT&T Passport - The AT&T Passport plan is an extra \$40/month. However, you only get 200MB of data for the entire month — which is next to nothing. Additionally, phone calls are \$1/minute but texts are free.

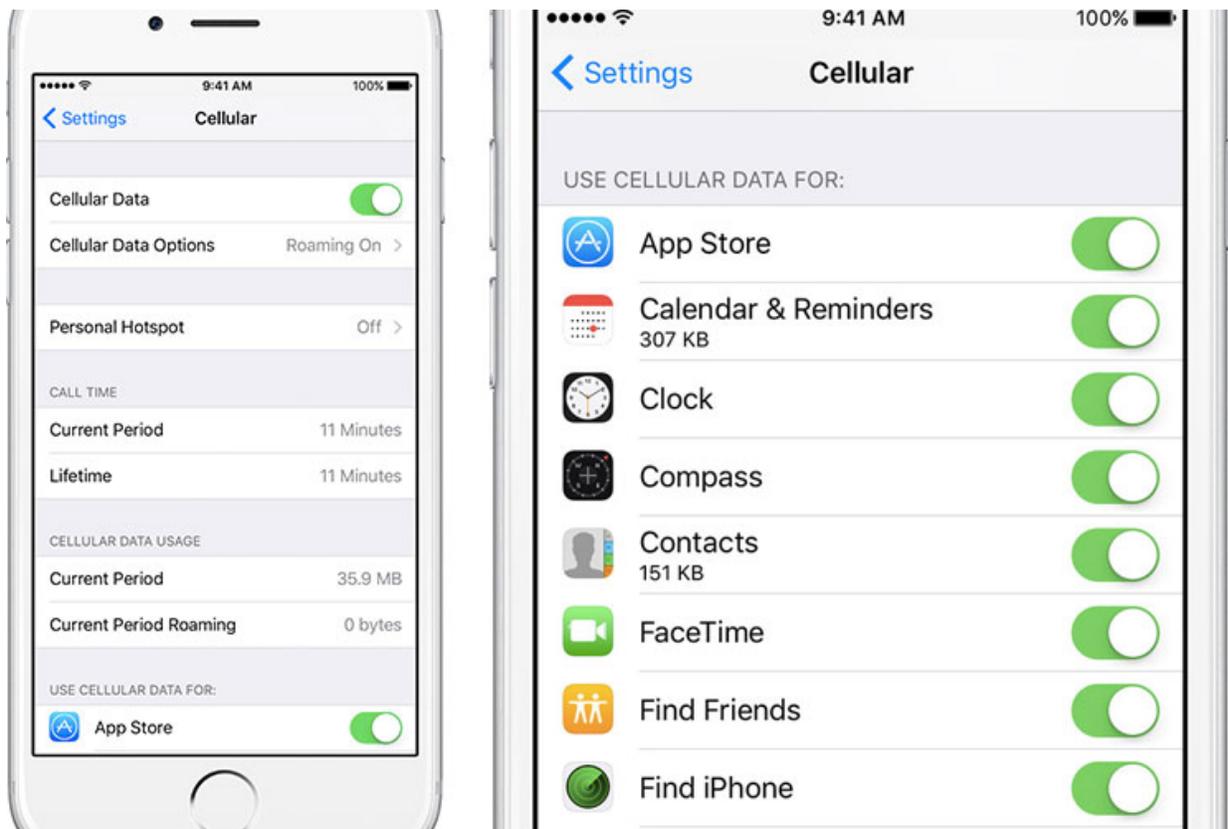
Do You Even Need A Data Plan?

The short answer: No. You can probably get by with using free WiFi that's fairly prevalent at coffee shops, restaurants, and various other locations. A lot of times you don't need to use the internet until you're back at the hotel. Or you'll stop into a coffee shop or McDonald's in a pinch.

The Long Answer: Doing without is tough but doable. It's fairly easy to find free Wi-Fi in most cities, but it's not always super convenient, reliable, or fast — just be aware of that. Additionally, availability does drop considerably once you leave the big/medium-sized cities. The best places to find free Wi-Fi are McDonald's (some make you purchase something first), Starbucks, cafés, and hotels. You might have to buy something to get the password, just an FYI.

If you mainly use the internet for Google Maps and for looking up restaurants while you're on the go (especially lunch, having instant access to the internet is a huge convenience. Again, you don't *need* internet access but it's nice to have. It is also nice to have access to texting and phone service. You may want to make dinner reservations over the phone.

Tips For Using Only Wifi And/Or Lowering Your Data Usage



Caution: It's easy to unknowingly run up a lot of data charges because a many apps use data in the background. Facebook, email, Instagram, Snapchat... those all constantly use data throughout the day without you knowing it.

That's why I'll put my phone in **Airplane Mode** because that disables all data (but GPS still works in Airplane Mode). You can also go into the settings and disable data access to each individual app. I'll go in and turn every app off except for Google Maps and Yelp, so when I turn off Airplane Mode those are the only two apps that will use data. Then I'll turn Airplane Mode back on when I'm done.

Offline Apps: Many apps can be used offline so you don't have to worry about eating up all your data. For example, CityMaps2Go and MapsWithMe are the two best offline city map apps. Basically, you download the city map and then the app uses the built-in GPS function to pinpoint your location (**GPS doesn't use/need a data connection to function**). These apps will save you a ton of money and stress, so make sure you download them *before* you're abroad.

Calls Over WiFi: WhatsApp is an excellent app for free calling and text messages. Other apps are Skype and Google Voice.

So, Should You Get A Data Plan?

If you only make a few calls, send a few texts, and use minimal data then it's probably best to just pay as you go. Sure, it will be expensive for what you get but it's cheaper than paying for a plan.

If you want to use limited data for everyday usage then it makes sense to get a cheap plan — while closely monitoring your data usage.

Other Tips And Advice

- Do you just want a dumbphone to make calls and texts? Your best bet is to buy a cheap pre-paid phone once you're in Europe. They usually cost \$10-\$20 and come with \$5-\$10 worth of credit. You can add credit as needed.
- Texting is often called SMS in Europe.
- Many mobile phone companies will let you "pause" your contract, so this is a good option if you're traveling for an extended period of time. It will usually cost a little each month, but you won't be stuck paying for an expensive phone plan back home that you won't be using.
- In Europe, you're usually only charged for calls and texts that you make, but incoming calls and texts are free. Check your plan.
- Some pre-paid credit is only valid for a few weeks once activated, so be sure to know when it expires. You don't want to buy a ton of credit all at once and then find out it expires after 30 days. In this case, it might make more sense to buy credit in smaller chunks.
- If you're feeling overwhelmed with all this phone mumbo-jumbo, you can always rent a phone that's all ready to go. There are a handful of companies that provide this service. You're going to pay a premium for the convenience, but you won't have to worry about dealing with anything.
- Use apps like Skype to make international calls back home — just be sure you're using Wi-Fi.
- Even the cheapest data plan can run up a huge bill if you're not careful, so it's wise to use Wi-Fi whenever possible.
- The most secure way to make online purchases is through your data plan — not Wi-Fi.
- There are long-term data contracts in Europe, but they're generally only available to European citizens. Most people aren't traveling for long enough to take advantage of these long-term contracts.
- SIM cards come in multiple sizes, so be sure you know which size your phone needs.

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