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**How to Avoid a Smartphone’s Bite**

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**Correction Appended**

Travel and smartphones go together - and these days, texting, updating Facebook and good old tweeting-while-eating are the least of it. Instant access to Yelp, TripAdvisor and endless other apps helps with everything from choosing an entree, tracking down discounts, posting a photo and checking the traffic ahead. Add a healthy dose of old-fashioned phone calls from poolside or mountain trail, and you might say staying connected has become something close to a constitutional right.

Just one catch: leave the country and your smartphone plan - much like the Constitution - no longer has you covered.

As many people have learned the hard way, [calling and texting while abroad can bring painful bills](http://ipod.about.com/u/ua/internationaliphone/iphone-roaming.htm) (http://ipod.about.com/u/ua/internationaliphone/iphone-roaming.htm); using data services can lead to insolvency. That's because standard international roaming rates are outrageous: $2, $3 or even $5 a minute, 50 cents for a text message. A megabyte of data costs $15 to $20. That means that checking the status of your Facebook friends can cost about $3 or $4. That's a lot to see your high school classmate's backyard tomato plant.

The good news is there are ways to save. The bad news is there are lots and lots of ways, some complementary and none perfect. Here's how I'd break it down for five kinds of budget travelers.

**The Blissfully Disconnected**

*You're the type who leaves your cellphone and laptop at home, because traveling is about getting away from it all.*

What you should do: Write out your itinerary with hotels and contact numbers and leave it with loved ones. Try not to break your quill pen while doing so.

But be aware: The world doesn't really cater to your type anymore. Many budget hotels don't bother with phones in rooms, and good luck finding a pay phone to make a dinner reservation or to check what time a museum closes. Better hope the local farmers speak English when you get lost biking. Send me a telegram and let me know how it goes.

**The Semi-Connected**

*You don't feel the need for constant connectivity, and can wait until you're connected to your hotel's or hostel's Wi-Fi network to call home, check e-mail and plan the next day's activities.*

What you should do: Once you connect to Wi-Fi, e-mail, Web browsing and online chat are free. But phone calls are not, so be sure you have an account with an app like [Google Voice](http://www.google.com/mobile/voice/) or [Skype](http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/get-skype/) that can dial out to real world numbers. Calling the United States is as low as one cent a minute; calling other countries (like the one you're in - to make dinner reservations, to check on hotel vacancies, and contact local friends) is usually something like one-tenth the price of the standard cellphone plan.

Choosing the company is a matter of personal preference. [Google Voice has lower rates](https://www.google.com/voice/rates) than [Skype](http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/prices/payg-rates/) to virtually every country and is especially easy if you already use Gmail. Skype is reasonable too and maintains a loyal following. There are many other competitors, and all them claim to be revolutionary and cheap, but I've yet to find one that can beat the reach and dependability of those two.

Keep in mind that while offering "free Wi-Fi" is practically an industry standard at budget hotels, and even some campgrounds, it can mean many things. A system that's always online, is acceptably fast and actually works in your room (rather than the lobby) seems more the exception than the rule.

Finally, when you go out for the day, bring your smartphone along for emergency calls and even for the occasional 50-cent text message if you make local friends or split with travel companions and need to meet up. Just be sure the international data roaming is turned off.

**The Moderates**

*You love to make friends in a new country and want to be able to call and text them later. Tweeting every minute is too much, but you would like to alert your friends the moment you've reached the mountaintop/seen the Mona Lisa/eaten a bug. You want the option of checking with TripAdvisor or Yelp to decide between two restaurants. You need to check your e-mail occasionally.*

What you should do: If your phone is "unlocked," meaning you can use other providers, get an international SIM card. I tested two this summer, [Telestial](http://www.telestial.com/)'s Passport card ($19) and [OneSimCard](http://www.onesimcard.com/)'s Standard card ($30). They have slightly different features, but each works more or less the same way. Your main phone number, once you insert the card, is not American.

For Telestial, it's a British number; for OneSimCard, it's Estonian. Telestial also provides you with an American number - OneSimCard offers it for $5 a month - that allows friends and family back home to text or call as if you had a local number. (You are charged 20 cents a minute to receive the call, though.)

Web browsing was surprisingly affordable in many places; in Scandinavia, it was 49 cents a megabyte on Telestial, which was enough to keep up with e-mail, tweet regularly and use the occasional app or Google search. Prices have dropped recently, to as little as 10 cents a megabyte with a $99 bundle from Telestial or 25 cents a megabyte with OneSimCard's Daily Data Package.

For pure Web browsing, install the [Opera Mini app](http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/opera-mini-web-browser/id363729560?mt=8), a free, intuitive browser that saves money by compressing data to a fraction of what Safari or Chrome or many other mobile browsers do.

Most of the time, you can travel from one country to another and your phone is unfazed, simply switching from one local company to another. (Data rates will change, but you can find them easily online.) You load your phone with credits and set your account to reload automatically.

But the international SIM cards can be quirky. For instance, to make a call, you enter the number and press enter or send. The call is instantly disconnected, and sometimes weird codes appear on the screen. Seconds later, the phone rings. You pick up, and then it connects your call. It's weird at first, but you get used to it. My biggest complaint, especially with Telestial, was that calls sometimes did not connect - and occasionally forced me to restart my phone to try again.

If that sounds too frustrating and you're an AT&T or Verizon customer, consider their newly competitive international data plans. [AT&T, for example, now offers $30 a month rates](http://www.wireless.att.com/learn/international/roaming/affordable-world-packages.jsp) that allow 120 megabytes of usage in over 140 countries. The cost of voice minutes, though, is still very high and can't compete with the international SIMs. A final note: though the rates sound reasonable, beware. You can easily fall into your home habits and stay overconnected. Don't. For a while, I was running through $10 or $15 of data a day.

**The Power Users**

*You want connectivity 24/7, and you'll sacrifice convenience - but not too much money - for it.*

What you should do: Buy local SIM cards. It's the cheapest way to go. But it's also the biggest hassle. Make that hassles.

First, you'll need to research and compare domestic companies' rates and coverage for each country you're visiting.

Then once you find a place to buy the card, you'll have to activate it and get used to its systems (for dialing, adding credit, and so on). If credit disappears faster than you think it should, there's little recourse. (The companies mentioned earlier have excellent American- or Australian-based customer service.)

Finally, while in some countries getting a local SIM card is as simple as handing cash to a street vendor, in others you have to fill out paperwork, provide documents and sometimes even travel across the city to register and activate your account.

**The Addicts**

*You looked up from your smartphone once, and you didn't like what you saw. Your greatest fear is that you'll die and find out that heaven doesn't have a Wi-Fi connection.*

Unless you just won a mega-lottery, forget about foreign travel for now. Head to some cozy spot in the United States where you and your smartphone can spend some uninterrupted quality time together. Find a cafe, check in there on [Four Square](https://foursquare.com/), snap a picture of yourself and post it to Instagram, and remember not to leave before praising your [latte's foam design on Yelp](http://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/filter-coffeehouse-and-espresso-bar-washington?select=KEXuKZH5m8QZiyVAtjlg3g#KEXuKZH5m8QZiyVAtjlg3g).

A trip abroad can wait, because, while [there are a few companies that offer international plans](http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2381232,00.asp) for "Mi-Fi" devices, a sort of mobile hot spot with large data allowances in specific countries, they are still prohibitively expensive for budget travelers and won't cover you everywhere anyway.

***Correction: September 30, 2012***

*The Frugal Traveler column last Sunday, about keeping smartphone charges down when traveling abroad, misstated the price for one of the international SIM cards the reporter tested this summer. Telestial's Passport card is $19, not $20.*

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