Buying a SIM Card in Europe: The cheapest way to use a smartphone while traveling

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This NanoSIM card might be small, but its savings are huge. Photo: EuroCheapo

Last month I spent two weeks visiting **Paris** and traveling around Bordeaux and the Loire Valley. To stay connected with my American iPhone this time around, I decided to try out a new strategy.

Rather than purchasing a $30 “Passport” package from AT&T before leaving (as **we discussed in this series of posts**), I instead bought a SIM card package in Paris from a French phone carrier for €39. Once

I popped it into my phone, I just used my smartphone as I normally would, although I now was dialing with a French phone number.

The experience was actually much simpler than I had imagined, and, in the end, provided me with a much more cost-effective way of using my iPhone while traveling outside the States. The biggest difference? I used my phone freely for calls, emailing and even browsing the Web, and never even got close to exhausting my plan. All that fretting over data use–gone.

I'll explain how I did it, and the various options I had below. But first, let's quickly review the choices you face when traveling abroad with your phone.

Traveling abroad? Your smartphone options

As we've discussed in **this series of posts**, travelers from North America have several options for using their smartphones when visiting Europe. These include:

• **Purchasing an international package from your carrier:** You could sign up for an international phone/texting/data package from your carrier (for example, **AT&T's "Passport" packages**). You will pay for these packages as an "add on" to your normal bill, and they will usually grant you some combination of data transfer (for emailing, using the Web and apps) and text messages. They will also usually lower your per-minute charge for using your telephone, although it'll still probably cost you about $1 per minute. (Read about **AT&T's** and **Verizon's** plans.)

• **Winging it without a package:** Many American tourists just wing it, and plan to simply limit their phone use or "try to keep it turned off". While this is an option, be advised that without a package, charges for texts and phone calls are more expensive, and data transfer charges are usually astronomically high. If you plan to use data (rather than

Wi-Fi) to check your email or use the Web during your trip, this isn't a good idea. (One notable exception is T-Mobile, which offers its "Simple Choice" customers free international data and calls for only $. 20 per minute.)

Some travelers who "wing it" place their phone into "airplane mode" for most of the trip, restricting email and Web browsing to times when they're connected to a Wi-Fi network. Others just keep their cellular data and roaming off, and use their phones for texting and calling. Still, expensive dangers lurk (especially if you haven't **set up your phone correctly**).

And now, add this to the list of options:
• **Purchasing a SIM card abroad:** You can also purchase a SIM card from a local phone carrier in Europe. As we'll discuss below, you can either use it in your regular US smartphone (if your phone permits it), use it in an old phone that is SIM-card compatible, or buy a cheap phone (either back home before you leave or once in Europe) for the new SIM card.

Options, options… Looking over the SIM cards available for purchase at a "Relay" newsstand at Charles de Gaulle airport. Photo: EuroCheapo

The benefits of buying a SIM card abroad

Why would go through the hassle of all this? Because buying and using a SIM card in Europe will almost certainly be far cheaper than using your home carrier while traveling abroad. When using a SIM card from a European carrier, you're buying a new phone number and have access to the same low-cost dialing options available to locals.

There are many, many European phone carriers, and each offers different SIM cards, packages and options. Broadly speaking, to make this work for you, you'll need to purchase two things:

1. a SIM card (which gives your phone the actual phone number), and

2. credits to make phone calls and use data

During my trip to France last month, I purchased a **€39 SIM package from Orange**, one of France's largest carriers. This package, aimed at international travelers, offers:

- a SIM card with a French phone number
- 120 minutes of phone calls throughout Europe (placed or received)
- 1,000 text messages throughout Europe (sent or received)
- 1 GB of data transfer throughout Europe (at 3G speeds)

Sounds great, right? I didn't even come close to using all of my minutes, let alone my text messages or my Gig of data! (I could dial #123# to track my usage.) If, however, I had exhausted my plan, I could have recharged it by buying Orange credits at any newsstand.

Compare that to AT&Ts $30 "Passport" package (which lowers your per-minute calls to $1 per minute and offers only 120 MB data) and you'll see that Orange packs a lot more juice. (Sorry.)

And note: This is by no means the best deal out there, nor are we promoting this particular offer. This was the most convenient for me, as I was a bit hesitant about setting up my phone for the first time.

Orange operates stores throughout France and is staffed with friendly folks who will set your phone up for you.

You'll see plenty of SIM-related packages at newsstands in France and throughout Europe, like SFR's "Call Cheap" package for visitors. Photo: EuroCheapo

How does it work?

A SIM ("subscriber identification module") card is a small chip that you place inside your phone that controls your actual phone number and can also store your contacts. These are sold by cellular carriers and are **used in all phones that operate using GSM technology** (and some newer CDMA phones, as well).

Europe's mobile phone carriers use GSM technology. In the US, **AT&T and T-Mobile use GSM**, while **Verizon and Sprint use another technology, CDMA**. If your phone uses CDMA, you should verify with

your carrier whether or not your phone operates using a SIM card. (Many of the newer smartphones do.)

(Note: All iPhones use SIM cards, except for a **CDMA version of the iPhone 4** produced for Verizon and Sprint customers.)

In my case, I have an iPhone 5 and my carrier back home is AT&T — it uses GSM technology and a SIM card. Once my phone has been unlocked (see below), I can easily pop open the SIM card slot (on the right-hand side of the phone), remove the card, and pop in another SIM card that I buy abroad.

When my phone reboots with the new SIM card, I'm in business and operating with a brand new phone number.

What about locked phones?

But wait, before you get too excited about using your phone abroad, you need to make sure that it will work with European SIM cards! Unsurprisingly, US cellphone carriers are not exactly eager for you to start shopping around for cheaper calling options. To make the SIM swap more difficult, many carriers "lock" their phones, preventing the customer from using a SIM card from another carrier. If your phone is locked and you load up another carrier's SIM card, it simply won't work.

To get around this, you'll need to "unlock" your phone. Many American phones are eligible for being unlocked as soon as they go out of contract, or any service or payment installments are paid off.

• **AT&T customers:** If you qualify (or to check to see if you qualify), **submit a request to AT&T to unlock your phone or tablet**. They will then send you instructions on how to unlock your phone.

• **T-Mobile customers:** Read the conditions for **unlocking your phone here**. Note that T-Mobile requires you to download a special app to unlock your phone. (But again, as noted above, T-Mobile customers with "Simple Choice" plans already get free texting and data throughout Europe, and calls at $.20 per minute. You might not want to go through any of this — lucky you!)

• **Verizon customers:** Many Verizon phones are not locked. **Read more here**.

In my case, my iPhone 5 was out of contract. I filled out AT&T's form, received detailed instructions on how to unlock it, backed up my phone on iTunes, and then reinstalled my data from a backup.
If it sounds complicated, it wasn't. Within about an hour I had backed up, jumped through some hoops, restored my backed up data to my phone, rebooted… and *voila*, it was unlocked and ready to go.

What happens if you can't unlock your phone?

If you can't unlock your phone, don't despair. You can simply use another phone. Some people, after all, prefer to use a second phone anyhow, leaving their regular phone on standby throughout their trip in case it receives important calls or text messages. (Remember, if you swap a SIM card into your normal phone, you'll be changing your phone number.)

Here are some other phones you could use:

• **Use an old phone.** Most people have an old mobile phone sitting around at home in the back of a drawer somewhere. While it might not be a cutting-edge smartphone, it could still do the job for your trip. Check out your collection of old phones to see if any of them operate with SIM cards.

• **Buy a cheap phone in Europe.** Really cheap phones are easy to come by in Europe, and some SIM card packages aimed at tourists even come with a phone to use! In France, for example, the carrier SFR offers a package with a SIM card and cheapo phone. While most of these phones won't be "smart" (you're not going to be updating your favorite apps or checking email), they can be used to make calls and send text messages.

• **Buy a cheap phone before leaving for Europe.** You can also pick up a cheap SIM-card compatible smartphone for as little as $20 in the US before taking off at major retailers like Walmart and Target. When shopping for a cheap "no contract" phone, just make sure it takes a SIM card.

Popping out the SIM card on an iPhone 5C. Photo: **roberrific**

How do you install the SIM card?

So you have an unlocked phone and have purchased a SIM card in Europe. Now you just need to install it in your phone.

While the installation process is different for every device, the process should be as simple as powering off your phone, locating the SIM compartment, popping it open, removing the current card, and placing your new SIM card inside. When you power on your device, you usually will need to dial an activation number (provided with the card), and you should be good to go.

On the iPhone 4, 5, and 6, the slot is located midway along the right-hand side of the device. (The slot on the iPhone 3 is at the top of the device.) The slot can be opened by inserting a small point (such as the head of a pin or paperclip) into the hole. (Read **more about loading a SIM card** on Apple.com)

Important note: It's very important that you put your old SIM card in a safe spot! Don't lose this card — it's your home phone number!

A sign for the “Orange Holiday” package geared to international tourists in France. Photo: EuroCheapo

Buying SIM cards in Europe

Although rules and regulations about the buying and selling of SIM cards vary depending on the country, in most European countries you can easily buy a SIM card in just minutes from cellphone stores, newsstands, tobacco shops… even vending machines in some relaxed countries! Other countries may require that you register with a passport or other form of identification.
Most commonly, you can buy SIM cards at:

• **Newsstands and unaffiliated cellphone store:** In France, for example, most newsstands at train stations and airports sell a variety

of SIM-card products, including the cards, credits, and packages. These shops will sell you SIM cards offered by **Orange**, **SFR**, **Bouygues Telecom**, low-cost **Lycamobile**, and other carriers.

• **Carrier-specific stores:** Don't be afraid to drop into mobile carriers' stores, as well. Be aware, however, that they'll obviously be limited to selling only their particular SIM cards and credits, so they won't be able to offer the same kind of objective advice you're likely to find from a newsstand or unaffiliated phone shop. (On the other hand, they're more likely to spend time with you talking through the options and helping you set up your phone.)

• **Buy before you leave.** Note that several international companies will sell you European SIM cards before you leave home for your trip. These can certainly be a convenient option, saving you the hassle of hunting down a SIM card once there, but they rarely present the same savings you'd find simply by buying direct once in Europe.

Check out the options available in unaffiliated mobile shops, like this one in Paris.
Photo: EuroCheapo

Considerations when shopping for SIM cards

With so many carriers and so many choices, you'll need to do a bit of comparison shopping to figure out which carrier will work best for you. I would suggest heading for the nearest newsstand or unaffiliated cellphone shop once you've arrived, check out the SIM card options, and strike up a conversation with the cashier.
Some things to keep in mind:

• **Package or Pay as You Go?** Are you buying a SIM card that needs credits or a SIM package that's already loaded with a set number of minutes, texts and data?

• **How much do calls cost?** When you buy credits, how much do calls, texts and data cost? (These usually come in increments of €5 / €10 / €15 / €25, and often include small bonus credits that increase the more you purchase.)

• **Connection charge?** Are you going to be assessed an initial "connection charge" each time you make a call? (**Lycamobile**, for example, offers very low per-minute charges, but also charges to make the connection.)

• **Other countries?** Will your SIM work in other countries or will you need to buy another card if you cross borders? (This is important. The SIM from Orange, for example, works throughout Europe, while SFR's "Call Cheap" package only works in France.)

• **Wi-Fi Hotspots:** Does your SIM card grant you access to Wi-Fi hotspots? Many packages from larger carriers will offer this, which could come in handy.

Finally, don't forget…

If you've made it this far in the article, you're obviously serious about using a SIM card abroad. However, there is just one more major, if obvious, point worth considering:

When you place a SIM card in your phone, your phone number will change.

At the risk of repeating myself: The SIM card that you buy dictates your phone number. In my case in France, when I slipped the French SIM card into my phone, I now had a French phone number. (You can now see why some people prefer to bring along an old phone or purchase a cheapo "travel phone" expressly for SIM card use.)

This also means that if you swap a new SIM card into your phone, your normal US number will not work. When people try to call your US number, it will go straight to voicemail, as you've basically just taken your number "offline." You could prep for this by changing your voicemail message in advance to state that you'll be traveling, and include your new number. (Although this can be a bit tricky, as you usually won't know what your new number will be until you buy your new SIM card.)

And the same goes for text messages. As your phone number will have changed, your texts will be coming from a number that your friends will not, at first, recognize. This can be a touch awkward at first, but they'll catch on. Some people get around this by sending text messages through an app like **Whatsapp** or Facebook Messenger (however, these will only work when using data or connected to a Wi-Fi network).

Original article:
http://www.eurocheapo.com/blog/buying-a-sim-card-in-europe.html