



Trip Resources: Phones

One of the most common questions we get at Embark is about using mobile phones overseas.

While there can be a few details to consider, in essence it's a pretty simple situation, as you really only have three options.

Option 1: Don't Take a Phone

This is the simplest option, of course, but lots of considerations need to be taken into account. You may want to make calls back home, the folks at home might need to call you, and you might want to make local calls, use the internet, check email, find your way with maps, and so on.

If you take a tablet instead of a phone, you will be at the mercy of finding a decent WiFi connection to do your online chores or to use an internet-based calling service like Skype, Viber, Apple's FaceTime or Google+ Hangouts. On Embark's trips, this can often be a challenge, as we are often away from civilization.

With neither phone nor tablet, you can look in town for call shops, internet cafes, business centers at your hotel, or public telephones. If you go this route, think about getting a prepaid calling card that has international service on it. This way, if you are calling from a public phone, you pay a lot less per minute. Otherwise, if you need to talk to someone back home, try to arrange for them to call you. They will pay less in the States than you are likely to on the road.

Option 2: Take Your Own Phone

This is the next simplest option, and there are two ways to do it: You can either get an international plan for your phone, or buy a SIM card in your destination country.

To decide between these two, first think about how you plan to use your phone. Will you be making phone calls? If so, how many (i.e. emergencies only?) and will they be local calls, international calls, or both? Will you be using much data, like for online maps, researching destinations, or streaming music and/or video?

If the answers to the above questions tend to be "not much," or if you would just rather spend a little more money and keep things simple, then you should consider **getting an international plan for your existing phone.**

First, though, you'll need to confirm with your carrier that your phone can do this (most can). Next, research the rates, as carriers usually have different packages of minutes, calls and texts available. Sometimes there are cheaper options that come with slower data speeds, for example.

If you go this route, activate the plan just before leaving the country, and make sure



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to turn it off when you get back!

If you think you will be using data on a pretty regular basis, we recommend you **buy a local SIM card** in the country you're going to. This gives you a local phone number and lets you use your phone just like the locals do, and just like you do at home.

Your phone will need to be **unlocked** to do this. Most Verizon phones now come unlocked, and most other carriers will unlock your phone for you (for a fee); just call yours to see how they handle this. Another possibility: Do you have an old, out-of-service phone lying around? Use that one and just make it your international phone.

One possible drawback to this option: Each country you visit will require its own SIM card, so if you are going to several different countries, and some of them for very brief times, then an international plan on your own phone will be simpler and might even save you money.

Here are some tips for buying a SIM card overseas:

- You can buy them from carrier shops, which are often located at airports and train stations.
- Make sure you're getting one with data, as opposed to minutes-only. In fact, often what you are buying is a package of minutes, data and messages that comes with a card.
- Shop around for the best deals, making sure to get prices for all the different pieces of the package. In our experience, unless you're a data hog watching Netflix without Wifi, about \$10 a week should get you through.
- Have the clerk install it and set it up for you - and put your US SIM card in a very safe spot! They can usually be replaced, but it's a hassle.
- Record your new local phone number and, crucially, your SIM's PIN; you might need to enter it whenever you turn on your phone.
- Add new contacts to your phone, not the card, and remember to add country codes for simpler dialing.
- If you are coming back to the country any time soon, remember that most SIMs have an expiration date if they are not used for a while. To avoid having to get another one, just turn it on and make a very brief call once a month or so, back at home.
- Also look into the possibility of ordering a SIM card ahead of time and having it delivered to your home or waiting for you at the hotel.

Option 3: Buy a Local Phone

This is, in many ways, the same as buying a SIM card, but of course it leaves your personal phone out of the whole process. Just make sure that the phone has data on it. Otherwise, all the same suggestions apply to buying a SIM card, above.



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You can buy a phone with or without a SIM card; if you are going to more than one country, the latter probably makes more sense. Cross a border, stick a new SIM in your handy international phone!

Some Apps to Try

There are many ways to “call” someone internationally that are not technically phone calls. But be sure to use WiFi for these, or else you will burn through some serious data - especially if you are making video calls.

- [Skype](#) is free over the internet and can also be used to call phones cheaply.
- Apple's FaceTime works much like Skype.
- Apple's iMessage is free if both parties are Apple users; otherwise, texting charges will apply.
- [Google+ Hangouts](#) also work much like Skype and do well with group video calls.
- [Viber](#) offers picture sharing, as well.
- [What's App](#) is yet another popular option for sending messages and making calls.
- [Maps.me](#) is the best of many mapping apps that don't require internet connection; you just download the maps you need before you go, and use them while you're there.

Use These Tips to Save Data

When you are using your phone, and you are not on WiFi, you are spending money by using data. Here are some ideas for reducing that expense:

- Download all your apps, podcasts, etc. ahead of time or on Wifi.
- In your settings, turn off the “autoplay videos” option in applications like Facebook and any other social media where you see videos.
- Also turn off automatic updates to apps, or make sure this only happens on Wifi.
- Adjust the quality on streaming video and music
- Turn off data when you're not using it, or just put the phone in Airplane Mode to be sure
- Download maps ahead of time, then just use the phone's GPS to track your location on them. Google Maps and other applications support this feature. Just keep in mind that you might wind up in places you didn't anticipate, without the ability to download new maps.