



Mobile phones and study abroad <http://trozos.net/mobile-phones-and-study-abroad/> by Michael McGuire, Editor / Contributor

Using a cell phone abroad is still an expensive endeavor. Most wireless carriers in the U.S. now offer packages to customers that allow them certain amounts of minutes and data to use while roaming on foreign networks. But those charges are paid in addition to the monthly charges you normally pay at home — not in lieu of them. This means, while going abroad, students may have to pay double or more of what they normally pay to continue to use their phones.

Luckily, with the evolution of global smartphones and cheaper plans in other countries, overbilling isn't your only choice. Here are a few tips to keep you connected — for a reasonable price — while you're abroad.

(Note: Students studying in Puerto Rico will be covered, in most cases, by nationwide calling, text messaging and data plans. There will likely be no need to change your plan or purchase additional services. But it is always best to confirm with your wireless carrier before you do.)

Don't let them talk you into buying minutes and data packages!

Not only will you pay for service at home — service you aren't using — but you'll have to pay extra for whatever calls you make or messages you send in Spain, Cuba or Argentina. The fees charged by networks aren't cheap either. Verizon Wireless charges customers \$25 for every 100MB of data used abroad. (That means the average 2GB data plan abroad would cost Verizon customers \$500 a month.) Text messages from AT&T phones cost around \$0.50 for every message sent and \$0.20 for each message received. And phone calls cost, on average, more than \$1.00 per minute.

Suspend your service at home.

Why pay for something when you won't be around to use it? Before you leave the country, especially if your trip will last more than a month, temporarily suspend your service. This way, you won't be stuck paying Verizon or AT&T when you haven't sent one text message or made one call from your device. The process is simple and free with most carriers. Just call customer service and tell them you're leaving the country and want to temporarily suspend — not cancel — your service.

Before leaving the country with your phone, make sure it is unlocked and compatible with the networks you'll be using abroad.

Bring a compatible device with you.

You can save the cost of buying or renting a phone abroad if you take the right phone on your trip. Most mobile networks around the world use GSM radio systems, but many carriers in the U.S. do not. Verizon Wireless, Sprint, MetroPCS, Cricket and U.S. Cellular all operate using CDMA radio systems. This means that a device that works on Verizon's network may not work on AT&T's network, which is a GSM network. That same device then, most likely, wouldn't work with a carrier in Spain, Cuba or Argentina. However, many smartphones sold to Verizon and Sprint customers are global-ready, meaning they have the proper GSM bands installed on the phone to work on other networks while roaming internationally. If you have one of these phones (most 4G phones are set up this way), it should be easy to remove your U.S. SIM card and put in a SIM card from a carrier from the country in which you're studying. This way, you'll only have to pay for a phone plan and not for a new device for your semester abroad.

If you're bringing a device, make sure it has been unlocked by your carrier.

Another thing to consider is whether or not your GSM-compatible phone is unlocked. Many phones purchased from carriers in the U.S. are locked for use on only one network. This discourages customers from switching networks mid-contract because the phone you've purchased won't work anywhere else. There are websites dedicated to providing unlocking codes for cell phones for a fee. But your best option, if you've been a loyal customer for at least a year, is to call your carrier's customer support and ask to have the phone unlocked for a trip abroad. Most carriers will walk you through the necessary steps to get your phone ready for use on other networks, and they won't charge a fee to do it.

Use an internet-based messaging client — never SMS.

It's almost a guarantee that even you haven't heard of applications like BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), Google Talk or WhatsApp before your semester abroad, you will be familiar with them before going back to the U.S. These internet-based apps allow for free messaging between users from all around the world. This means you can send text and photo messages to Mom and Dad without paying for a texting plan while you're abroad. The programs use your data plan or Wi-Fi to send messages, which means you won't be paying anything for each message sent and received. (That's a savings of \$0.50 per message.) Most European and Latin American carriers do not have the unlimited text-messaging plans that many U.S. students have. Young people in those countries rely solely on BBM and WhatsApp to communicate. Any new friends you make in Spain or Argentina will certainly appreciate it if you use those applications too.

Keep your phone in your pocket whenever possible.

There's no technical reason for doing this, and it won't really save you money — aside from the fact that you won't be making calls or sending messages with your phone tucked away. But the less you use your phone while abroad, the more you're going to gain from the experience. You'll be less distracted. You'll notice colors and smells and sounds that you might miss with a screen in front of your face. You'll spend more time engaged in conversations in the language you're trying to learn. Save conversations with friends and family back home for the last hour or half-hour before you go to bed.