

Americans Traveling to Europe:

Phone Readiness Guide

Getting Your Phone Ready for Europe

Goal: To give you confidence using your phone in Europe for data, calls, and messages using the equipment you have without breaking the bank.



Today We'll Cover:

- Understanding your options
- Pros and Cons of each approach
- A possible decision-making guide
- Essential tips for smooth travel

Option 1: Using Your U.S. Domestic Carrier

How it Works:

- Many U.S. carriers offer international roaming plans or daily passes. Check with them on costs and conditions to see
- You typically enable this feature before you leave or it's automatically included in some premium plans.
- For example, Verizon offers a \$10-12/day "International Travel Pass" more here: <https://www.verizon.com/plans/international/international-travel/travel-pass/> as well as an International Monthly plan for \$100/month more here: <https://www.verizon.com/plans/international/international-travel/monthly-plan/> Verizon Ultimate or Google Fi have affordable plans now too
- Other carriers offer their own versions of this.
- This is an "easy button" for people that have locked phones or don't want to wrestle with tech.

Pros:

- Convenience: Keep your existing phone number.
- Familiarity: No need to swap SIM cards or set up new services.
- Includes calls, texts, and data.

Cons:

- **Cost:** Can be significantly more expensive than local options
- Data limits may be restrictive, and speeds can be throttled after a certain usage.

What to Ask Your Carrier:

- "What are your international roaming rates for Europe?"
- "Do you have a daily pass or a monthly international plan?"
- "What are the data limits and speeds for these plans?"
- "Are calls and texts included, and what are their costs?"

Option 2: eSIM (Digital SIM)

How it Works:

- A digital SIM card embedded directly in your phone.
- You can purchase and activate an eSIM plan online before you leave.
- No physical card swapping required.

Pros:

- **Convenience:** Purchase and activate entirely online, often within minutes.
- **Cost-Effective Data:** Usually much cheaper for data than international roaming with your domestic carrier
- Keep your U.S. number active for SMS/calls (using your domestic carrier's lowest rate for those services, if needed).



Cons:

- **Compatibility:** Not all phones support eSIM. Check if your phone is compatible below.
- **Setup:** Requires a stable internet connection for initial setup.
- **Local Number:** Most eSIMs for travelers are data-only or may come with a non-local number.
- Can be confusing to manage dual SIMs for some users.

Popular eSIM Providers: Airalo, Holafly, Nomad, and local European carriers e.g., Orange, Vodafone.

E-Sim Compatibility List: <https://esim.holafly.com/how-to/esim-phones/>

Option 3: Physical SIM Card in Europe

How it Works:

- Purchase a local SIM card upon arrival in a European country.
- You'll physically swap out your U.S. SIM card for the new European SIM.
- You will usually be asked for your passport at Point of Sale so have it handy

Pros:

- **Best Value:** can be the cheapest option for local data, calls, and texts.
- **Easy-Peasy:** if you're not technically savvy, the local vendor will typically install the SIM for you and get it set up on your phone, and even test it.
- Get a local phone number, which can be useful in certain cases
- It may be the only option for some older phones that don't support esim



Cons:

- **Inconvenience:** Requires finding a store (airport, mobile shop), purchasing, and installing the SIM.
- **Phone Unlocked:** Your phone *must* be unlocked from your U.S. carrier to use a foreign SIM.
- **Lost U.S. Number:** While using the European SIM, your U.S. number won't directly receive calls/texts unless you swap back.
- Potential language barrier during purchase/setup.

Where to Buy: Airport kiosks, dedicated mobile carrier stores (Orange, Vodafone, T-Mobile, etc.), sometimes supermarkets* (caveat: *be careful with supermarche SIMs. I bought one in Portugal and I could not get it to work).

Key Considerations: Data, SMS, & Calls

Before you decide, think about your needs:

- **Data Usage:**
 - **High:** Streaming, frequent video calls, heavy social media. (eSIM or local SIM recommended)
 - **Moderate:** Maps, email, light browsing. (All options possible, compare costs)
 - **Low:** Emergency use only. (Domestic roaming might suffice, but check rates)

- **SMS (Text Messages):**
 - **Critical:** Need to receive bank codes, multi-factor authentication, or communicate with U.S. contacts via SMS. (Keep U.S. SIM active, even if on a minimal plan, or use apps like WhatsApp).
 - **Occasional:** Less critical, can rely on Wi-Fi messaging apps.

- **Calls:**
 - **To U.S. Numbers:** International roaming plan, Wi-Fi calling, or VoIP apps (WhatsApp, Google Voice).
 - **Within Europe:** Local SIM or eSIM with calling, VoIP apps.
 - **Emergency Calls:** All phones can dial 112 (European emergency number) regardless of SIM status.

Decision Tree: Choosing Your Best Option

Here's a simplified guide to help you decide:

1. **Is your phone locked to your U.S. carrier?**
 - **YES:** You will use your U.S. carrier's international plan. Or get your phone unlocked or buy an unlocked phone before you go.
 - **NO (Phone is Unlocked):** Proceed to step 2.

2. **Is your phone eSim compatible or do you need to keep your U.S. number active for critical 2FA bank codes via SMS?**
 - **YES: Consider a Data-Only eSIM.** This lets you use cheap European data while your U.S. SIM remains active on a minimal plan for essential texts. Use WhatsApp/Wi-Fi calling for calls.
 - **NO:** Proceed to step 3.

3. **Are you comfortable with swapping physical SIMs, getting a FR phone number, and want the absolute lowest cost for calls, texts, and data within Europe?**
 - **YES: Get a Physical SIM card upon arrival in Europe.**
 - **NO:** Proceed to step 4.

4. **Do you want a balance of convenience and good value for data, without needing a local European number or swapping physical SIMs?**
 - **YES: Purchase a Full-Service eSIM** (if available with calls/texts, or just for data with VoIP apps).
 - Some eSims (e.g. Orange) provide FR numbers now as well as data

Pro-Tips for Seamless Connectivity

- **Unlock Your Phone:** Contact your U.S. carrier well in advance to ensure your phone is unlocked. This is crucial for installing new physical SIMs and eSIMs.
- **Download Offline Maps:** Use Google Maps or Apple Maps to download regions of Europe while on Wi-Fi.
- **WhatsApp is Widely Used in the EU:** Encourage your U.S. contacts to use WhatsApp for free messaging and calls over Wi-Fi or data.
- **Wi-Fi Calling:** Enable Wi-Fi calling on your U.S. number before you leave. This allows you to make/receive calls and texts using your U.S. number over Wi-Fi, often at no extra charge.

Checking if your phone is unlocked:

Modern smartphones often tell you their lock status right in the system menus.

For iPhone:

1. Go to **Settings > General > About**.
2. Scroll down until you find **Carrier Lock** (or **Network Provider Lock**).
3. If it says **No SIM restrictions**, your phone is unlocked. If it lists a specific carrier name or says "SIM Locked," it is locked.

For Android: *(Note: Android menus vary heavily by manufacturer, so this is a general guide)*

1. Go to **Settings > Network & Internet** (or **Connections**).
2. Tap on **Mobile Network** (or **Cellular Networks**).
3. Look for a setting like **Network Operators**, **Carrier**, or **Network Lock**.
4. If you have the option to manually search for networks or you can edit your APN (Access Point Name) settings, your phone is likely unlocked. If the menu is entirely restricted or explicitly says "Network Locked," it is locked.

More resources

Here are some good resources on this topic:

3 Simple Ways To Use Your MOBILE Phone in Paris, France by Les Frenchies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbuHoimKTrc>

Start here. This is a great video by Anton from Les Frenchies and a perfect video to start.

How to Travel and Not Get SCREWED by Roaming Fees by Away Together w/ Nik and Allie

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Obp05Q61Dpc>

This one is biased towards the Holafly eSim company (I've used them, it works) but the rest of the content is very relevant. He mainly talks about data e-sims but also using your domestic SIM to get 2FA codes (which can be really important). He also talks about turning off data roaming specifically for your domestic SIM (can be important for some US carriers that might charge you a higher "pay-as-you-go" rate without you understanding or knowing it).

How to Use an eSim for International Travel (for Beginners) by Danny Packs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1J9y7_n4hE

Discusses eSim carriers SimOptions and Nomad and also gets into the basics on deciding what type of eSim to get.

Questions & Discussion

Let's discuss any questions you have and clarify anything that's unclear.

Appendix 1

Questions to Ask Participants prior to the Presentation

The goal of this session is to help everyone stay connected during our travels without any unexpected costs or connectivity issues. To make our time together as productive as possible, please take a few moments before the meeting to consider the following questions. Your answers will help you decide which connectivity option—domestic roaming, an eSIM, or a local physical SIM—makes the most sense for your specific situation.

Please consider these questions in advance:

- **Phone Status:** Is your current phone unlocked, or is it locked to your carrier's network? E.g. Buying a phone from Verizon or AT&T might lock it to that network.
- **Carrier Costs:** What specific international roaming rates, daily pass fees, or monthly international plans does your current carrier charge for travel in Europe?
- **Data Needs:** How would you categorize your typical data usage while traveling—high (streaming/video calls), moderate (maps/email), or low (emergency only)?
- **SMS/2FA Requirements:** Do you need to receive SMS messages for banking alerts or multi-factor authentication (MFA) while abroad, or can you rely solely on apps like WhatsApp or your banking app itself?
- **Device Compatibility:** Does your current smartphone support eSIM, or are you limited to physical SIM cards?
- **Comfort Level:** Are you comfortable with the technical steps of managing dual SIMs, swapping physical SIM cards, or configuring new network settings, or do you prefer a "set it and forget it" option?
- **Communication Preferences:** Do you primarily need to reach people in the U.S., or do you anticipate needing to make local calls within Europe?

Although it's not required that you know all the answers beforehand, having some or all of them will help us use our time most productively.