

Cellphone solutions while cruising

BY SHERRY MCCAMPBELL

With the advent of cell-phones, smartphones, and 3G and 4G data, the use of Wi-Fi and “Internet cafes” is diminishing. We bought a Wi-Fi antenna/router arrangement two years ago and have never actually finished installing it. I now wish we’d spent the money on a cellular antenna instead.

So, there are two sides to this coin: one is the telephone side, what we actually use

was on an AT&T plan with a cellphone number that I’d already had for 10 years. Fortunately, our cruising budget was ample enough to put this plan on hold as we cruised (good for up to six months). As we planned to make annual trips back to the U.S., this gave us an easy way to have a cellphone on our return without any hassle, and all our family and friends would still have the number I’d had for the past

10 years. I reduced my data plan to the minimum but was still paying about \$50 per month for the six months that the plan was active. AT&T had rollover, so my plan was fully stocked and ready for use when we’d arrive in the U.S. We’re not doing this anymore, but that is a topic for part two of this series.

Pay as you go (PAYG) or “prepaid” phone plans add flexibility. We’d use my AT&T unlimited minutes/unlimited texts plan for most of our telephoning. Then we would get my husband a PAYG phone to provide communications between the two

of us when we were apart.

The PAYG carrier we used in 2017 in the U.S. was h2o Wireless, which piggybacks on AT&T’s network. But the players, coverage and “best deals” change so much that it’s worth doing the research each time you visit the U.S. With h2o Wireless, I can order the SIM card and have it delivered to our first stop in the U.S. with any cellphone area code we desire. Activation takes about five minutes on the Internet, and I can load money by credit card on the phone or select a monthly plan that can be canceled at any time. If you want handholding for a bit more money, Walmart has a similar offering called Straight Talk, as well as other PAYG plans.

Phones and data in foreign countries

The absolute *cheapest* way to get phone and data service in a foreign country is to use your own unlocked phone, buy a SIM card locally and use the country’s own cellular service. A typical SIM card in a foreign country can cost from \$1 to \$20. The higher-cost ones usually come with some pre-loaded value, while the lower-cost ones typically do not.

Smartphones have made communications easier for voyagers, but the details of service plans can be confusing.



phones for; the other is the Internet side, or data.

Phones and data in the U.S.

When we left the U.S. in 2007 to cruise around the world, I

To use this option, you must have a GSM quad-band cellphone (smart, flip or simple) that is “unlocked.” CDMA phones from Verizon or Sprint will not work outside the U.S. unless they are specifically “world phones” that have a GSM radio and a SIM slot (like the iPhone).

I unlocked my first phone through AT&T after it was “paid off” on the account. We had a guy on a street corner unlock our phone in Guatemala. I have used several online unlocking services as well. You can also now buy unlocked cell-phones on Amazon and eBay before you leave the U.S. It’s important to research frequencies, especially if you are planning to use the phone for data. Note that LTE makes this more complicated, as it adds 22 additional frequency bands.

Carrier-locked phones are likely to lead to a drawer full of phones you cannot use any longer.

Voice and SMS service, once you understand unlocking and the need for a quad-band phone, turns out to be pretty easy. That’s because the world is standardized on four frequency bands for voice

use. If you have a GSM quad-band phone, your phone is set to handle 3G/4G cellphone service from a voice/data perspective in any country in the world.

Data service, on the other hand, gets pretty tricky. With the quest for speed in the cellphone data world — first 2G, then 3G, now 4G and LTE, and in the future 5G — standardization has fallen by the wayside. So if you buy a phone to use in your travels, you need to research where you are planning to travel and what the LTE phone standard is there, and you must make sure your phone can handle the higher-speed data frequencies in that region.

Frequency compatibility is complicated by two factors: 1) The same phone — for example, the Samsung Galaxy S3 — was sold in about 10 different models with completely different frequency coverage, so you need to know your EXACT model; 2) The competitive race for more speed and more customers has cellular companies changing offerings on a regular basis, so if you find a website with what looks like good info, it may still be dated. Frequencycheck.com is a useful website for confirming compatibility.

The downside to local SIM cards

The two major downsides to using local SIM cards are that your phone number is always changing, and managing your phone minutes and data plans can be sometimes quite daunting, as every carrier in every country has a different method. This can be especially difficult in a country

that doesn’t use English.

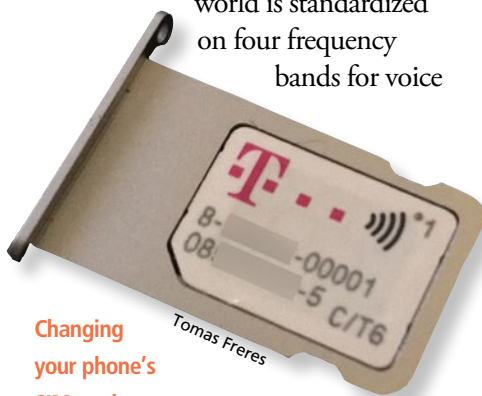
To help with the changing phone number issue, we added a “Contact Us” page on our website that we keep updated with our local cellphone numbers, and we tell our family and friends that if they ever need to contact us in a hurry, to use that.

For managing the phone minutes and data, many carriers now have an app that can help. But not all cellphone carriers have an English app or utility that will help you recharge your phone and buy plans — tourist countries usually do, but it’s rarer in non-tourist countries. For us, Indonesia was the most confusing. Their primary provider had very quirky plans, and very few people spoke English, at least where we were cruising. It usually takes a local to explain the best/cheapest plan to you.

Some countries/carriers market “tourist SIMs” that are designed for fly-in tourists on a short vacation. These come pre-loaded with a data plan for a given period of time, and are worth exploring if you are only staying a short time.

Since we left the U.S. in 2007, we have visited roughly 30 countries in the Americas, Pacific Ocean, Australia and New Zealand, Southeast Asia and Europe. The ONLY country where buying a SIM on arrival didn’t work was in Costa Rica in 2009, and this has been corrected since. ■

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Changing your phone’s SIM card can open up new areas of coverage, but this can come with downsides too.