

Getting best value when using your mobile abroad: advice from Oftel

Oftel's goal is to achieve the best deal for UK consumers. This advice should help UK mobile consumers to limit the costs of using their mobile phones abroad.

Charges for using your mobile abroad

When travelling abroad using the service of your UK mobile service provider, the call will pass, or 'roam', over a foreign mobile network as well as your UK mobile network. Using your mobile abroad is called 'international roaming' for this reason. Whilst this service can be convenient, charges may be both higher than you might expect and structured differently to UK charges. For example:

- charges are often a lot higher than UK domestic calls eg using your pre-pay phone for a 3 minute call from France to your UK home phone often costs about £3;
- you will probably pay to receive calls abroad, as well as to listen to voicemail messages;
- you may be billed per minute not per second, and perhaps billed more for the first minute;
- rates can vary between countries and between the networks you could use when abroad

Ways to save money on mobile use abroad

The information below sets out ways to limit spending on international roaming. Which suits you best will depend on how and where you use your mobile phone. You can check out the following sources of information from retailers and mobile providers to help you choose the best option and make the necessary arrangements:

- websites;
- customer services departments;
- leaflets;
- faxed summaries of charges for specific services and countries.

- **Change from pre-pay to contract.** Especially if you travel frequently, the cost of monthly line rental may be offset by the much cheaper rates that can be available to contract customers for international roaming ;
- **Use international traveller services,** by which contract customers can get extra savings on call charges by paying extra monthly rental. You may be tied to this service for as little as a month. Ask your provider for further details;
- **Get incoming calls diverted directly to voicemail (or to someone else) and do not access voicemail whilst abroad.** Alternatively, **get incoming calls barred completely.** You may need to arrange these through your service provider before leaving the UK;
- **Use text messages instead** of voice calls. This can be cheaper, but do check the charges for sending and receiving them whilst abroad;
- **Select a different network to roam on.** When abroad your phone may use a preferred network or one with the strongest signal, but this may not be the cheapest. Your handset user guide may tell you how to select a different network, alternatively ask your mobile service provider;
- **Swap the “SIM card” in your phone.** The SIM card is what lets your phone work on a particular mobile network. You could use the SIM card of another UK or foreign network (for some European countries the latter can even be bought in the UK). By using a SIM card of a network in the country visited, you may cut your bill significantly. Check out the following:
 - Do the alternative SIM cards have expiry dates?
 - Does your UK provider need to unlock your phone first, and what will that cost you?
 - Are the contact numbers you need abroad stored in your phone or your SIM card?
- **Buy or rent a different mobile phone to use abroad. You may be able to do this in the UK.** This may be your only option, as your mobile may not work in some countries.

Other considerations when using your mobile abroad

- Do check roaming charges just before you leave, as they can change at short notice, for example due to exchange rate fluctuations.
- When using a SIM card for a foreign network (including in a different mobile phone), although you won't pay to receive calls it may cost more for other people to call you abroad. This is because those calling you will be charged for an international call from a mobile rather than the standard rate for a call to your UK provider.
- Advice on some practical aspects of mobile use abroad is available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website, at <http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel/dynpage.asp?Page=586>