

Checklist for getting ready for international trips

International travel is fun and rewarding, but getting ready to go, particularly if you haven't traveled often, can be a lot of work. The key is to start getting ready early so that you aren't rushed, have time to problem solve anything that comes up, and leave for your trip feeling rested and prepared.

Three months before departure

- ☐ If you don't have a passport, apply for one (see http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html for instructions)
- ☐ If you do have a passport, check the expiration date – it needs to be valid for at least 6 months after you return. Renew if necessary
- ☐ Look at visa requirements and plan to get visa
- ☐ Look at the packing list. If there is anything you need to buy, start watching the internet and your local stores for sales
- ☐ If you haven't gotten your airplane ticket yet, start looking at airfares. Set up an "Alert" on kayak.com or whatever website you use

One month before departure

- ☐ Think about how you want to stay in touch. See Appendix A for a comprehensive discussion of the choices.
- ☐ Determine whether you need a plug adapter or a voltage transformer or both. See Appendix B for details

Two weeks before departure

- ☐ Start packing. Your suitcase should be completely packed at least a week before you leave
- ☐ Buy the snacks you know you'll miss

One week before departure

- ☐ Call your bank and let them know when and where you are traveling
- ☐ Call your credit card company and let them know when and where you are traveling
- ☐ Go to the bank and get a supply of new \$1 bills for incidental tipping
- ☐ Arrange a stop on the mail and the paper if needed
- ☐ Make 2 copies of your passport and credit cards you plan to take. Leave one set with your emergency contact, put the other in a secure place that is separate from where you're carrying the originals.

One day before departure

- ☐ Pack the things you couldn't pack before because you use them daily: chargers for any electronic gadgets, gadgets, toiletries, nightclothes
- ☐ Put your ticket, passport, money and credit cards someplace where you can't forget to take them
- ☐ If you have an early departure, lay out the clothes you intend to wear
- ☐ Take a deep breath, congratulate yourself for being prepared, and go to bed early

Appendix A: Staying in touch during overseas adventure travel

The international phone options are as varied as traveling style. The one thing you don't want to do is use your hotel phone, unless someone else is picking up the bill or you have an international calling card and your hotel doesn't charge for toll-free numbers.. Here is a guide to some of your choices. First, though, you need to answer three questions.

1. Do you need to stay in touch? There are advantages to truly being away from contact with your every day life. You can always leave the numbers at hotels where you're staying. Or if you're on an Adventures in Good Company trip, just give our office number to your contacts and tell them to call us if they have to get in touch with you.

2. Is your mobile phone GSM compatible? The standard mobile-phone network in Europe, and much of the world, is called GSM. Some mobile phones, including most smart phones, use the same GSM technology and others use a system that is incompatible. Within the GSM network, different regions operate on different bands. The United States uses two bands, and most of Europe uses two other bands. A GSM phone that's tri-band or quad-band operates on both US bands, plus one or both European bands so it works well at home and abroad.

3. How often do you travel and why do you want to stay in touch? Do you do a lot of international traveling? Do you want people to be able to call you, or is it just important for you to be able to call home? Do you think you will be making many calls in the country in which you're traveling?

Having answered those questions, here are the major options for a person who travels for leisure.

1. If you have a GSM mobile phone

A. Use your own cell phone with an International Calling Plan

Most major U.S. phone companies give you the option of choosing a plan that allows you to make international calls. Each company offers different plans for various prices that work for a number of phone models and in designated countries, so be sure to check that your plan covers the destinations in which you plan to travel. You can turn the plan on just before you leave and have it discontinued as soon as you get back.

Pros:

- Your cell phone number will stay the same
- The names and numbers that are currently programmed into your phone will still be available to you overseas without your having to transfer them to another device
- Other than adding an international calling plan, it doesn't take much planning

Cons:

- Per-minute calling rates vary for different countries and even an international plan can be expensive depending on where you're traveling
- You'll be charged for incoming calls, even if you don't answer them. Be sure to tell your friends and co-workers not to call except in emergencies
- If you forget to turn off data roaming, you may be surprised with huge bills for unwittingly roaming such as when the phone constantly checks for new emails.

- You have to remember to call the phone company when you get home to discontinue your plan

Bottom line: This is a great choice for someone who does not anticipate making many phone calls and wants to be reachable in an emergency

B. *Buy a local SIM card for your own cell phone*

Another option is to buy a Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) card to use in your own phone while traveling internationally. A SIM card is the part of a cell phone that holds the identity information and other personal data; if you switch your own SIM card for one that you purchase in another country, you can have all the benefits of a local phone (such as low in-country calling rates and a local phone number) without having to buy a whole new phone. You can then use an international calling card to call home (see below)

However, the option of replacing the SIM card is only available on unlocked GSM phones and you may not be able to legally unlock it (e.g. AT&T will not unlock the iPhone). You can purchase prepaid international and country-specific SIM cards from Web sites such as Teletial or just buy one when you get to the country you are visiting. You can buy a SIM card at a mobile phone shop, as well as (in many countries) at a newsstand. SIM cards, which generally cost around \$5, come with a European phone number and starter credit.

Pros:

- You can buy additional prepaid credit as you go
- Rather than buying a whole new phone, you can simply buy a SIM card for your existing phone -- which is cheaper and takes up less space in your luggage
- You'll enjoy low local rates for calls within whatever country you're visiting

Cons:

- It may be very expensive to call the United States unless you use an international calling card
- This option isn't available to travelers with phones that are locked or don't operate on the GSM network

Bottom line: This is a great choice if you anticipate making lots of calls while you're traveling,

2. If you don't have a GSM mobile phone

A. *Purchase or lease an International cell phone*

Another option is to buy or lease an international cell phone for use whenever you are overseas. These phones do not work at home in the US - they are dual-band phones compatible with other countries, and not what the US uses. You can buy/lease one on-line before you go, but it is often less expensive to buy one when you get to your destination country from a mobile phone store. If you don't travel that often, leasing may be a better option. Verizon has leasing options for their customers and there are other companies that also lease mobile phones.

Some international phones utilize a pre-paid calling card, which you buy when purchasing the phone at the local mobile phone store. You buy a certain amount, and the card has a code you scratch off and enter into the phone when prompted.

Other international cell phones have the ability to switch out SIM cards, so it can be used for more than one trip. You simply buy the local country SIM card (from someplace like Telestial) and put it in your phone. You usually get a prepaid amount of minutes when you buy the SIM card and then if you want to add more, you call a number and can use your credit card. Make sure the phone you buy can be unlocked.

Pros:

- They are pretty inexpensive, easy to come by, and make local calling a breeze
- If you get one with a changeable SIM card, the contacts directory will remain saved on the phone
- You can use it in multiple countries
- People will be able to reach you when you're traveling

Cons:

- You will not be able to use this phone anywhere but internationally, so you end up with 2 cell phones.
- You pre-pay minutes, which expire after a certain period of time (usually a couple months)
- If you are going to different countries and don't buy local SIM cards, rates will be higher once you leave the country where you bought it

Bottom line: Buying an international phone is a great choice for people who frequently travel internationally. Leasing one can be good for people who travel less frequently

B. *Calling Card*

Buy a pre-paid calling card in the country you are visiting. These are often sold at newspaper stands. The card has a code on it that you enter into the phone every time you make a call from any local land-line or payphone. Buy from a reputable source.

Pros:

- It takes no advance planning of any type and can be quite inexpensive
- It works for both local and international calls
- An automated voice typically tells you how much you have left on the card before each call
- You can use it with any phone that has low local calling rates

Cons:

- This is for outgoing calls only. You will not have a phone number at which people can reach you
- You need to have a phone to use
- Some foreign language automated messages are frustrating to wait through before you can place your call

Bottom line: This is a great choice if you just want to be able to call home occasionally

3. You have a phone with wireless capability

Another option besides making a traditional cell phone call is using a Voice Over IP (VoIP) service such as Skype, which connects calls via an Internet connection. Skype is often used on laptops, and it is now available on many smartphones as well. Skype users can talk to each other for free, and can make calls to landlines and cell phones at affordable rates.

Pros:

- It's easy and inexpensive or free
- The connections are great quality as long as you have a good wireless connection

Cons:

- You need a laptop or smartphone with the Skype app
- You need to find a wireless connection
- You may need to pay for the wireless connection

Appendix B: Adapters, transformers? What do you need?

We often get asked if there will be a place you can plug in your rechargeable camera battery or recharge a cell phone or plug in a hairdryer? Even if there is an outlet to plug these electronics and appliances into, you will probably need a plug adapter and a power converter to use them. What does all this mean?

Most US and Canadian small appliances and electronics operate on 110v-120v. In most other countries, they operate on 220v-240v. This means that if you try to plug your 110v cell phone charger into a 220 v outlet, it will not work and may blow a fuse in your appliance or in the electrical system. What you need is a three-tier power converter/transformer that will transform the 220v to be compatible with the North American current. Where this gets complicated is that some US appliances and electronics actually will work without the transformer. Many cameras and computers actually have a dual voltage range of up to 220v and therefore can be charged/used without the converter. How do you know? Look for the voltage rating on your appliance, if the rating states something similar to 100V~220V then your product is dual voltage and you do not need a transformer/converter. If it says 110V or 120V, then it is a single voltage and will need a transformer to use abroad in 220v countries.

Once you know whether you need a transformer/converter, then you need to determine what type. You want to select the converter according to the wattage rating of your appliance (volts x amps = watts). A converter that is at least 25% higher than your product's wattage rating is recommended. For something like a hairdryer or a power tool - something that surges when you turn them on, you want a transformer/converter at least double the wattage rating. Most travel specialty stores should be able to help you get the right transformer.

But remember: this is only half of the equation. What you need regardless of the electrical current is a plug adapter. This item changes the shape of the prongs of your plug (which are flat prong in the US) to the shape of the plug in the other country (which is typically round in Europe, but can be a combo of other shapes/angles elsewhere). You can consult a travel shop or look on line to see what worldwide plug adapter you may need.