

TALK IS CHEAP

How to stay in touch with home while you're abroad

BY LAURA DAILY



I was one of the last American tourists to visit Odessa, Ukraine, near the Black Sea's Crimean Peninsula. Less than three hours after my shipmates and I strolled Odessa's main square on May 2, 2014, riots broke out.

The good news: We were safely aboard ship about 30 minutes prior. The bad news: CNN interrupted its regularly scheduled programming, and my parents' phone in Texas started ringing with calls from concerned relatives. But Mom and Dad knew I was safe, because I had emailed an account of the day's activities, including a lively Ukrainian cooking class, from my smartphone.

I constantly communicated with family and friends at home throughout my vacation. And my phone calls, emails, and web surfing didn't end up costing hundreds of dollars a day. In fact, I plan to use the same strategy on an upcoming Baltic cruise. How did I save? Serious pretrip research. You can do it, too.

Check your cell phone provider's **INTERNATIONAL CALLING PLANS** and compare rates among the major carriers. Before the cruise, I used AT&T, which would have cost 35 cents to \$1 per minute just for voice calls. The price to download even a small amount of data made me shudder. So I switched to T-Mobile, which offers unlimited data and text for free in more than 120 countries and destinations and with an international phone-call rate of only 20 cents per minute. Sprint just launched a similar International Value Roaming plan good in 15 countries. Check before you leave.

UNLOCK YOUR PHONE. Most cell phones are designed to be used only on the carrier that sold you the device. However, you can often obtain a software code to "unlock" your phone or you can buy an unlocked phone. Then, you can buy a SIM card (a tiny computer chip) in a specific country and swap out the phone's card for the SIM. Incoming calls are usually free and data is cheaper than on your U.S. carrier. Doing this, however, assigns the phone a new country-based number: That's great if you are in Paris and calling friends in Lyon, but your American buddies will pay international rates to call you.

BUY A CHEAP PHONE TO USE OVERSEAS. Search "unlocked international phone" on Amazon or eBay. They work with single- or multicountry SIM cards, which you can purchase online or once you arrive abroad. The phone will have its own international phone number and you can buy additional talk time at your destination from companies such as Vodafone.

TEXT. Some carriers offer international calling plans that include free texting. Or get a texting app: If you have a circle of family or friends that you will be communicating with often, download a free app such as WhatsApp, WeChat, or Viber—and tell your peeps to download it, too. These mobile apps allow you to make phone calls and send texts for free to other same-app users on any device in any country. If you don't have access to free Wi-Fi, data plan charges will apply.

TURN YOUR DEVICE INTO A PHONE. Using your tablet, computer, or smartphone's built-in microphone, speaker, and video camera, you can use apps such as Skype or Vonage to make low-cost VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) calls—Skype-to-Skype and Vonage-to-Vonage calls are free. Apple's FaceTime requires Wi-Fi or a cellular network and allows Mac, iPhone, and iPad users to make free video calls to each other. But all of these require a fairly high-speed Internet connection, so ...

LEASE A MOBILE HOTSPOT (MiFi). San Diego-based XCOM Global (xcomglobal.com) delivered a palm-size device just before my trip. Following the instructions, I connected my laptop and smartphone in every port and city with a cellular network. That meant unlimited 24/7 connectivity in Russia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, and Ukraine, with no need to seek out public Wi-Fi, a haven for cybercriminals, or, in my case, to pay for a pricey Internet package from the cruise line (anywhere from 25 cents to \$1 per minute). I sometimes had a stronger signal than the ship's crew, and when Ukraine blew up, I got the inside skinny via CNN online long before we saw or heard anything on the ship. Rental runs \$14.95 per day for two countries, plus a \$30 surcharge per country thereafter. A European Plan includes 40 countries, usually EU members, for a \$14.95-per-day flat rate.

USE GOOGLE VOICE. It's my personal choice for calling home. Once you sign up for a U.S.-based Google phone number (usually you are assigned one in your home area code), you can use your laptop computer to place calls from the Google Voice website to any U.S. phone for free, no matter your location. That's because, in essence, you are "calling" from one U.S. phone to another. Check out google.com/voice.

On my Black Sea adventure, the MiFi rental and cell phone calls ran about \$20 a day, or \$300. The peace of mind it provided to friends and family was worth every penny. **W**

Laura Daily writes about consumer travel strategies.