

How To Get Inexpensive Data Roaming For International Travel on Verizon

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If you're a U.S. Verizon customer with a smartphone, here's the lowdown on keeping data roaming charges to a minimum for any trips outside the country.

Also read this excellent article: Which iPhone 5 for a Global Traveller?¹

Keep in mind, it's not uncommon for Verizon to alter the options they offer. If this article hasn't been updated in more than 6 months, things may have changed; in that case, look around further online or call customer service and ask them how best to handle it.

Be sure to leave a comment with your findings!

The penny-pincher method (for trips of less than three weeks)

My wife is from Canada and we do this regularly during our visits to family there.

The way Verizon charges for data outside the U.S. is (currently) very simple: They charge for global data in chunks: \$25 gets you a somewhat-measly 100MB. You can't pay in any smaller increments.

Here's what to do. Call customer service ahead of time², and ask them to add one 100mb block of Global Data, but only for the days you'll be outside the US. Give them the days you want it to go on and off your account (i.e., the days that you'll be crossing the border). This will pro-rate the cost by the number of days you are on the plan, but it will also pro-rate the amount of data you get.

For example, supposing you'll be out of the country for 11 days. Here's how the costs for this method would work out (for each line, remember):

- Cost: $(\$25 / 31) \times 11 = \8.87
- Data: $(100MB / 31) \times 11 = 35MB$ (*round down to nearest MB*)

1. http://duncandavidson.com/blog/2012/09/which_iphone5

2. From your Verizon phone, dial 611, or dial (800) 922-0204. Press 0 at the menu to just get right to a live person. You'll be asked to state your reason for calling and told about higher-than-normal wait times, but this is just to deter you into trying the website instead; the wait usually isn't very long.

Now (in this example) you're only paying \$9 extra per phone instead of \$25. On a two-phone account, that would be a savings of \$31.

The trick is staying under that low data ceiling (35MB in this example). If you use more than the chunk of prorated data you've already paid for, you'll automatically get an additional 100MB—and charged the additional \$25 as well, meaning you'll probably pay more than you needed to.³

If you're going to be out of the country for more than 20 days, the savings from this method become too small to be worth the hassle; you might as well just get the 100MB.

Either way, here's how to make sure you don't use up your "cheap" data:

- Save your data usage for when you're at a wifi hotspot (any data you use over wifi doesn't count against you). This includes websites, email, Instagram, Facebook, etc.—pretty much app that communicates in any way. Some games don't use data, but many do. Light usage of these things is ok, but the more you can save for wifi, the more likely you won't break your data cap.
- Don't watch videos when not on wifi (Netflix, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)
- Don't stream any music when not on wifi (Spotify, Pandora, iCloud, Amazon, etc.)
- If you'll need maps during the day, look them up ahead of time while on wifi, making sure to zoom in and out to download the tiles at various zoom levels
- (For iPhone users) Turn off Push for email—instead set it to Fetch Hourly (or Fetch Manually). Go to Settings—Mail, Contacts, Calendars—Fetch New Data, turn off the Push option and set the frequency to Hourly or Manually.

What about the inconvenient and totally free method?

Depending on your phone, it's possible that you *may* be able to avoid any extra overseas data charges altogether by turning off cellular data.

When your phone is connected to a network of any kind, it is constantly "sipping" data. True, it's a minuscule amount, but as soon as it sips even one kilobyte while you're out of the country, you get that \$25 charge for a block of 100MB of roaming data.

3. Supposing you did use up your "small" chunk and got hit with an additional 100MB chunk, but your total roaming data for the month was still under 100MB, you *should* be able to call customer service and at least get credited for the "small" chunk. I've had to do this once, with no problems.

On an iPhone, you need to turn off cellular data under `Settings` → `General` → `Network`. (Turning off “Data Roaming” will *not* work—it’s notoriously unreliable.) Another option, if you want to avoid voice roaming charges as well, is to turn on Airplane Mode and then re-enable WiFi. Remember you can’t place or take any cellular calls in Airplane Mode, but you could use Skype or FaceTime to make calls while connected to WiFi.

The catch with this method is that it can never actually eliminate your risk. Unforeseen circumstances can very easily require you to grab an email or place a call when you’re not near wifi, and even if it’s technically possible to change your phone’s settings back and forth in just the right ways, you always risk slipping up even for a second and incurring that \$25 charge. Personally I’d much rather be realistic and plan ahead so I can be flexible without breaking the bank. For short trips especially, I really don’t believe it’s worth the mental hassle, unless you want to take the challenge as sort of a game with yourself.

What if I’ll be out of the country for more than three weeks?

Then you really need to read this article: World travel with the unlocked US Verizon iPhone 4S⁴—check out the comments as well.

4. <http://a.wholelottanothing.org/2012/02/world-travel-with-the-unlocked-us-verizon-iphone-4s.html>