

## Four ways of staying connected traveling in Europe

1. Use **free WiFi** in hotels, cafes, and restaurants - this is a “do nothing” and totally free method that we won’t need to cover here. The other methods covered below address our specific need to be connected on the go.
2. Use **international roaming** that comes with your home cellular provider - almost do nothing but potentially expensive, possibly very costly.

This is an almost “do nothing” method, since most likely your home carrier offers automatic roaming on your phone while traveling outside of the US, unless you turned the feature off from your phone’s Settings menu. Roaming can be for both phone calls and data or just phone calls. We compare two other options in 3 and 4 below aiming to avoid costly data roaming.

Some cellular providers offer **prepaid international calling and data plans** which can be more cost effective and also very convenient.

E.g., if you happen to have Mint Mobile as your cellular provider, it recently started offering Minternational Passes. A 10-day pass costs \$20 and comes with 500 min talk/500 text messages/10 GB data.

Of course the cost concern is minimal if you only plan on using data roaming sparingly or only for emergencies etc. But as chaperones, we do need to be prepared for more cellular usage while traveling in a group with responsibilities.

3. Prepaid data **SIM** card - perhaps the best method for our trip, but one hurdle to clear first

We’re not talking about physical SIM cards to purchase locally as European countries may require a local address. We’re referring to **eSIMs** that you can purchase easily online and install on your phone like an app.

This method offers probably the best value, considering our specific needs on this trip.

The one hurdle to clear is to make sure that your phone allows an eSIM to be installed. First check whether your phone is **eSIM compatible**. Most eSIM providers have a list of compatible phones you can check against. iPhone 11 and later should all be good. Next, make sure your phone is **unlocked**. This could be the most common reason why you might end up choosing another method. If not sure, call your cellular provider and some providers might unlock your phone for travel if you request. Also if you have a spare, out of contract

phone, bring that one as well/instead. There are phone unlocking services too, but that may seem a lot of work or risky to some of us. More about **unlocking** a phone below, but be sure to contact your provider first.

If your phone simply cannot work with an eSIM, method 4 below offers similar wireless connections at an average cost somewhat higher with a bit more work.

#### 4. Portable WiFi

**Portable WiFi** does exactly what it's called. It connects to a cellular network and you can have access to WiFi-like connections on the go. This is a good option if you don't have an eSIM compatible and unlocked phone, or if you plan to use a device other than a phone or tablet for staying connected, such as a laptop, in addition to mobile devices. You can read on below for comparisons. This is a separate physical device that needs to be separately charged. You can either rent or purchase a portable WiFi. For our trip specifically, it makes sense to rent. If you already own such a device, then you're all set and just need to purchase a plan.

### How eSIMs works

If you're already familiar with eSIM, skip this section.

After you select a plan (see information and links for example providers below), and complete the purchase, you'll likely receive a QR code with instructions of how to install the eSIM on your phone. Once the eSIM is installed, you'll see two carriers on the Cellular page in Settings (using iPhone as examples). You will set the home carrier's international data roaming to Off and use the eSIM for data.

Some eSIMs come with a **local phone number** (in the country of the eSIM provider, such as France) for calls and texts. These tend to be more expensive, and in most cases including our trip, you don't really need the calling and texting features using a local phone number.

Since an eSIM works just like a WiFi connection (even though it gets its signal from a cellular network), to make calls using your existing phone number, you'd simply need to enable the **WiFi Calling** in Settings/Cellular. Not to make it confusing, WiFi calling is actually a feature under your home carrier's coverage. There's a reason to mention this.

If your eSIM doesn't come with a local phone number, and you use WiFi calling, just beware that when you make local calls on the trip, e.g., to restaurants etc, WiFi calling doesn't know your location and thinks you're still calling from the US,

and there could be an international call charge (typically inexpensive these days). On the other hand, if you call home or anyone in the US, it's likely all free.

Since all of us will be using **WhatsApp** on this trip, perhaps the calling feature on your phone will simply be a backup option.

### An important eSIM feature

**Hotspot** - It turns your phone into a portable WiFi box. To share your eSIM data plan with others or your own other devices, simply enable the eSIM phone's Personal Hotspot. Everyone in your group can connect to that just like a WiFi router. If at least one phone in your group has an eSIM installed, everyone in your group will have at least one data connection to fall back on, as long as the group moves around together. If more data is needed, it's very easy to just simply recharge (top-up) through the eSIM's accompanying app.

Here's a suggestion for circumventing the locked phone situation. Bring both your most advanced phone with its fancy camera etc which is often still under contract and thus locked, and your slightly older phone if you still have it, using the latter to get the eSIM since it's easier to have it unlocked (carriers may automatically unlock your phone based on set schedule or when it's fully paid for), and both phones can use the same data plan.

Here is a helpful Consumer Report on unlocking phones - [How to Unlock Your Phone From Any Major Carrier - Consumer Reports](#)

### Key factors in choosing your method/device/plan

#### Quality factor

Because eSIMs, portable WiFi, and data roaming all merely tap into local cellular networks available to the location you travel to, their signal quality/strength is subject to the same influences common to all cellular devices - distance from the cell tower, obstructions, interference, and the device's antenna quality. Regardless of your chosen method, you may be getting your cellular signal from the same local network. Also most networks have similar 4G LTE speeds. 5G, even if it's offered, depends on local availability.

Thus the quality factor is not so much about the signal strength. Rather it's about the total package and all the services and conveniences that come with it, and whether there is a good match between what's in the package and what you're looking for. There are numerous online review sites about eSIMs and portable devices that can support your decision, but like most technology purchases,

online reviews should have no more than a supporting role, and it's better to check the reviews after you've already narrowed down your choices.

As far as convenience goes, as in the order of 1-4 above, portable WiFi ranks last because you have to get a separate physical device first, but you should have plenty of time for that to be easily arranged. If the device is a rental (delivery ahead of time or to the hotel is possible) you'll have to return it afterwards. In most cases the rental fee includes a selected data plan. When you travel with it, you do need to keep it recharged separately in addition to your connected devices. Be sure to check in the device's specifications for battery **running time**.

If there has ever been any advantage of portable WiFi over eSIMs, it's shrinking fast as eSIMs get more popular. As suggested earlier, your older unlocked phone can readily serve as a portable WiFi device if you just equip it with an eSIM.

Very important - **hotspot** is not always available with eSIM plans. Always check in the tech specifications whether your chosen plan allows hotspot. Unlimited data plans tend not to allow hotspots (for obvious reasons).

Some other pros for portable WiFi - when you check out a portable WiFi as it's designed for supporting **multiple devices**, you will be informed as to how many devices you can connect to it, be it 10 or 30, at least more than enough for most situations on our trip. Whereas with eSIMs, how many people you can share your data depends on the phone and carrier. Some people have experienced a limit of 2 or 3 connections. Of course, using an eSIM with 10 people connected to its hotspot all watching movies at the same time is not recommended.

As we travel in groups, portable WiFi could come handy in situations where one person might need to be more than a few feet away from the group. If you're the one with the eSIM phone serving as the hotspot for the group, you have to leave your phone with the group while they wait for you to make a convenience stop. Less of a problem if your group has a portable WiFi device.

If you plan to connect a laptop to your hotspot device, portable WiFi boxes sometimes come with ethernet ports.

## Cost factor

When it comes to cost, it's not just the price. More important is how cost effective the plan is. How cost effective is about whether the plan provides most of what you need, or allows you to customize your plan enough such that you're not paying for coverage, data, features you won't use much of.

In that regard, eSIMs generally are more economical than portable WiFi devices. However, not all eSIM plans are the same, and not all providers offer similarly configured plans.

**Coverage** Some plans provide wide coverages, e.g., for all of Europe. These plans might be good if you plan to add a stop or two before or after the orchestra tour in other parts of Europe. However, regional plans may offer better value if you plan to stay in Central/Eastern Europe.

**Data size** Unless you want to watch a movie on a long bus ride, you actually won't be using a lot of data on the go. Your chaperone responsibility is to focus on the kids, not your mobile device. Plan data size starts from 1 GB for the length of our trip. A 3 GB plan is plenty for calls, texts, and navigation tools. A 10 GB plan can be good if shared in a small group. As described above, if you start with a small data plan, you can easily top-up later with most providers.

E.g., [Ubigi eSIM](#) offers an Eastern Europe plan perfectly tailored for our trip in terms of coverage that includes Poland, Czech, along with Austria and Hungary. Their pricing structure is simple: the cost for a 30 day eSIM is just \$8 for 3 GB and \$16 for 10 GB (with simple top-up procedure).

[Holafly](#), in contrast, has a 47€ Europe plan with unlimited data for 15 days. Although it also offers individual country plans, there isn't a regional plan similar to Ubigi's that I can find. One catch and it's very important - the unlimited data plans don't allow hotspot. As of my last search, all Holafly's Europe plans are for unlimited data.

For comparison, [HIPPOCKETWIFI](#) can be rented at a cost of 4.9€ per day with unlimited data.

As you narrow down your choices, keep an eye out for what prepaid international plans your home carrier might offer. One example is the new Minternational Passes offered by Mint Mobile. A 10-day pass costs \$20 and comes with 500 min talk/500 text messages/10 GB data.

## More helpful web links

[The 6 Best Portable Wi-Fi Hotspots of 2024](#) by Travel & Leisure  
[TravelWifi](#)  
[eSIM Providers We Sell - eSIMs for 200+ destinations](#)  
[Europe eSIM | Travel Without Roaming Fees | Airalo](#)  
[Orange Travel](#)  
[Bouygues Telecom](#)

