

Taking Your Cell Phone Abroad

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(Written for Yahoo! Tech Job Interview - February 2006) What does it take to have a cell phone when you travel abroad? Last year, one of my closest friends went to France for a wedding. She asked me if there was a way to take her phone with her. If she had been with Cingular or T-Mobile, the answer is a definite "maybe". With Sprint PCS and Verizon Wireless, it's definitely "no".

Cingular and T-Mobile customers can always subscribe to an international plan and take their phone to a variety of countries that use the same technology. All of Europe, Hong Kong, China, Australia, and South Africa come to mind. Countries like South Korea and Japan don't use compatible technology, so you're out of luck there. There are two stipulations though. Your phone has to support the same frequency and there are huge roaming charges when you use it overseas. Another alternative is to forgo your own phone and rent one for the country you're going to visit. Cellular Abroad and Mobal are a couple companies I found online that offer a rental service. Mobal offers phones for Japan and South Korea too. The route I took was a little more complicated. Phones from Cingular and T-Mobile use a little card, called a SIM chip, which contains your account information. Technically, you can swap it between phones or just buy a SIM chip for another country and drop it into the phone. But service providers lock their phones to recognize only their own SIM chip. Unlocked phones are available on eBay and other sites or you can have it unlocked at your mom and pop cell phone shop for around \$35. I happened to have an unlocked phone that works in Europe, so I just bought a France SIM chip from Cellular Abroad and that's the package my friend took with her. In many European countries you can buy a SIM chip at the local cell phone shop, but that's not as convenient as arriving ready to go. After a long flight and in a foreign country, who wants to hunt for a SIM chip anyway?