



CUBFacts^{Telephone}

Making International Calls

Paying for an international call

International calling rates vary widely—from a few cents to a few dollars per minute, depending on the plan, the country you're calling, and when you call. Rates even vary depending on what part of a country you're calling. One plan's rates to Mexico showed a range of about 5 cents per minute to 15 cents per minute, depending on the city. The most expensive rates to any country are likely to be a company's standard, or "default" rates, as well as operator-assisted calls. At the end of this guide are some examples of reasonable international calling plans, as well as a list of websites to help you search for the plan that's right for you.

Avoid "standard" rates

Avoid making international calls with the regular long-distance plan you use for phoning people within the United States. You could get hit with very high rates, \$1 to \$5 a minute! That's because a long-distance plan for domestic calls likely will charge you standard international—also called basic, casual, or default—rates. To avoid paying exorbitant standard rates, sign up for an international calling plan with your long-distance company, use a prepaid card, or use a dial-around plan.

Operator-assisted calls

If you enlist the help of an operator to complete an international call, rather than dialing directly, you will spend too much money. For example, one company's operator-assisted rate to Bolivia was \$4.36 per minute during the day, plus a \$9.99 service charge.

Finding low rates

If you have a domestic long-distance carrier, ask about its international calling plans. Then compare those rates to other calling plans as well as "dial around" (a.k.a. "10-10") numbers and prepaid calling services. Dial-around and prepaid plans may be the simplest options. Often a regular long-distance company will require you to subscribe to one of its domestic calling plans before you can sign up for its international plans.

The same rules that apply to shopping for a low domestic long-distance rate also apply to international rates. Never trust the advertising. Read the fine print to determine exact rates and spot extra charges. Call or e-mail the company to make sure you know exactly what you're paying. While you're at it, ask the company if it allows you to receive a credit for calls that don't go through or are sent to a wrong number.

Saving with "dial around" numbers

A 10-10, or dial-around, number allows you to connect with an international long-distance carrier different from your regular long-distance company. You can use such numbers to call another country, even if you don't have any long-distance service. While you can find low dial-around rates, the drawback is you will have to push extra numbers to connect to such a service. (The task can be made easier if your phone has a speed-dial function.) The charges for such calls will be on your monthly phone bill, unless the service directly bills to a credit card or offers online accounts.

Saving with prepaid calling cards

International prepaid cards, sold at many retailers and over the Internet, provide a set amount of calling time at a specific price—starting at about \$20. The cards carry instructions that give you a special PIN number for your account and requires you to dial extra numbers to complete a call. Some cards allow a user to recharge them for more minutes.

Another international option: VoIP

VoIP, or Voice over Internet Protocol, could be an exciting option for some international callers. It's a phone service that carries calls over a broadband Internet connection. Some VoIP services, like Skype, require a computer equipped with a headset to make calls. However, other VoIP companies, such as Vonage, allow customers to use a traditional phone. The rates can be amazingly low. For example, Vonage charges a flat monthly fee of about \$25 for all domestic calls, and all calls to western Europe. Calls to China, Mexico, Poland and parts of Israel are an

extra penny a minute.

Skype's international rates are as low as a few cents a minute, with free calls to other Skype users anywhere in the world. VoIP isn't for everyone.

The broadband Internet connection adds \$20 to \$40 a month to the cost. Also, VoIP may not offer traditional 911 service, the sound quality may suffer, and if the power goes out, you lose your phone service. Still, it has some nifty options. For an extra monthly fee, you can get a "virtual" phone number—a second number in certain other countries. That means a Chicago caller could choose a number with the same area code of a close relative in Mexico, whose calls to Chicago then would be treated as local.

Avoiding rip-offs

When you scan the fine print of the international offer you are considering, look for these red flags that can inflate a low advertised rate:

Extra fees and charges: International offers tack on monthly fees, per-call charges, weekly fees, and payphone surcharges. For example, one dial-around number had a 12 cents per minute rate to Mexico—but a \$1.13 connection charge for each call.

Minimums: A minimum assures the carrier a certain amount of money for each call. For example, a

10-minute minimum means you get charged for at least 10 minutes of calling, even if your call only lasts one minute, which often happens in this age of answering machines. One offer had a 7 cents per minute rate to Rome, but you had to make at least \$200 worth of calls each month.

Billing increments: This is how a company determines the length of a call. A common billing increment is one minute. This means that if you talk for 50 minutes and 12 seconds, the company will round up to the next minute and bill you for 51 minutes. Other companies have more favorable increments of six seconds, or one second. Beware of anything more than a minute. One prepaid card had a 2.8 cents per minute rate to Israel, but a five-minute billing increment. That meant a call that lasted one minute cost about 14 cents when it would have cost only about 3 cents with a one-minute billing increment.

Special restrictions: Make sure a prepaid card doesn't have an expiration date—or, at least, make sure you use up your calling time by that deadline. Also, many offers have online or credit card billing only, and charge an extra monthly fee if you want a paper bill sent to you. A company also may charge you an extra fee if you want dial-around charges included on your local phone bill, as opposed to a separate bill.

What's in a name?

An international calling plan may come from a major company but that doesn't make it a money saver. Check out some different rates to Germany, as of March 2007.

<i>Company</i>	<i>Plan</i>	<i>Per-minute Rate</i>	<i>Monthly Charges</i>	<i>Cost of two 20-minute calls/month</i>
AT&T	Worldwide Occasional Calling*	\$1.56	\$1	\$63.40
Sprint	Standard Rates*	99 cents	None	\$39.60
NobelCom.com	One Second Germany (at www.EnjoyPrepaid.com)	2.5 cents	None	\$1

*These options also require the customer to be signed up for one of the carrier's domestic long-distance plans.

Bigger not necessarily better: Don't assume that major companies, such as AT&T and Sprint, will have the best rates. Quite the contrary, the best rates often are found with companies you probably have never heard of.

International mobile wireless termination fee: It's a fee that many long-distance carriers charge consumers who are calling a cell phone or pager outside North America. Long-distance carriers say these fees are imposed on them by foreign phone companies. Whatever the reason, consumers are stuck with the fee, up to 20 cents per minute on top of long-distance charges. Make sure you know what your international plan charges you for calls to cell phones overseas.

Cell phones and international calls

You can make international calls with your cell phone, but it's not the ideal way to call another country. You'll get charged hefty standard rates. If your only choice is to use your cell phone, call your wireless company and ask about its international calling plans. Better yet, a prepaid calling service could give you even lower rates. But be careful. While one service CUB checked offered attractive rates to foreign countries, the fine print revealed that in addition to those rates, callers would get charged airtime by their cell phone company for calling an access number to connect with the service.

Reading the charts on pages 4-5

The charts show rates to various countries that CUB found in June 2007 by searching the websites listed in the box on this page. The charts show the range of per-minute rates available—from a few cents to a few dollars—and examples of low-cost options from dial-around,

prepaid, and more typical long-distance companies. CUB also lists the websites where it found each example, but that is not an endorsement or recommendation of any plan or website. CUB gets NO compensation from any of these companies. The charts are for informational purposes only. This is not a comprehensive list of all the international plans available. The prices quoted may have changed by the time you read them. While every attempt has been made to verify all the information, CUB cannot be responsible for errors or omissions.

Where can I get more information?

There are many websites, including www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org, to help you search for a low-cost international plan. Here are some others:

www.ABTolls.com

www.EnjoyPrepaid.com

www.LowerMyBills.com

www.LowerMyPhone.com

www.Phone-bill-Busters.com

www.PhoneDog.com

www.SmartPrice.com

www.Tel3Advantage.com

www.1010-phonerates.com

International Calling Options

A June 2007 review of the websites listed on page 3 found these rates for various countries. The rates do NOT include taxes and surcharges. Rates may differ according to what region of the country you are calling.

Country	Options	Example of an Offering	Cost of two 20-minute calls/month
<i>China</i> Rate range: 2 cents-\$5.43 per minute	Dial-around company (1010-phonerates.com)	-1.9 cents/minute -\$1.49 monthly fee -39 cents connection fee -1-minute billing increment.	\$3.03, plus taxes and surcharges.
	Long-distance company (ABTolls.com)	-4.8 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$1.92, plus taxes and surcharges.
	Prepaid company (EnjoyPrepaid.com)	-3.5 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Online billing only.	\$1.20, plus taxes and surcharges.
<i>India</i> Rate range: 9 cents-\$5.53 per minute	Dial-around company (1010-phonerates.com)	-9 cents/minute. -\$1.49 monthly fee -39 cents connection fee -1-minute billing increment.	\$5.87, plus taxes and surcharges
	Long-distance company (ABTolls.com)	-18.44 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$7.38 plus taxes and surcharges
	Prepaid company (EnjoyPrepaid.com)	-9.5 cents/minute. (8.5 cents/minute to Bombay) -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$3.80, plus taxes and surcharges
<i>Israel</i> Rate range: 3.5 cents-\$4.18 per minute	Dial-around company (PhoneDog.com)	-5 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$2, plus taxes and surcharges
	Long-distance company (ABTolls.com)	-4.8 cents/minute. -1-minute billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$1.92, plus taxes and surcharges
	Prepaid company (EnjoyPrepaid.com)	-3.5 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Online billing only.	\$1.40, plus taxes and surcharges.

Country	Options	Example of an Offering	Cost of two 20-minute calls/month
Italy Rate range: 4 cents-\$3.23 per minute	Dial-around company (1010-phonerates.com)	-4.3 cents/minute. -95 cent monthly fee. Fee waived in months service not used. -\$5 minimum. -1-minute billing increments. -Must register your number to avoid much higher rate.	\$5.95, plus taxes and surcharges.
	Long-distance company (ABTolls.com)	-4.54 cents/minute. -1-minute billing increment. -Online billing only.	\$1.82, plus taxes and surcharges.
	Prepaid company (EnjoyPrepaid.com)	-4 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$1.60, plus taxes and surcharges.
Mexico Rate range: 2 cents-\$2.39 per minute	Dial-around company (1010-phonerates.com)	-2 cents/minute. -\$1.49 monthly fee -39 cents connection fee -1-minute billing increment.	\$3.07 plus taxes and surcharges
	Long-distance company (Phone-Bill-Busters.com)	-12.9 cents/minute. (6 cents/minute to Mexico City) -1-minute billing increment	\$5.16 plus taxes and surcharges
	Prepaid company (Tel3Advantage.com)	-7 cents/minute. (3.25 cents/minute to Mexico City) -1-minute billing increments. -Credit card billing only.	\$2.80, plus taxes and surcharges
Poland Rate range: 3.5 cents-\$2.10 per minute	Dial-around company (PhoneDog.com)	-5 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only.	\$2, plus taxes and surcharges
	Long-distance company (ABTolls.com)	-4.8 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Credit card billing only. -You can get a paper bill by paying 99-cent monthly fee.	\$1.92, plus taxes and surcharges
	Prepaid company (EnjoyPrepaid.com)	-3.5 cents/minute. -1-second billing increment. -Online billing only.	\$1.40 plus taxes and surcharges.