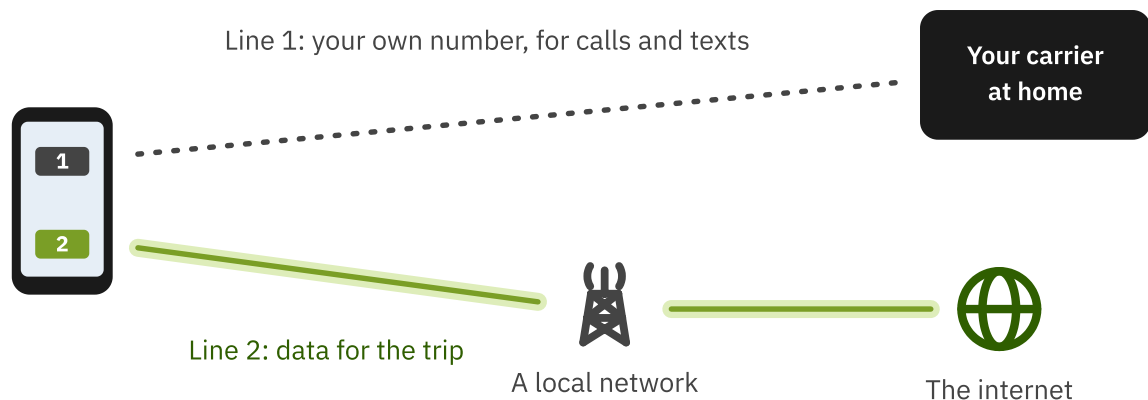


Phone Data Abroad, Explained

How to land in another country with your phone working, and no surprise bill when you get home.



The short answer

Your phone needs a plan that works where you're going. There are three ways to get one. And your phone number doesn't have to ride on the same plan as your data.

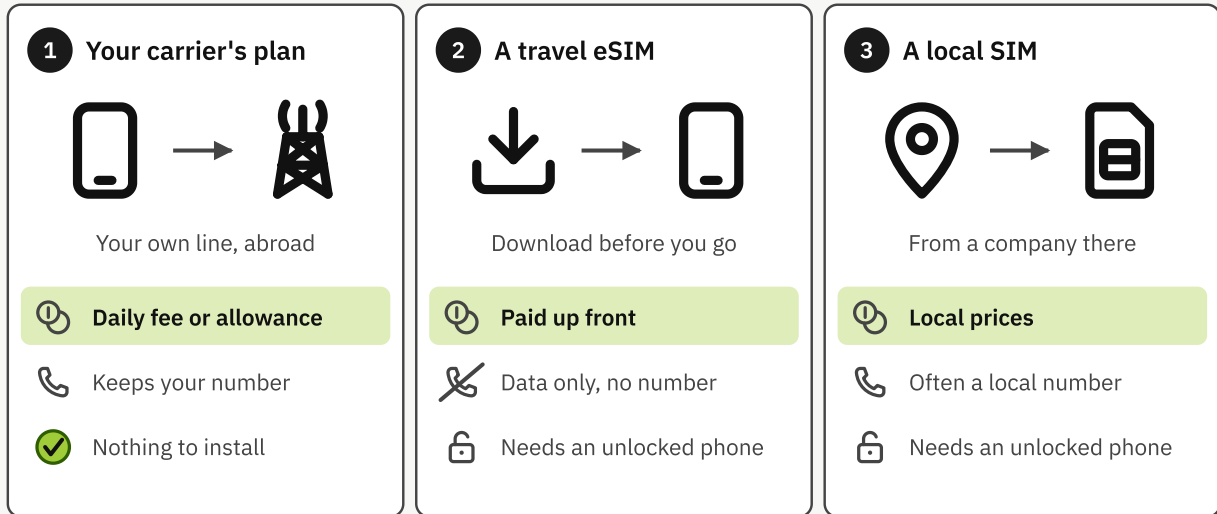


Figure 1. Three ways to get data abroad. They differ in how you pay (the green row), whether you get a number, and what your phone needs.

The one idea that explains this guide

Many recent phones can hold two plans at once. Check yours. Keep your home plan on for calls and texts. Let the second plan carry your data.

What's inside

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HOW IT WORKS

What a SIM does

A SIM holds a key. It tells the phone network who you are, who pays the bill, and how calls and texts find you wherever you are.

A SIM card is the key on a small chip you slide in. An eSIM is the same key, downloaded into a chip already inside your phone. Some new phones, including some iPhone models, only take eSIMs.

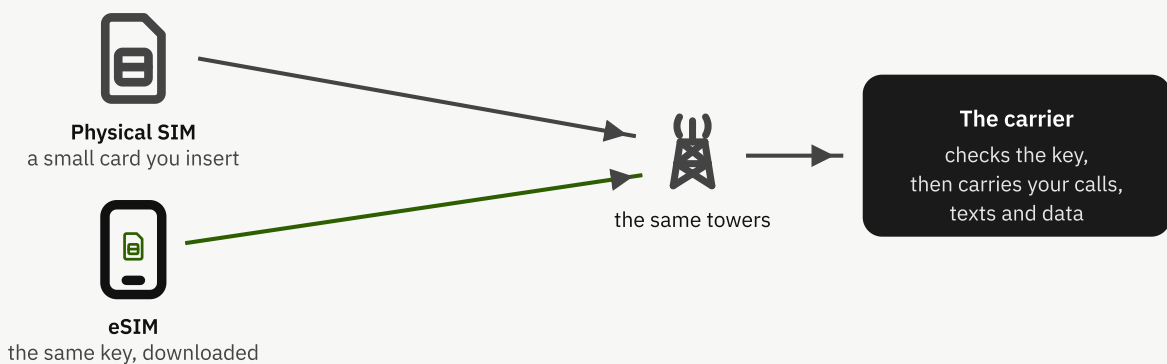


Figure 2. Two ways to carry the same key. A card and an eSIM reach the same towers. Neither one is a different network.

A word on the words

Carrier means your phone company. **Roaming** means using a network your carrier doesn't own, usually abroad. **Unlocked** means your phone will take a plan from any carrier.

Is your phone unlocked?

A phone bought from a carrier may be locked to it. Ask your carrier to get it unlocked well before you leave.

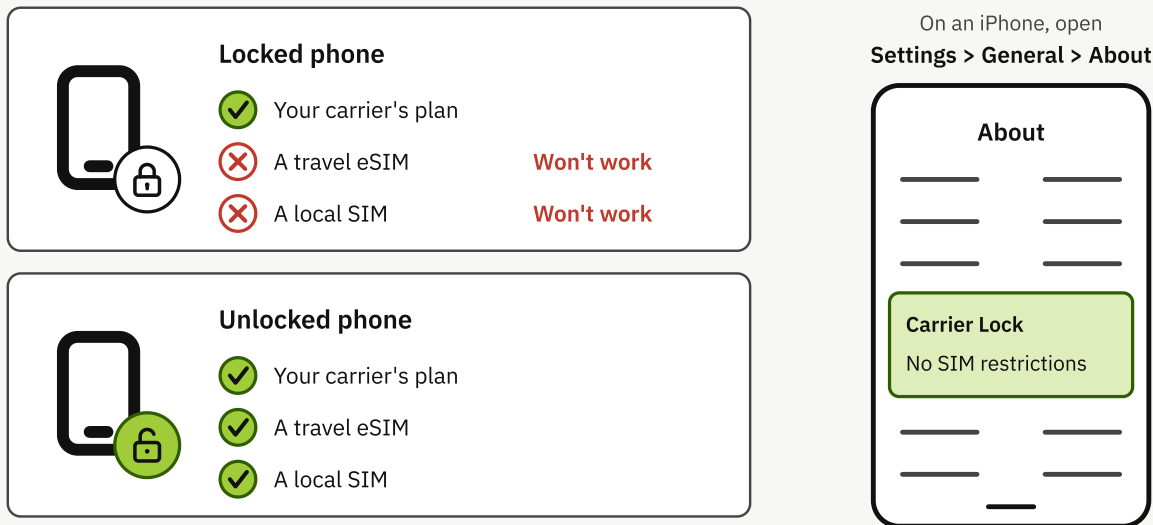


Figure 3. A locked phone won't take a travel eSIM or a local SIM. On an iPhone, the Carrier Lock line tells you. "No SIM restrictions" means it's unlocked.

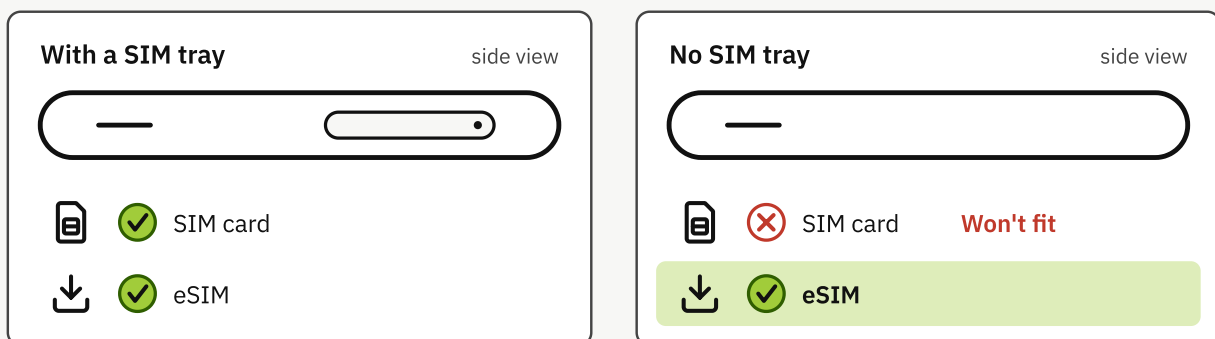


Figure 4. No SIM tray means eSIM only. Many new phones have no slot. A SIM card from an airport kiosk won't fit, so buy an eSIM instead.

Three ways to get data

All three put your phone on a local cell network. What changes is who you pay, when you pay, and whether you get a phone number.

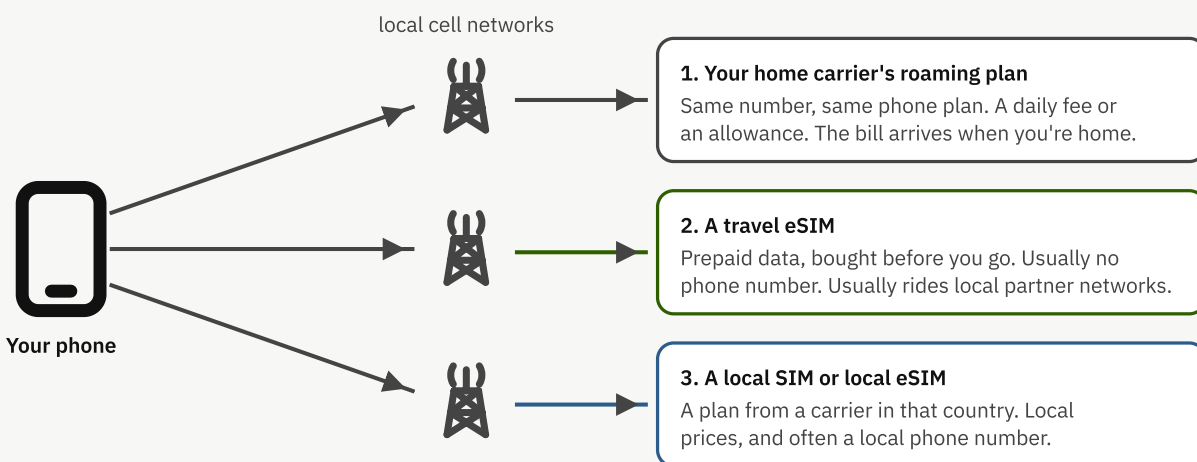


Figure 5. Three roads to the same towers. Each one bills you differently.

Your carrier's plan is the easiest. A travel eSIM is often cheaper for extra data, but compare it with what your plan already includes. A local SIM makes sense for a long stay, or when you need a local number.

OPTION 1

Roaming with your own carrier

The simplest choice, and the one I suggest first when friends ask. Nothing to install. Your phone joins a partner network when you land, and your carrier charges you by the day, or out of your plan.

A daily fee sounds small. But it adds up on a long trip.

A \$12 daily fee, added up over a trip

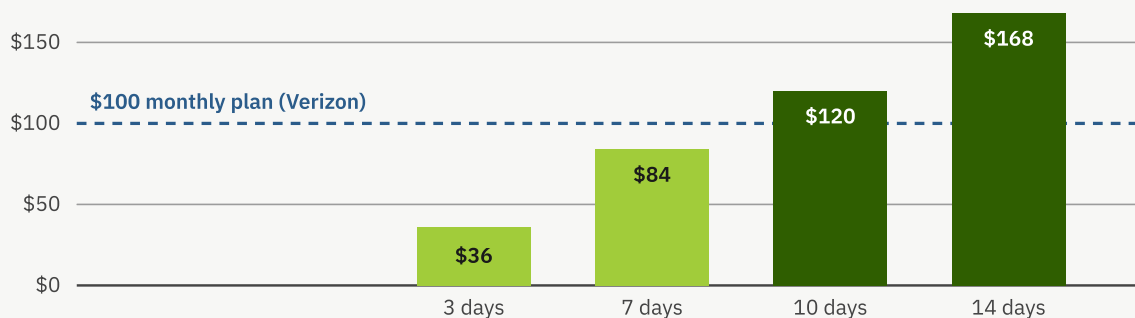


Figure 6. A daily fee adds up. If your carrier charges by the day, compare it with a monthly travel plan for any trip over a week.

⚠ CAUTION

What starts a day

Using data, making a call or sending a text on your home line can start that day's fee. That includes apps updating in the background.

Check your carrier's travel page before you go. Plans and prices change often.

Travel eSIMs and local SIMs

Both need an unlocked phone. Both are paid up front, so there's no surprise bill.

A travel eSIM

You pick a country, an amount of data and a number of days. It usually comes with data only, so that plan won't take normal calls. You can buy one for a single country, all of Europe or Asia, or the whole world. Set it as your phone's data line, and your calls and texts still come in on your home number.

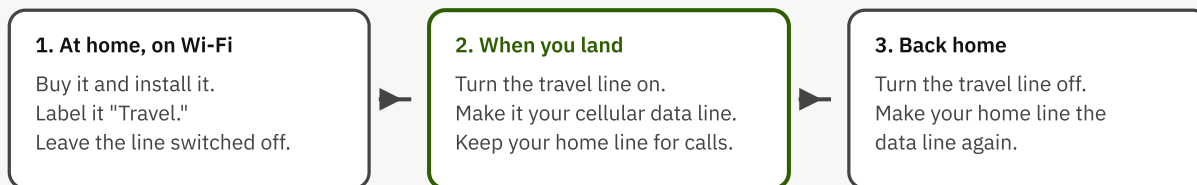


Figure 7. A travel eSIM in three steps. Set it up at home, switch it on when you land, and switch it off when you're back.

⚠ CAUTION

Install it before you need it

Setting up an eSIM usually needs Wi-Fi or a hotspot. Do it at home, then leave it switched off until you land.

A local SIM or eSIM

Buy it online before you go, or when you land, at an airport kiosk or even a vending machine. It's good for a long stay, or when friends in that country need to call you without dialing long distance. You may need your passport.

Keep your own number

Your bank, airline, doctor and kids all text your home number. Keep that line on.



Line 1: your home number

Stays on, so calls and texts still reach you.
Its Data Roaming is off, and it is not the data line.
Answering a call on it may still start a roaming charge. Incoming texts are free on some carriers.

Line 2: travel eSIM or local plan

Set as the cellular data line.
Carries maps, email and app calls. On an iPhone, iMessage and FaceTime keep using your home number over this data.

Figure 8. One phone, two plans, two jobs. Your home plan takes calls and texts. The travel plan carries the data.

Where surprise charges hide



You answer a call
on your home line



Can start a daily fee



A call goes to voicemail
on your home line



Can cost you too



A text message
on your home line



Some carriers charge

Figure 9. Your home line still rings abroad. Data Roaming off doesn't stop any of these.

Calls home over hotel Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi Calling can carry your home number over Wi-Fi, often at no extra charge. Check your carrier's rules first. Our guide *Wi-Fi Calling, Explained* covers it.

The switches that matter

Four switches decide what your phone does abroad. Each one stops something different.

	Calls and texts	Cell data	Wi-Fi
Airplane mode, Wi-Fi back on	⊖	⊖	✓
Data Roaming off	✓	⊖	✓
Cellular Data off	✓	⊖	✓
Line turned off	⊖	⊖	✓

 Still works
  Switched off

Figure 10. Which switch stops what. Data Roaming off stops roaming data on that line, but calls and texts still get through, and can still cost you. With Wi-Fi Calling on, calls and texts still work over Wi-Fi, even in airplane mode.

The one to remember

Turn **Data Roaming** off on your home line. On an iPhone it's in Settings > Cellular. On Android, look under Settings > Connections or Network, then Mobile networks or SIMs. If your travel eSIM says to, turn it on for the travel line only.

STOP

Know the emergency number

Learn the local emergency number before you land. It isn't 911 everywhere, and 999 only works in some countries.

Hotel, airport and ship Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi is often the cheapest data on a trip, and the least predictable. I've long said public Wi-Fi should be fast, free and frictionless. Some places charge instead.

IN KEITH'S WORDS

"If a network ever asked you to sign in on a web page, your Wi-Fi already worked."

Keith Parsons, *Fix Your Own Wi-Fi*, chapter 6

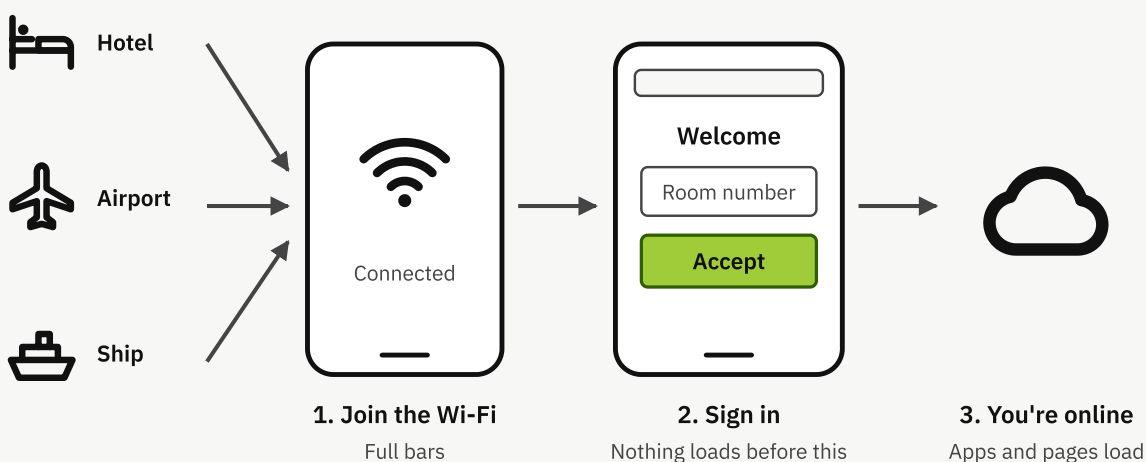


Figure 11. The sign-in page stands between the Wi-Fi and the internet. Full Wi-Fi bars only mean step 1 worked. Nothing else loads until you sign in.

Hotels

One internet connection shared by many guests. Strong Wi-Fi bars can still mean a slow connection.

Airports

A sign-in page and a crowd. Fine for messages. Don't wait until the gate to set up your eSIM.

Cruise ships

At sea, the ship runs its own cell service over a satellite link, and calls, texts and data all cost extra. Use airplane mode with Wi-Fi on.

Is public Wi-Fi safe?

Mostly, yes. Nearly every website now locks its traffic. Look for the lock in the address bar, and keep your phone's software up to date.

Which one for this trip?

Three questions settle most trips. If your phone is locked, your carrier's plan is your only choice. Answer them a week before you leave. That leaves time to get your phone unlocked or set up an eSIM.

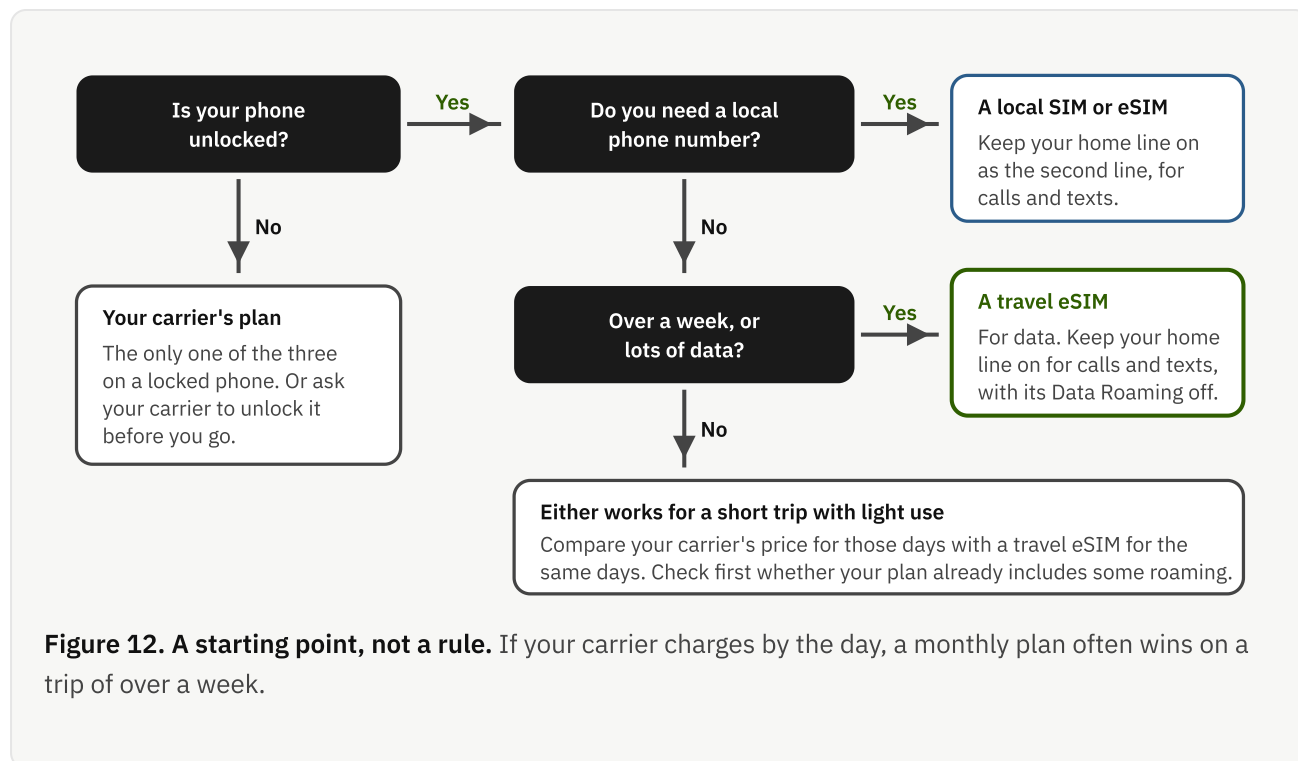


Figure 12. A starting point, not a rule. If your carrier charges by the day, a monthly plan often wins on a trip of over a week.

Things that change the answer

- Several countries on one trip? Check that the plan covers every one.
- Sharing data with a laptop? Check that the plan allows a hotspot.
- Your plan may already include some roaming. Look before you buy.

STRAIGHT FACTS

Four things people get wrong

MYTH An eSIM is a different kind of network.

FACT It's the same key as a SIM card, just downloaded. It uses the same towers.

MYTH Airplane mode is the only way to avoid roaming charges.

FACT Turning off Data Roaming stops data. A travel plan can carry your data. Airplane mode is just the bluntest switch.

MYTH Data Roaming is off, so I can't be charged.

FACT Calls and texts still work on that line. Answering a call can start a daily fee.

MYTH The hotel has Wi-Fi, so I don't need data.

FACT You need maps and ride apps between Wi-Fi spots. And your bank may text its security code to your home number.

Your checklist

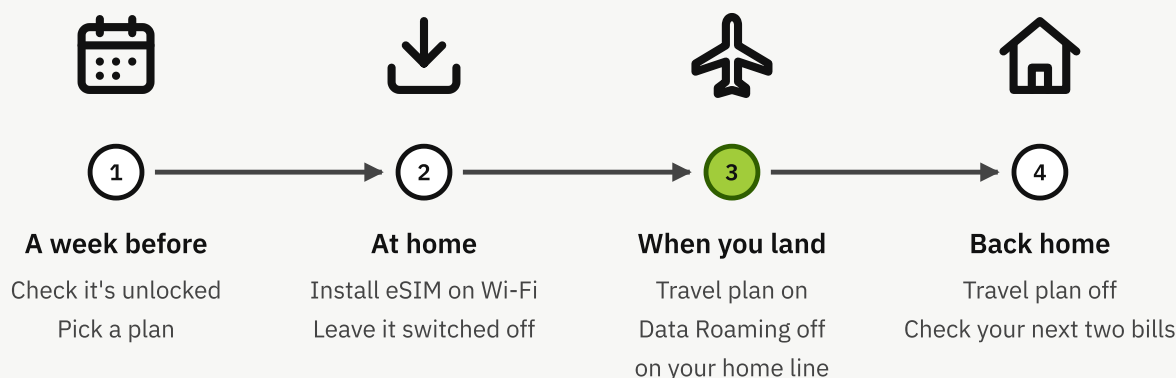


Figure 13. Your trip, in four steps. Two small jobs at each one. The green stop, when you land, is where the switches matter.

SOURCES

Where these facts come from

Checked on each company's or agency's own pages in September 2026. Carrier prices and plans change often, so read your carrier's current page before you travel. This guide names no travel eSIM company and recommends none.

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- Samsung UK, How to turn international data roaming on or off on my Samsung phone (updated 5 June 2026); Samsung US, SIM cards for your Galaxy phone or tablet (ANS10001619)
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- Keith Parsons, *Fix Your Own Wi-Fi*, chapter 6, "When it's not the Wi-Fi at all"

About this guide

Written for travelers who aren't technical and want their phone to work when they land. Keith Parsons, CWNE #3, runs Wireless LAN Professionals. This guide is independent and isn't affiliated with any carrier, phone maker or eSIM seller.