

## Cell and Other Phone Service for RVers

Phone service when traveling used to be a real headache, but today's ubiquitous cell phone service makes it a breeze. You probably already have a cell phone, but here are some tips that may help you out. There are also some alternatives to cell phones that may be worth considering in certain scenarios.

### Cell Phones

RVers generally want nationwide service and Verizon, Sprint, AT&T, and T-Mobile all do a fine job of that, so you have several choices. For those who don't travel far from home, a regional cellular carrier may suffice. Usually there will be at least two and sometimes several cellular carriers in an area, so shop around. You may also find useful service from an independent service like TracFone or Wal-Mart's Straight Talk.

### Coverage

The main thing is to make sure that your carrier has good service ("coverage") in the areas where you travel. Most cellular providers have good service in and around cities and sometimes along the interstates, but as you get out into the countryside the signal may fade. In mountainous regions, the signal can disappear by just rounding a bend in the road. If you have a favorite spot but your phone service won't work there, ask around to see if another carrier is doing better in that spot. Each carrier will have a coverage map on their web site that shows the areas where they provide service. In general, the map is at the zip code level and service can vary quite a bit within a covered area, so don't assume you will have good service everywhere the map shows it. The independent services piggyback onto one of the major carrier's network, so their coverage will be similar to one of them. Fees and services, however, will differ.

Many RVing couples find that they want to have two phones so they can keep in touch when one or the other is away from the RV. One of the tricks of the seasoned RVer is to get phones from two different carriers, increasing the odds that at least one of them will work wherever you are. A basic prepaid phone like the TracFone makes a

good second phone for limited use. For as little as \$9.99/month you can have a second phone with 30 minutes of service per month. It is expensive to exceed your monthly limit of minutes.

### **Cell Phone and Internet**

Your cell phone can also serve as your portal to the Internet. Some phones can act as modems to get you online, a procedure called *tethering*. See the article entitled “*Internet on the Road*” for more specific information about this process and the equipment needed to make it work.

### **Roaming and International Borders**

RVers need to be cautious when traveling with their cell phone near international borders. A US cell phone account does not provide service in Canada or Mexico and the international “roaming” fees can be exorbitant. Even though you are on one side of the border, your cell phone may be communicating to a tower on the other side. Check your phone’s screen for the “roaming” icon before making or receiving a call. You may want to turn your phone off when traveling near a border, just to be sure you are not connecting across that border. Sometimes a US carrier and Canadian carrier agree to partner and provide services across the border—for an extra fee. If you plan to travel between the US and Canada, check with your carrier to see if a multi-country plan is available.

At the present time, I do not know of any plans that allow roaming into Mexico. If you need to stay in touch by phone from south of the border, you may want to consider getting a Mexican phone with an international calling feature.

### **Accessories**

Some phones have the capability to attach an external antenna. This can be a big help in a remote area, pulling in a usable signal when the phone alone can’t do it. If you will be traveling to remote areas, be sure to look for a phone with an external antenna jack. Cellular antennas can be single band or dual band (PCS plus regular cellular). Always get a dual band antenna, so it works with whatever type of cellular service is available.

You may also wish to consider getting an amplifier for the phone. This is an external device that increases the power of the phone to 3 watts (a typical cell phone is

about 0.8 watt) for better range. Coupled with an antenna, it can increase the range dramatically. If your phone does not have an antenna jack, there are cellular amplifiers that use a tiny antenna that sticks onto the back of the phone to boost the signal.

How do I figure out what features a phone has? The clerks in the store either don't know or give conflicting answers. One good source is a website named *phonescoop.com*. It gives detailed specs for every phone, old or new, regardless of carrier. The site also has user reviews to give you an idea of how the phone performs in real life.

### **Alternative Calling Services**

You can make telephone calls via an Internet connection using VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). This can be a great way to get cheap telephone service, especially long distance. Skype, Magicjack, and Vonage are well known VOIP services and many people use them for some or all of their voice communications from their homes. Can an RVer use these? Yes, under certain conditions.

Most importantly, you need a solid high speed Internet connection with consistent performance. "Consistent" means that it delivers the same, quick response time over a period of time, not just bursts of high speed followed by delays. Erratic performance of the Internet connection results in broken up audio and lost snatches of conversation that quickly become irritating to the user. It can also cause a delay that makes conversation awkward.

Satellite Internet has an inherent delay that makes it pretty much unacceptable for VOIP conversation. Cellular Internet can also be problematic and works well only in ideal reception conditions. However, if you have a Wi-Fi connection to a fast Internet link, or if you have cable or DSL Internet at your site, you can probably make use of a VOIP service.

**Skype...** is a VOIP service that you access by downloading free software to your computer. Calls to other Skype users are free and calls to cell or landline phones, even in other countries, are very low cost (a few cents a minute). Skype users seem to be happy in general.

**Magicjack...** has received a lot of attention because of heavy TV marketing. It costs \$40.00 to get started (the USB device plus one year of service) and \$20.00/year thereafter. You just plug it into your Internet-connected computer, plug a regular residential phone into the Magicjack, and it should work. If you have problems, don't expect much in the way of customer service (there have been numerous complaints from unhappy customers) and there have been reports of difficulty getting refunds.

**Vonage...** is a professional voice communications service that works well and has excellent online and telephone support for customers, but it will cost you \$19-\$27 per month. To use Vonage from an RV, you need to plug your Vonage adapter into a LAN port on your computer or a Wi-Fi router to give it Internet access and plug a regular phone into it, but after that it works like any residential phone. Your phone number follows you around wherever you plug in, and voice mail collects your messages between times. Vonage will also automatically forward to another phone if you wish, including cell phones. You can also update the phone's e911 information as you move, so that 911 emergency responders can find you. Vonage is a workable option for those who stay in one place for weeks or months at a time and have good Internet access.

### **Who You Gonna Call?**

Today's cell phone coverage makes it a wonderful option for RVers and anyone who travels. The rates are competitive and thus keep the costs reasonable. The quality of the calls is very good for the most part. The equipment is mostly good and will take a certain amount of abuse. Simply, today, there is no good technical reason not to call home.