



# Tech Tools for Dialing Out of Disaster

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by Mike Haney | Published February 2009 | Condé Nast Traveler

In an emergency, communication is key. Here's how to choose—and use—the best phone overseas.

Like others around the world during the Mumbai siege, Australian photographer Daniela Federici heard on the news that the terrorists were calling the rooms of foreign guests at the Taj hotel and luring them to the lobby by pretending to be hotel staff. But for Federici, that information was more urgent: She was among the many guests barricaded inside a Taj ballroom for seven hours with no TV and, for most of the night, no power. Their only source of intel was their cell phones. Federici followed news reports using the Web browser on one guest's iPhone. "It let me find out what was going on right away," she says. "You'd hear an explosion and within minutes they'd be reporting it on CNN." Guests also used their cell phones to exchange text messages with family members because it was too dangerous to talk. Ultimately, their phones allowed them to learn that the hotel was on fire and it was time to make an escape.

Think of the cell phone as a digital Swiss Army knife: useful anytime but vital when things go awry. Many countries, even in the developing world, have nearly ubiquitous cell service, and finding a phone that will work overseas is cheaper and easier than ever. Web browsers on phones let you access up-to-the-second news, while services such as Twitter let you broadcast your status in real time to family and friends. Here's what you need to know to make sure you stay connected wherever you are.

## Carry the Right Phone

Researching phones can lead you into a jungle of acronyms, but simply put, quad-band GSM phones will give you the broadest coverage worldwide. In fact, these phones will work just about anywhere but in Japan and Korea. If you're with T-Mobile or AT&T and purchased your phone in the past year or two, chances are that's what you've got (check your owner's manual or [phonescoop.com](http://phonescoop.com)). For Verizon and Sprint customers, only models designated "world phone" will work overseas, although you may get service in Canada, Mexico, and some South American countries. (If you're looking to buy a new phone, the 3G iPhone will work in any country, including Japan and Korea, as will Verizon's new BlackBerry Storm.)

All of the above applies only to phone calls, not to international data service (e-mail and Web browsing). But if your phone can make calls abroad, you should at least be able to send and receive texts. If you don't have a phone with these capabilities, consider renting one at [intouchusa.us](http://intouchusa.us); many include free incoming calls and start at about \$50 a week.

## Make Sure You Can Use It

Having the right hardware is just the first step. Both T-Mobile and AT&T require you to call and activate international calling on your phone. Be sure to find out whether you'll have both voice and data service and what it will cost (and how to avoid excess roaming charges). A more economical alternative to the dollar-plus-per-minute international rates is to "unlock" your phone (your carrier will tell you how) and insert a pre-paid local SIM card—a small plastic chip that will give you a local number, access to cheaper in-country rates, and often free incoming calls. Just remember: While you're using that SIM card, your phone won't ring when people call your U.S. number.

## Know Where to Call

Be sure to memorize or pre-program the three-digit emergency number for the country you're visiting. In many places, including the European Union, you can dial 112 from any GSM cell phone to reach local authorities, sometimes even without a SIM card. Finally, store the contact information (including the physical address) for the local U.S. embassy or consulate, as well as your insurance and credit card companies' international collect numbers.