

How to keep in touch while studying in America

A comprehensive guide to saving money on broadband deals and mobile phone costs while you're studying abroad.

Researched and compiled by Ofcom accredited broadband, TV and phone comparison site www.cable.co.uk

In a country as large and populous as the United States of America, it is no surprise there's a wide range of choices when it comes to telecoms. So if you're travelling and want to keep in touch while still managing your finances, what's the best way to cut costs? Our guide to the USA has the answers.

Broadband providers in the US

The most popular internet service provider in the US very much depends on where you are in the country. If you're studying or working in the east (New York, Pennsylvania, Washington D.C.) or south (Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico), then Verizon broadband tends to be the most widely subscribed ISP.

In the central and north of America (Nebraska, Wyoming, Minnesota), WOW! Broadband performs well, while those on the west coast (California, Oregon, Nevada) will find Cox Communications broadband receiving the highest levels of customer satisfaction and attracting large numbers of customers.

Unlike in the UK, where speeds are generally offered in Mbps (megabits per second), the majority of US providers still offer connections measured in Kbps (kilobits per second) along with mid to high-end ADSL speeds. AT&T, for example, offers internet connections from 768Kbps up to 24Mbps. While fibre broadband is available in selected cities, the average US download speed is just 8.6Mbps – so if you're going from up to 300Mbps fibre broadband in the UK, it's worthwhile lowering your expectations before you arrive.

Mobile providers in the US

Verizon Wireless consistently receives the highest levels of customer satisfaction for its cellular network, closely followed by Sprint and a provider that UK mobile consumers will recognize: T-Mobile.

Mobile provider AT&T has mixed fortunes, being rated as the least reliable 3G carrier, yet the most reliable supplier of 4G in the US.

You'll find that if you sign up for a mobile contract in the US you can call UK landlines and mobiles for a reasonable price as long as you pay a small fee to access an international call plan. This provides real savings if you're going to be calling the UK from the USA regularly, and also provides you with the flexibility of being contract-free while you're away.

Getting a broadband or phone contract in the USA

As a non-resident, you'll need to visit a bank in the country to set up your first account. Take at least two forms of identification (including your passport), plus proof of your student status. Once you've got this, it'll be easy to arrange your first mobile or broadband contract.

International roaming: what you need to know

International roaming is the term for when you use your mobile on an overseas network but get billed by your UK provider. While there are plans to scrap roaming within the European Union from July 2014, it's likely that such charges will still apply for visitors to the US in the immediate future.

Surprisingly, it can in some instances be cheaper to roam with your UK mobile than sign up for an American contract – but this is very much dependent on how generous your current provider is.

Deciding if roaming is right for you depends on how you're planning on using your mobile, how long you're going to be in the US, and whether or not you mind switching to a different number while you're overseas.

Consumer rights in the US

The laws protecting you from poor service, deception or fraud in the USA are enforced by three different agencies: the Federal Trade Commission, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau or the U.S. Department of Justice. Some states also provide consumer protection but this varies considerably and you should check this before traveling. Generally, you can expect the same level of consumer protection in the United States that you receive in the UK. However, since laws can change from state to state, it's important to spend some time researching the relevant legislation for where you'll be studying and working before you go.

Manage your data

There are some simple steps you can take to make sure you don't run up unexpected data bills while you're in the US. Here's our top five:

Beware email attachments

Email checking is a relatively low data activity – until your family or friends send you large attachments. If your email client automatically downloads linked files when you go into messages, switch this facility off – or you'll use a lot of potentially expensive data very quickly.

Use Wi-Fi

Where possible only browse or download when using a Wi-Fi connection. Users are not billed for data downloaded over Wi-Fi. The only charge might be if a particular Wi-Fi hotspot

charges for access, and you should be informed of that before you can start using the connection.

Switch off to be sure

Most mobile phone operating systems will allow you turn off data roaming, so even if you try to use your mobile data while overseas, you won't be allowed to. If you are in a situation where you need to get online, you can always switch it back on again – just remember to turn off when you're done.

Bundle up

Check with your current mobile provider to find out what kind of data bundles they offer for international travellers. You may find that you can purchase a bolt-on data allowance, which means you can directly control how much you get through on a daily basis. It's a useful way of controlling your usage, which is especially important when you're travelling overseas.

Pre-download files you know you'll need

If you know that you're going to need files like maps or local guides before you travel, it makes sense to download them while you're in the UK. The same rule applies for any digital media you might want to put on your phone like MP3s, movies or TV shows. Maximising your home broadband usage before you travel can help you save money.

The high cost of US broadband

A study by the New America Foundation think tank found that broadband in the US costs nearly three times as much as in the UK and France - and five times more than comparable packages in South Korea. As such, it's advisable to avoid signing up for a fixed line broadband package if you can avoid it: even if you're planning on staying in the country for a prolonged period of time.

Local information

While you might be used to broadband and mobile jargon in the UK, there's a number of country-specific acronyms that it's helpful to know if you're planning on living or studying in the US. Here's our brief summary of the most commonly used US telecoms acronyms.

Pre-Paid: The US equivalent of Pay-As-You-Go

Cellular Phone: What American's call the mobile telephone (similarly, you'll connect to a cellular - not mobile – network)

AOL: America Online, a large internet service provider

FCC: Federal Communications Commission, US Regulator

IXC: Inter-Exchange Carrier

kft: Kilofeet – a measurement of US cables

LEC: Local Exchange Carrier

SONET: Synchronous Optical Network

T1: A 1.544Mbps internet connection

Know what it's costing you

Currency exchange rates can fluctuate during any journey and it's important that you know what you are spending. If you are looking at prices shown in American dollars, always use a reputable currency exchange service to check the latest rates so you can see what that cost represents in British pounds. Popular exchange rate services include Reuters, XE and Oanda.

Useful Links

Reuters: <http://www.reuters.com/finance/currencies>

XE: <http://www.xe.com>

Oanda: <http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/>

Cable.co.uk is a provider of impartial information to increase public awareness in matters of broadband, TV, landline and mobile.