Using cellphones, mobile devices and computers abroad

If you use your Canadian cellphone, mobile device or computer in another country, or even if you don't – smartphones use data intermittently even if you are not actively using them – you may receive an unexpectedly large bill for your data usage, known as "bill shock," from your wireless provider after you return home. This is the result of the exceptionally high international data roaming fees charged by Canadian wireless providers to keep you connected to a wireless network while you are outside the country.

International data roaming

International data roaming is a service that allows a customer of a wireless network in one country to receive multimedia messages, email and the Internet on his or her wireless device from a wireless network in another country.

When you use the Internet on your wireless device while you are abroad, your connection is established through a local wireless network, which then transmits your data through an intermediary international transit service to your Canadian network.

The high rate you pay for international roaming charges is determined by your Canadian wireless provider and is based on various wholesale and overhead costs plus a retail markup.

Here are some tips to help you avoid roaming charges while you are abroad:

Bringing your device with you

Cyber security

If you travel with your cellphone, mobile device or computer, be aware that cyber-based threats can significantly increase when you are travelling and devices can easily be compromised and stolen. Protect yourself by being cyber aware.

Check your carrier's website

Roaming charges will be applied when you use your Canadian cellphone anywhere outside your plan's coverage area – even within Canada. Take the time to go through the fine print in your contract on your carrier's website or over the phone with a customer service representative.

Check whether your Canadian network's toll-free number will work from your destination country. If so, keep it with you so that you can reach customer service from abroad without long-distance charges.

Compare Canadian and foreign data options before you leave home

Ask your wireless provider about roaming fees for both phone and data use before you leave. Some providers offer travel packages for U.S. and international destinations that offer a bundle of minutes or megabytes for a fixed price.

If your phone is locked, meaning that you can't change its SIM card for one from another network, you can leave it at home and purchase a GSM-enabled phone in Canada or when you arrive at your destination. GSM is the most popular international standard. Then you can buy a local-network SIM card when you get to your destination and buy a prepaid plan for a minimal price. Telecommunications companies are local, so do some advance research on the Internet or on travelling forums such as Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree or CanuckAbroad to find the name of a reliable carrier in your destination country.

Enable airplane mode

Airplane mode should be turned on before your departure flight and remain on until you have returned to Canada. When airplane mode is enabled, both voice and data cellular services are turned off, as well as Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, GPS and other location services.

You can manually re-enable Wi-Fi to connect to secure wireless spots, as many hotels and public places offer free or cheap Wi-Fi service. Bluetooth can also be turned on during airplane mode to exchange files between devices.

Remove or switch your SIM card

Make sure you store your SIM card in a safe place if you decide to take it out, as any information saved on it – contacts, photos and text messages – will be lost if you misplace it. Wi-Fi and Bluetooth can be enabled without a SIM card.

If your device is or can be unlocked from its home network so that you can use a foreign SIM card, you can purchase a SIM card at your destination to use a 3G or GSM network at a reasonable rate.If you want to unlock your device, your provider may remove the lock for a fee, you can use free or fee-based software and websites to unlock it yourself or you can take it to a local independent mobile phone store.

Use Wi-Fi and applications

You can save a lot of money by turning off data roaming on your cellphone and logging into Wi-Fi hotspots to get an Internet connection. If you purchase a subscription to Skype, Google Talk or iChat, you can call landlines and cellphones through the Internet for a very low fee.

Rather than running Internet searches to find directions, use a GPS app such as CoPilot, Sygic or Navigon that does not require data usage.

There are also applications such as Onavo that will compress data and let you do up to five times more with your current data plan without additional fees. They reduce your roaming charges by providing a leaner version of the Internet. They will also provide you with a breakdown of your mobile data usage, showing you how much data is being consumed by each app and allowing you to make better informed data usage choices.

Go to mobile-friendly websites

An increasing number of websites now have specific sites where the pages are specially optimized for mobile phone, so they use fewer megabytes. Most mobile websites have an address that is very similar to their desktop site. Try replacing the "www" with "m" or "mobile" or replace the ".co.ca" or ".com" with ".mobi."

Set up a MiFi

If your phone can't be unlocked and you are travelling with your family or a group of people you can create your own personal secure Wi-Fi hotspot with a MiFi device, a wireless modem that emits a Wi-Fi signal that will allow you to run up to five Wi-Fi-enabled devices from that point.

Check your bill when you get home

It is difficult to monitor your real-time usage and compare it to the limit of your plan, so your monthly bill is the next best tool. Report any surprise charges on your bill to your carrier. Carriers may give first-time offenders a break by waiving or reducing the roaming charges.

Related links

- Cyber security while travelling
- Travel Smart

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