

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Call Home for Free (Almost)

How to make Internet phone calls. By MEI-LING HOPGOOD

As the technology of making phone calls via Internet (known as Voice Over Internet Protocol, or VoIP) rapidly improves, so has the ease of making Internet phone calls while traveling abroad. All you need is Internet access and a computer with a speaker and microphone. Here's how to make it work for you:

Signing up for most VoIP services is free. **Skype.com** is the most well-known with 136 million users. Register and download the software onto your laptop. You also can use VoIP from many Internet cafes or business centers worldwide. You'll need to get your family and friends to sign up for the service to talk for free. But you can phone anyone if you buy cheap calling plans from Skype and others that cost as little as pennies a minute to call any landline phone.

Skype isn't the only player. Many instant message service providers, including **MSN**, **Yahoo**, **AOL Instant Messenger**, **iChat**, and **Google Talk** offer similar services. Broadband phone companies such as **Vonage** offer unlimited monthly calling plans for a fee. If your laptop doesn't have good speakers

or a microphone, you can buy headsets for less than \$20. Before you travel, call a friend to test the software and connection. You may occasionally get an annoying echo. Just hang up and call back again.

Skype, Vonage, and other services also sell Wi-Fi phones (around \$200). You'll need to be in a Wi-Fi hotspot to use these devices, but if you have a signal, whether in the hotel lobby in Taiwan or a cafeteria in Argentina, you should be able to use the VoIP phone to reach your loved ones. Be aware that some countries, such as Costa Rica and the U.A.E., have outlawed or tried to limit VoIP services, fearing that they would hurt local telecom companies.

JaJah.com will channel your Internet calls through any landline and many mobile phones, eliminating the need for a headset or downloaded software. Check the website to see if your mobile phone is supported. You sign up, sign in, and enter the number you want to call from and the number you want to reach. The phones will ring in with the call in process. So if you are in a hotel in Italy, you could schedule JaJah to arrange a call from your room phone to the U.S. cheaply—or even free if are calling another JaJah user.



A Skype phone lets you call for pennies.

DULY NOTED

Are Resort Fees Going Bye-Bye?

In the last several years, major hotel chains such as Starwood, Hilton, and Wyndham have changed the way they disclose and charge resort fees, which are typically added on top of your rate to cover everything from the cost of an in-room coffeemaker to the use of the hotel gym. For example, Hilton recently promised to make resort fees "optional" and to make sure its customers initial a form accepting the charges. It agreed to the switch as part of a proposed settlement in a class-action suit over the disclosure of the charges. Others have made similar changes following other lawsuits.

That's good news for hotel guests—as long as they stay at a major hotel chain. Problem is, about 10 percent of hotels—most of them independently owned—still charge these fees. If you don't pay attention to the fine print when you make your reservation, you could pay an extra \$10 to \$20 a night in resort fees. Some have made efforts to disclose the surcharges—adding them to their websites, instructing reservations agents to tell guests about them, and including them in their brochures. Still, many guests are surprised when they find these fees on their final bill, and managers are reluctant to remove them even when visitors complain about them.

—CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT



A*List Cheaper Europe

Why wait for July? Euros and pound notes—currently strong against the dollar—will go further if you travel before June. Air and hotel rates are down, and you've got a good chance of redeeming those frequent-flyer miles. Just don't forget to pack a light jacket and an umbrella.

THE EXPERIENCE A week in western Ireland on a walking trip through the Burren, Aran Islands, and Connemara, from \$1,612 per person. The package includes seven nights' lodging in three-star hotels, full Irish breakfasts, lunches, dinners, guides, and a round-trip flight from Galway to the Aran Islands. Select departures through mid-July. Book at least a week before departure. (800-721-4672; www.govisitireland.com)

THE TASTE A weekend in Bruges, Belgium during the Choco-Laté festival (April 6-10), from \$260 per person. The package includes two nights at the Hotel Heritage, buffet breakfast daily, a boat ride on the canals of Bruges, a visit to the Choco-Story museum, festival passes, and a box of Belgian chocolates. (011-32-50-444-444; www.hotel-heritage.com)

THE RETREAT Two days in St. Andrews, Scotland—the "home of golf"—from \$589 per couple. Package includes one night's stay at the Fairmont St. Andrews, full Scottish breakfast, dinner in the Squire restaurant, and 18 holes of golf or a spa treatment. Available through May 31. (800-441-3414; www.fairmont.com)

THE BARGAIN One week in Lisbon, Portugal, from \$809 per person. The package includes round-trip airfare from Boston on Azores Express (Tuesday departures), six nights' lodging at Hotel Mundial, and breakfast daily. You'll need to pay taxes and fees. Available through mid-June. (800-762-9995; www.azores-express.com) —EMILY KING