



Guide to Buying Your Spanish Cell Phone

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CELL PHONE SERVICE PROVIDERS

There are currently three cellular phone service providers in Spain: Movistar, Vodafone, and Amena. The cell phone services of these three companies are sold (along with actual cell phones) at privately owned franchises found throughout the city.



Movistar: Movistar is a service of Telefónica Móviles España, which is owned and operated by Telefónica, a world leader in the telecommunications industry and the principal provider of local and long-distance telephone service in Spain. Telefónica is Spain's telephone giant, similar to what AT&T is (or was) in the United States. They have held the nation's largest market share of cell phone clients since 1984, when mobile phones were first introduced for commercial sale.



Vodafone: With operations in over 26 countries, Vodafone is one of the world's largest mobile telecommunications network companies. Previously known as Airtel Móvil, Vodafone launched its cell phone service in Spain in 1995. They are currently Spain's second largest cell phone service provider.



Amena: Amena is a service of Retevisión Móvil, which is owned and operated by Grupo Auna, one of Spain's newest telecommunications alternatives. The Amena service was first made available to the Spanish public by Retevisión in 1999. Today it serves over six million clients and boasts a reception network that covers the entire country.

BILLING OPTIONS: PRE-PAID OR CONTRACT

Cell phone users in Spain (regardless of their provider) have two basic billing options: prepaid service or contract billing.

Pre-Paid Service: With pre-paid service, cell phone users buy "calling time" (in Spanish, *saldo*) from a cell phone service provider. When a call is made, the cost of the call gets deducted from the available pre-paid *saldo*. Once the customer runs out of *saldo*, he or she simply buys more. Cell phones can be "recharged" with *saldo* through ATM machines and through the internet, as well as through the purchase of phone cards sold at cell phone retail outlets, *estancos* and *kioskos*.

Contract Billing. Quite recently, a new kind of contract service directed at study abroad program participants has come onto the cell phone market in Spain. With this type of contract billing, customers receive a monthly statement, indicating the cost of calls made within the previous 30 days. Monthly charges are automatically deducted from the client's credit card.

DECIDING BETWEEN CONTRACT AND PRE-PAID SERVICES

The very first thing you'll want to decide is whether you prefer to use a contract or a pre-paid cell phone service. In making this decision, we suggest that you carefully consider the following:

- Contract services for study abroad program participants tend to offer a flat rate schedule (in Spanish, *tarifa plana*). With *tarifa plana*, you are normally offered one rate for calls to users within the contract's private network and another rate for calls made outside of the network. Generally speaking, these flat rates apply 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. This makes for a fairly easy-to-understand rate schedule. In addition, the flat rates offered through contract plans tend to be quite favorable.
- Pre-paid services normally involve variable rate schedules. In other words, the cost of your calls will depend on a variety of factors. For example, with most pre-paid plans, the cost of a call will depend on the time of day the call is made. Costs can also vary; depending on the type of phone you are attempting to call (cell phone or land line). If you are calling another cell phone, the cost of the call can change; depending on the service provider of the person you are calling (Movistar, Amena, Vodafone). Unfortunately, all this often makes for a somewhat difficult-to-understand rate schedule. In theory, it is possible to save a little bit of money with variable rates; but to do this, you need to be *extremely* vigilant about the time and type of calls you are making.

- Pre-paid services are “pay as you go.” As such, some students find it far easier to control costs with a pre-paid phone. Once your *saldo* is gone, you need to buy more time in order to make more calls. In this way, spending can be more easily monitored, and curbed if necessary.
- With contract service, billing is done at the end of each month. Students who find it difficult to control their phone usage might want to stay away from contract services. Cell phone use in Spain is much more expensive than in the US, and indiscriminate calling often results in a surprisingly large phone bill at the end of the billing period.
- Contract services offer rented phones, which must be returned at the end of your stay in Seville. Some students (particularly those who travel after the end of the program) may prefer pre-paid packages for the simple fact of avoiding the minor hassle of returning the phone prior to departure.
- Prepaid packages require that you purchase a phone, along with some initial *saldo*. At the end of the program, most students just end up giving their phone to a friend. Others attempt to sell their phone to a future study abroad program participant, once they are back in the States. Unfortunately, there isn't much of a market for used cell phones in Spain.

CONTRACT SERVICE: HELPFUL HINTS

If you decide that a contract plan is best for you, the next step is to choose between the companies that offer this service. To help you make that decision, here a couple of things to keep in mind:

Cost of Phone Rental: Cell phone quality is certainly an important consideration, and you'll want to make sure that you are getting a good phone at a good price. Nevertheless, any basic, no frills, cellular phone should suffice for the relatively short period of time that you are in Spain. We suggest that you not spend a great deal on cell phone rental.

Also, you would be wise to consider the cost of a lost or stolen telephone. Unfortunately, cell phone theft is somewhat common in Spain. So, you should consider the additional costs incurred, should your rented phone be lost or stolen.

Cost of Calls: It should be fairly easy to determine which flat rate plan is the best deal. You basically just need to compare the per-minute rates that are being offered by each company.

In certain cases, you may need to consider the way in which the per-minute charges are incurred. Some companies, for example, round up calls to the nearest minute. In other words, a call of 2 minutes and 3 seconds will cost you 3 minutes. Other companies break down the charges by seconds. For limited amounts of calling, the manner in which the company calculates charges shouldn't make much of a difference. If you are a high volume caller, however, you may save a little bit of money with a plan that doesn't round up.

You may also need to consider the cost of connection fees. The cost of any call made from a Spanish cell phone begins with a connection fee. This fee, known as the *establecimiento de llamada*, is charged as soon as the receiver picks up his or her phone. With most plans, the cost of the *establecimiento de llamada* should be around 12 *céntimos*.

Remember that in Spain you pay for only outgoing calls. There is normally no charge to receive a call. The only time you would incur a charge for an incoming call would be when you take your cell phone outside of Spain.

Customer Service: Unfortunately, cell phone service is not fool-proof, and problems do occur. We suggest that you buy your cell phone service from a vendor you feel comfortable with. If you run into a problem with your phone after purchase, you'll need to deal with that company. So, it is best to buy from someone you trust.

PRE-PAID SERVICE: HELPFUL HINTS

If you decide that a pre-plan plan best meets your needs, you'll need to start thinking about which pre-paid package to purchase. There are *lots* of options, so to help you make that decision, here a few of things we suggest you keep in mind:

The Phone: Fortunately, purchasing a cell phone in Spain should not be very costly. With a pre-paid package deal, you should end up spending less than 40 euros for your phone.

Cell phone quality is certainly an important consideration, and you'll want to make sure that you are getting a good phone at a good price. Nevertheless, any basic, no frills, cellular phone should suffice for the relatively short period of time that you are in Spain. Keep in mind that, at the end of your stay in Seville, you'll probably just end up giving your phone to a friend. There isn't much of a market for used cell phones in Spain, so (even if you are able to sell it) you should not expect to get much more than 10 to 15 euros for your used phone.

Some students may be tempted to buy a top of the line phone, with digital camera, polyphonic sounds, java technology, WAP, etc. Be advised, however, that such phones will be much more expensive, and may not actually work, once you are back in the United States. The cellular phone system in the U.S. is different from that of Europe. As a result, only GSM or triband phones work in both locations. If you shell out more than 100 euros for your phone, you'll probably want to make sure that it is GSM or triband.

Please understand that, when making an initial pre-paid cell phone purchase, phones are normally sold together with a certain amount of *saldo*. For example, you might see a Siemens C55 phone on sale for 129 euros, but that offer may include up to 100 euros in *saldo*. Taking into account the calling time, the end price of Siemens phone is essentially only 29 euros.

The Calling Plan: Cell phone service providers normally offer three or four different calling plan options to pre-paid service customers. The actual cost of the calls you make on your cell phone is determined by your calling plan, so selecting a plan is a fairly important issue.

Normally, the cost of a call made from your phone begins with the *establecimiento de llamada*. This connection fee, determined by your particular calling plan, is deducted from your *saldo* as soon as the receiver picks up his or her phone. With most plans, the cost of the *establecimiento de llamada* is around 12 *céntimos*.

After the connection fee, the cost of any given call is incurred at a per-minute rate. This rate (also determined by your calling plan) is normally based on two simple factors: 1) time of day the call is made and 2) the type of phone being called (ie. a cell phone of the same service provider, a cell phone of another service provider, or a land line).

For example, Service Provider X may offer the following three plans to its pre-paid service customers:

Plan A provides calls at a rate of 30 *céntimos* per minute, at any time of day, to any type of phone.

Plan B offers calls at a rate of only 15 *céntimos* per minute both in the early morning (midnight to 4am) and in the evening (4pm to midnight), but charges a much higher rate of 75 *céntimos* per minute for calls made during the day (4am to 4pm).

Finally, Plan C offers calls at a rate of 12 *céntimos* per minute, at any time of day, but only to cell phones using the same service provider. Calls to land lines and to cell phones users with other service providers cost more, 21 *céntimos* per minute and 48 *céntimos* per minute respectively.

Which plan should you choose??? With so many variables to consider, selecting a pre-paid calling plan can certainly be both confusing and frustrating. Our best advice, therefore, is that you try to focus on the following:

- What kind of phone will you normally call? Land lines (*un fijo*, in Spanish)? Cell phones? Both cell phones and land lines?
- Will you primarily call cell phones users of the same service provider or other service providers?
- What time of day are you most likely to make calls?

Your answers to the above questions should help you determine which pre-paid plan will be "best" for you. In the end, however, try not to lose too much sleep over the selection of your calling plan. If you feel like you've chosen the wrong plan for your calling needs, most service providers allow a change of plan type, one time only, at no additional cost.

Note: While it is fairly easy to change from one calling plan to another, it is a bit more complicated changing providers. Cell phones in Spain are "blocked" so that they provide the service of only one company. As a result, if you want to switch providers, you'll either need to buy a new phone, or pay to have your old phone "liberated."

The Cobertura: You may hear a great deal about *cobertura*, or reception, when making your cell phone purchase. In certain locations (in the mountains, in parking garages, in basements) the signal of a particular service provider may be very weak. As a result, your cell phone may be unable to transmit or receive calls. This is commonly referred to as being *sin cobertura*.

Your level of *cobertura* can be somewhat affected by the quality of your phone's antennae, but probably has more to do with the strength of the signal available through your cell phone provider. Obviously, you'll want a service provider that has a strong signal and offers reliable reception.

To be quite honest, you should have no major problems with the level of *cobertura* available through any of the three service providers in Spain. When asked, however, Spaniards normally say that Movistar has a superior level of *cobertura*. This is why some cell phone users are willing to pay slightly more for Movistar service.

The Service Provider Your choice of service provider (Movistar, Vodafone, or Amena) should be primarily based on phone price, calling plan, and *cobertura*. In general, we suggest that you go with the service provider that gives you the best mix of these three variables.

Keep in mind, however, that some service providers offer discounts for calls made between their own customers. Some also offer the possibility of creating a "caller network" of 5 to 10 fellow customers. In many cases, you'll receive deeply discounted rates on calls made within your network.

If you have friends in the program that you plan to call on a regular basis, ask service providers about the availability of discounts such as those mentioned above. In the end, you may save money if the people you call the most purchase from the same service provider.

The Vendor: As mentioned at the start of this handbook, pre-paid cell phone services in Spain are purchased through privately owned franchises. These franchises normally have exclusive contracts with one of the three Spanish service providers. As such, you'll find one store selling Amena products, another store selling Movistar, and another Vodafone. A few retailers have multiple franchises and, therefore, sell the products of more than one provider.

Generally speaking, we suggest that you buy your pre-paid cell phone service from a vendor you feel comfortable with. If you run into a problem with your phone, after purchase, you'll probably need to deal with that particular vendor. So, it is best to buy from someone you trust.

WHERE TO GET A PRE-PAID PHONE

CIEE does not endorse any particular pre-paid cell phone service provider. For your convenience, however, we are listing two privately owned franchises that have offered prepaid services to CIEE program participants in past semesters.

MOVISTAR
JPMovil, SL (3 locations)

Virgen de Luján, 23
Tel: 954.27.61.11

Eduardo Dato, 26
Tel: 954.66.21.00

Plaza del Salvador s/n
Tel: 954.21.04.6

AMENA
Prado Telecomunicaciones SL

Avenida de Cádiz. 6
Tel: 954.53.05.58

WHERE TO GET A CONTRACT SERVICE

CIEE does not recommend or endorse any particular contract service provider. We would however like to assist you by providing the following contact information:

Apelcom
c/ Capitan Vigueras 9
Tel: 900.800.464

California Connection
c/ Rodrigo de Triana 2º izda
Tel: 685.48.30.50

Platform -3000
c/ Camilo José Cela 1
Tel. 954.636.413

OTHER THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Read the fine print! When shopping for your cell phone, you need to ask questions, particularly about “special offers.” As a consumer, you should understand that things are not always exactly what they seem. So, before you buy, ask the vendor how these special offers actually work.

Take, for example, the imaginary pre-paid Siemens C55 offer mentioned previously in this guide. This phone sold for 129 euros, and provided 100 euros in *saldo*. You should be sure to ask, however, when (and how) you’ll be receiving that “free” *saldo*. In fact, you are likely to receive only a small amount at first, perhaps 15 euros. After that, you may be required to purchase another 50 euros in calls, before receiving a coupon for the remaining 85 euros promised in the offer. In the end, you’ll pay a total of 179 euros for the phone and 150 euros in calls. For most CIEE students this is still a great deal. Nevertheless, you should be certain that you understand the specifics of what is being offered, before you buy.

Don’t make calls to the U.S. from your cell phone! Dialing direct to the United States from your cell phone is extremely expensive, regardless of your calling plan. So, it is advisable to avoid calling the US on your mobile phone. Even a quick call to your family (just to say “call me back”) can end up costing 2 or 3 euros of *saldo*.



We suggest that for international calls, you use a pre-paid calling card such as EuroDirect or EuroCity. These cards are available in most internet cafés. You can use such cards from your cell phone, but you’ll receive the very best rates by using the card from a land line.

Some companies offering contract services also offer international calling cards that work in conjunction with their contract plan. These cards also offer very favorable calling rates.

Receiving calls is FREE. In Spain, you are only charged for calls made on your cell phone. There is normally no charge to receive a call.

The only time you would incur a charge for an incoming call would be when you take your cell phone outside of Spain. Your Spanish cell phone will work in other countries in Europe. Be careful, however, about charges incurred for incoming calls. If you are in London, and you pick up a call on your cell phone, you are likely to be charged a per-minute “international calling fee.” This fee varies depending on your calling plan, but generally speaking, you should expect pay around 1 euro per minute in order to receive a call from Spain, while you are travelling around Western Europe.

If you are low on *saldo*, “dar un toque.” Since cell phone users normally only pay for calls made, and not received, it is not uncommon for young people (with little *saldo*) to call a friend and hang up before the other party has a chance to pick up. This is known as “*un toque*.” The person receiving your *toque* will understand that they are supposed to call you back, or that you are arriving to a predetermined meeting point. In this manner, the person who is low on *saldo*, doesn’t end up paying. Note: While this is an acceptable practice, don’t abuse it. Your friends won’t mind calling you back every once in a while, but they’ll obviously get a little frustrated, if you always seem to be without *saldo*.

Send a text message, instead of calling Another way to save money on cell phone service is to send a text message, instead of calling. Text messages usually only cost around 10 – 15 *céntimos* per message sent.

Be prepared for sticker shock The cost of using a cell phone in Spain is much more expensive than in the US. In Spain, you can forget about free weekend calling or anytime minutes. Every time you use your phone, you are going to pay. US Students are often very unpleasantly surprised by the cost of cell phone use in Spain. Don’t be caught by surprise. Even students who work hard to control their calling report spending around 50 – 60 euros per month in cell phone use.