



Smartphone Apps for Travelers



By Rick Steves

Apps for smartphones and tablets can be useful both before you leave and while you're traveling. Most devices are preloaded with apps that can come in handy on a trip (such as an alarm clock, compass, calculator, weather, and so on). But you can greatly extend your device's usefulness by downloading additional tools, such as restaurant reviews, translators, and transportation apps.

Apps for mapping, transit schedules, weather forecasts, and more are now essential tools for many travelers.

While it's convenient to be able to access this type of information, there is a catch: For many mobile apps, you need to be online to download the latest information. With the prevalence of Wi-Fi in most corners of Europe, this is generally not a problem — just find a hotspot and browse away. But if you have a smartphone or tablet

with mobile data capabilities, you can incur outrageously high data roaming fees if you try to access these apps while not logged in to a hotspot. To be sure you understand your options, see my tips on [taking your own phone to Europe](#).

I've recommended some of my favorite mobile apps below. All of these are available on Apple's iOS devices through their app store, and many of them are also available for Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry platforms. I've noted whether they're free or must be paid for, and whether they're self-contained (Internet connection not necessary after the initial download) or require ongoing Internet access. While it's possible to download these apps over any Wi-Fi network, plan ahead and try to grab the ones you want while you're still at home. This is by no means a comprehensive list. New apps are hitting the market every day. To find the latest, browse the iTunes App Store or the Android Market (look under "Travel"), or search for tips on travel blogs and websites.

Trip-Planning and Management

From booking flights and hotels to managing your itinerary, these apps can help you plan your trip.

Travel Booking: [Orbitz](#), [Priceline](#), [Booking.com](#), [Expedia](#), and [Travelocity](#) (free, Internet) allow you to search for flights, hotels, rental cars, and more. [Skyscanner](#) (free, Internet) helps you survey a wide variety of European budget airlines to find the cheapest connection between any two points.

Airlines: Each airline has its own app; these usually allow you to search for and book flights, check in, and track the status of a flight. While you can do many of these same activities through the airline's website on

your phone's browser, the apps are generally faster and more user-friendly.

Flight Trackers: Plug your flight details into FlightTrack (pay, Internet) or [Kayak](#) (free, Internet), and these apps will keep track of whether your plane is on time. Folks back home can even track your plane's progress on a map.

Itinerary Organizers: Apps like [TripIt](#) (free, Internet) save all your trip details in one convenient place. Forward reservation emails to your TripIt account, and it automatically adds them to your itinerary.

Audio Tours, Transit, Restaurants, Money, Weather, and More

The following tools run the gamut, from Europe-specific advice to apps that help document your travels.

General Europe: [Rick Steves Audio Europe](#) (free, self-contained) has hundreds of radio interviews and dozens of audio walking tours of Europe's top sights, organized by destination for easy browsing. Download the playlists that interest you and fit your itinerary before your trip, then listen to them offline as you travel.

[Smart Traveler](#) (free, Internet), from the US State Department, includes basic information on each country, plus travel advisories.

Public Transportation: Various subway map apps for the London Tube, Paris Métro, and others (pay, self-contained) have detailed, digital plans of public transit networks that save you from having to unfold an unwieldy map on a busy platform. The free, self-contained [MetrO](#) is a handy route-planner for public transit in dozens of European cities, but does not have maps.

[DB Navigator](#) (free, Internet), German Rail's comprehensive train timetables, includes connections for all of continental Europe. For the UK, try [thetrainline](#) (free) or [UK Train Times](#) (pay).

Restaurants and Reviews: [TripAdvisor's app](#) (free, Internet) gives you access to millions of user reviews of restaurants, hotels, and sights (though TripAdvisor ratings should never be taken as gospel). Some users prefer [Yelp](#) (free, Internet), which is just catching on in Europe; unlike back home, where most Yelp reviewers are locals, European Yelp reviews tend to come from travelers.

Currency and Conversions: [Oanda Currency Converter](#), [Currency](#), or [XE Currency](#) (free, Internet) instantly tells you today's exchange rate. [Measures](#) (pay, self-contained) converts various European units (metric measurements, clothing sizes, even currency) to American ones.

Weather: Take a walking tour or hit a museum? You can better plan your day with the [Weather Channel](#), [AccuWeather](#), and other forecast apps (free, Internet).

Medical Help: [mPassport](#) (pay, self-contained) are city-specific apps that direct you to English-speaking doctors and hospitals, as well as local names for prescription medications.

Journaling: Note-taking apps such as [All-in Notes](#) and [Microsoft OneNote](#) (pay, self-contained) let you combine photos, recorded sounds, and written notes to keep a multimedia journal of your trip.

Translation

These amazing apps are helpful for navigating in a country where you don't speak the language.

With [Google Translate](#) (free, Internet), you can type something in a foreign language (or have someone speak clearly into your microphone) for an immediate translation. You can also say or type a sentence in English, and a computer voice actually says the translation (or hold up the screen to show someone the written translated message). It also lets you aim your smartphone's camera at a sign in a foreign language, and it'll instantly translate it for you (available in most European languages).

Digital phrase books, such as [Lonely Planet Audio Phrasebooks](#) (pay, self-contained), allow you to simply press a button to hear the phrase you're struggling to pronounce.

Maps and Navigation

With the help of mapping apps, you can navigate Europe more easily than ever. Smart smartphone users have become accustomed to having local maps at their fingertips and to downloading route information, including maps, turn-by-turn directions, and estimated trip duration. But there's a catch to using mapping apps overseas: Since base maps must be downloaded and continually updated on the Internet, you'll either have to wait until you reach a hotspot or pay international data roaming fees in order to call up a new map.

To avoid these fees, download a map or driving route when you're on Wi-Fi (for instance, from your hotel), then use it to navigate all day long. This can be useful whether driving through Burgundy or walking around Barcelona. And since the GPS signal does not utilize the Internet (instead, it uses a combination of satellites and cell phone towers to triangulate your precise location), it will continue to track your location on the map, even when you're offline.

To download a map on your iPhone, simply punch in the start and end points of your route or the city or town's name. The map remains available on your phone, and you can zoom in and out, even if you go offline. Note, though, that maps are downloaded at a fairly low resolution (you can only zoom in so far before it becomes unreadable); route time estimates are based on the initial request and don't adjust as you travel; and it can only remember one route at a time — so you can't switch to another route without a Wi-Fi hotspot or paying for data roaming. GPS also gobbles battery life, so you may want to bring a car charger.

The iPhone app OffMaps (pay) will store multiple maps for later use. You need an Internet connection to download maps, but once that's done, the maps are accessible anywhere. Google Maps for Android phones have a similar capability that lets you download and cache (save) several maps for use offline (free). For much more fully featured GPS apps for your mobile phone, check out those from TomTom, Garmin, and other GPS device makers, though European maps for these tend to be very expensive.

Keeping in Touch

Stay connected to home with these apps.

Social Media: Using [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and other social networking apps (free, Internet), you can post descriptions and photos of your trip while keeping track of what your friends are up to back home.

Internet Calls and Texting: [Skype](#) or [Fring](#) (free, Internet) lets you make free voice or video calls over Wi-Fi to fellow users' computers and smartphones, and cheap calls to other phones. [What's App](#), [Text Plus](#), and

[Textfree](#) (free, Internet) work similarly for text messaging (note that both parties need to have the app installed).

News: [The New York Times](#), [ESPN ScoreCenter](#), [NPR News](#), and other news/information readers (free, Internet) help you keep track of news and scores back home.

File Sharing: [Dropbox](#) (free, Internet) saves files from your computer in an online account, which you can access from anywhere on your smartphone or a computer.

Postcards: Using apps like [SnapShot Postcard](#) (pay, Internet), you can snap a photo with your phone and turn it into a custom postcard, which will be printed and sent via snail mail to anywhere you want. Various digital postcard apps (including fCards) will let you email your postcard instead.

Resources for Staying Connected

- [Country Calling Codes](#) Dialing how-tos
- [HowtoCallAbroad.com](#) Dialing how-tos
- [This site's Tech Tips Forum](#) Tips from my readers

Apps

- [Skype](#) Internet-based video and voice calls for most devices (and any computer it's installed on)
- [Google+ Hangouts](#) Internet-based video, voice, and messaging for Android and iOS devices (and through any computer's browser)
- [FaceTime](#) Internet-based video and voice calls between iOS devices
- [Viber](#) Video, voice, and messaging for mobile devices (and any computer it's installed on)
- [iMessage](#) Internet-based messaging between iOS devices (and Macs)
- [WhatsApp](#) Internet-based messaging between phones

Tech-savvy travellers know the best travel apps can be the perfect co-pilots for a memorable adventure. There's a time and a place for unplugging, but tech-savvy travellers know a smartphone can be the perfect co-pilot. A new crop of functional, practical, how-did-I-ever-live-without-this travel apps pops up each year. Some make your journey faster. Some make it easier.