

Electronics Guru:

Mobile phone operators to slash roaming prices!

It is impossible to make an article about a new European Union regulation sexy. Even when the subject is something as close to all our hearts as the high cost of GSM roaming calls and data connections! However, unlike most political intervention which appears to inconvenience and impoverish the many without appreciable benefit, the EU has forced the mobile operators to introduce sweeping discounts to European roaming rates. Without changing a thing on board, Captains will be able to report to their paymasters that this Summer's phone bills will be up to 70% (seventy per cent) cheaper for the same amount of usage compared to last year. Sending a picture of a broken component to a manufacturer via 3G will no longer cost the same as the component - and flying a technician to the boat with it – from Japan. And sending your loved ones wonderful photos like this -



of your sailing successes will no longer require a second mortgage!

The introduction date for this new regulation could be very soon. Something called the EU Telecoms Council met in December 2006 and agreed to the price cap levels in principle. It is proposed that a call to your home network from your roaming partner network will not cost more than €0.40 per minute for outgoing calls and €0.15 per minute for incoming calls. This goes to a vote by Euro MPs in June and could become effective before they go home for the Summer for a well-earned rest.

In preparation for this, some operators have introduced special roaming tariffs. Vodafone has something called Passport which has a fixed connection fee when using a Vodafone European Union partner network after which you pay your home tariff. This is for outgoing calls and incoming calls you just pay the connection charge. The service is EU wide. The Three network has something similar offering free inbound calls. Orange has a credit system to offer reduced cost calls up to a certain limit. O2/Movistar is also removing the incoming charges for a fixed fee and bringing outgoing call charges down. The other smaller operators will have to follow suit.

So it would appear that people power is winning the day on this one. One would hope that it all started when the Euro-travelling politicians noticed that their Phone bills were too high when they were flitting from Brussels to Strasbourg to wherever home is and thought that this was unfair on their fellow Europeans border hopping around Europe. Whatever the reason, it will help lower costs for boat crews.

One area the legislation will not apply to (yet) is data connections. But even without political pressure, the network operators are bringing data roaming charges down. Why? Good old competition one supposes! The voice market in Europe is saturated and finding incentives to stay with your network or switch to a new one are keeping all the GSM operators' MBAs busy these days. All the 'value added' services such as music downloads, video messaging, Blackberry, VPN access, and so on are where their growth will come from and these all require packet data connections.

Each of the big networks is offering access to cheaper data connections and looking for the killer application that will generate everlasting brand loyalty. For users on yachts this is a Godsend. GPRS/3G services are now widely available but the frightening cost of roaming has discouraged anything but sparing use. From the start of this Mediterranean season there will be sensible pricing of data roaming in Europe which could bring down the data cost to the same level as WIFI. Along with less congestion, more locations, standard pricing, longer range and a single point of payment, this will make it very attractive to vessel operators and crew alike.

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