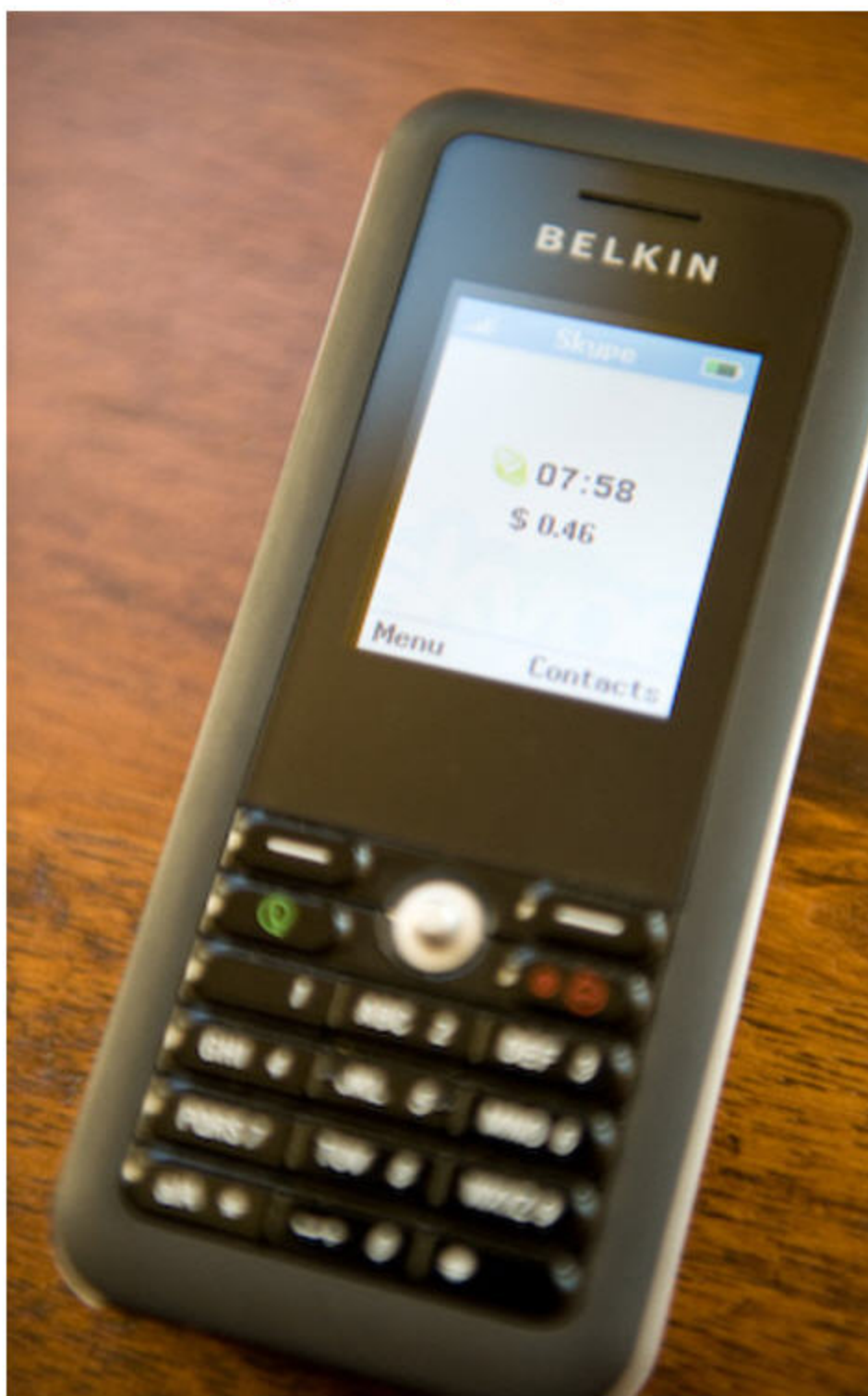


The Adventure Life with Steve Casimiro Belkin Phone, SkypeOut Keep Money In



Text and photo by [West Coast Editor Steve Casimiro](#)

Twenty years ago, my photographer friend Larry Pierce called his wife from his hotel room on a remote island in Tahiti, talked for 15 minutes, and unknowingly racked up a \$400 bill. Ouch. Last week in [New Zealand](#), I chatted with my family until even the cat was tired of me and it didn't cost us a dime. Well, barely a dime.

Like 300 million other people, I used [Skype](#), the voice over internet phone system. But this wasn't computer to computer—I was calling our home line on [Belkin's Skype handset](#) and talking just as I would on a cell phone.

Skype is obviously hugely popular, but few people seem to know about the service that's revolutionized my travel communications, [SkypeOut](#). You can pay as you go (about two cents a minute), but I've signed up for the annual plan: For \$30 a year, you get unlimited calling to land lines and mobile phones in North America. Combined with the Belkin phone and free wi-fi networks, it makes calling from the road ultra-affordable and easy. It also gives the slightly thrilling sense that you're getting something for nothing.

Of course, you aren't. The Belkin is \$180 ([and found on Amazon for \\$138](#)). With the annual fee, that's two bones. But still, I've inadvertently spent that much checking voice mail and email from Europe on my [Nokia N95 cell phone](#). If you travel a lot or even want a cheap alternative for domestic calling, the Belkin/SkypeOut is a fantastic combination.

The Belkin itself worked flawlessly for me. It charged through my laptop USB connection and easily found local wi-fi networks. It automatically logged into my Skype account and provided a list of all my Skype contacts, complete with their online status. For conversations, it beats the laptop/headset combination hands down (though you can't do video chat or IM with it). Given the state of electronics technology, \$100 seems a more reasonable price, but you can certainly pay less than list.

And what of the call quality? Ah, yes, there's that. Well, it's a Skype phone. Anyone familiar with Skype knows that the price of "free" is a degradation of quality. I found the sound to be typical of a mid-level cell phone—good, but not great. There were no echoes, no annoying lag as the words travel around the world, just a sense of low-fi acoustics. Calls got dropped 10 percent of the time, which is about what I've averaged making Skype calls on my computer at home. I probably wouldn't negotiate a contract over a Skype line, but for most business and all personal calls, the Belkin is an ideal cost-saving choice, whether you're traveling or just trying to avoid using cell minutes.