

# These Satellite Gadgets Will Save Your Butt in the Backcountry

A regular mobile phone—an unlocked model with the right SIM card, of course—is enough to keep you in touch around most of the populated parts of the world. But if you really want to go into the boonies, or if you can't be bothered with international roaming plans or renting local SIMs, you'll appreciate a device that can talk to satellites.

For a few years, those wanting a sat-comms device were limited to one-way text messaging. But lately, devices capable of two-way satellite-based data communications have continued to mature and become more accessible (and affordable) for the average traveller. Key to this maturation is the arrival of mobile devices that can talk to the Iridium Satellite Network. It's a commercially-operated network that spans the entire globe, so you can almost always chat with the folks back home, even if you're in the middle of the ocean, wandering through the desert, or trekking deep into the polar regions.

I tested two Iridium-based devices: The DeLorme InReach SE and the ROM Communications Text Anywhere. I'll state right up front that these hand-held units do have their limitations. You have to keep all your messages under 160 characters just like SMS, and because the antenna works to constantly stay connected, the batteries will drain more quickly when the unit can't see to the satellites. So if you're surrounded by trees, cliffs, or thick walls and ceilings, you will have trouble sending an update. Less worrisome but still noteworthy, the company that owns the satellites conforms with U.S. embargo restrictions, so you can't message from places like Cuba, Sudan or North Korea. But provided you're not chasing the Taliban around the Afghan highlands, you can update Facebook and Twitter.

Here's the breakdown of each unit. I've also included a comparison chart at the end.

## DeLorme InReach SE

Famous for over 30 years of map-making, then evolving with the times to become a leader in GPS units, DeLorme released the InReach in 2011. It was the first two-way satellite messaging product aimed at consumers. It lacked an integrated screen, but paired via Bluetooth to a smartphone, which you could use to send and receive messages. 2013 brought us the InReach SE—the “SE” is short for “screen edition.” You can use this one entirely on its own, or pair it with a phone so you can interact with a larger touchscreen, which I highly recommend. Scrolling around with the omni-directional rocker button to hunt and peck for each letter as you type gets old fast.

Best for: minimal texting, location tracking, and those who can make use of pre-defined messages.

The InReach SE has an internal USB rechargeable lithium battery. Even in tracking mode, the most continuous transmitting mode, the battery will last 100-plus hours, or over four days. If you use the InReach SE sparingly and only send and receive messages as needed, the battery will last much longer. Odds are you'll need to recharge your smartphone a number of times before you ever need to recharge the InReach SE.

Like the Spot Messenger before it, the InReach SE has an SOS button for emergencies. The button is protected by a lockout switch to prevent accidental distress notices while the InReach SE bounces around in your pack. Once the SOS is activated, a rescue dispatcher will send a message to confirm your distress notice and location were received and will ask you what the problem is and help how s/he can. They will provide an estimated time of rescue if one is necessary. Note though, that the SOS button is not guaranteed to provide a rescue anywhere under any circumstance. It adds peace of mind, but you're not fully covered.

Until March 2014, subscriptions were locked into annual contracts at four different levels of service. Now, along with annual subscriptions, DeLorme offers its four subscription levels with its “pay as you go” Freedom Plans. Visit the website to check out which plan is best for you. In the side-by-side comparison chart at the end of this article, we use DeLorme's “Freedom Safety Plan,” which includes 10 type-as-you-go and incoming text messages, unlimited pre-set messages and the SOS service. Text messages beyond the included 10 cost you 50 cents each. For 10 cents per tracking point, you can have your location plotted on an online map for friends and family to follow along.

## ROM Communications Text Anywhere

This Canadian communications company is keen to make two-way satellite based text messaging simple. And by “simple,” I mean it only sends and receives text messages: no tracking, no map feature, no SOS button. Even though it does less, the Text Anywhere has larger internal components and is about twice the size of the InReach SE.

Text Anywhere runs on 4 AA batteries (a nice touch) and can send/receive between 300 and 400 messages per set, depending on the quality of the AA's and how hard the unit has to hunt for satellites. The unit can also be plugged in via a 12 volt cigarette lighter socket.

Just because the Text Anywhere doesn't have an SOS button doesn't mean you're not able to be rescued in the event of an emergency.

*Global Rescue is a subscription-based service to provide just what the name implies. As a member, you will be able to text Global Rescue directly for medical assistance or extraction as needed. Even some InReach SE users subscribe to Global Rescue's service and forgo the built-in SOS button. Which service is best depends on your destination and your needs, so do your own research.*

The Text Anywhere box doesn't have a screen, but it does have a flashing red light to indicate when a message is being sent or received. With only a power button, a Wi-Fi connection is used to manage messages via a web browser interface. This allows any Wi-Fi-enabled device with a web browser to send and receive messages. There has been the rare occurrence of needing to update the software on the Text Anywhere device. It's not difficult, just the standard download and install routine. But it's clearly not as easy (nor as frequent) as a smartphone app, which can automatically update itself.

The user interface for managing messages is super-basic and purely utilitarian. Each incoming or outgoing message is accessed individually instead of in a conversational stream like we are getting used to with text messaging on our phones. It's not so bad if you're only communicating with one person, but it's a little annoying to have to go back and forth between previous messages to see what question someone is answering or what they are referring to. It's especially tricky if you're texting with a number of different people and have different conversations going on.

ROM Communications only offers one plan with Text Anywhere. It's \$30/month and includes 100 text messages. Messages beyond that will cost 27 cents each.

Since pricing these units can be tricky, below is an example of essentially the least expensive way to use either product for three months out of the year. If you can get away with minimal texting, can make use of pre-defined messages and value the SOS feature you'll want the InReach SE. If you're a frequent texter, go with the Text Anywhere.



DeLorme's InReach SE is one of two devices we tested for sending texts via satellite. Photo by Ariel Zambelich/WIRED



Photo by Ariel Zambelich/WIRED