

Review: How an iPod can be a poor man's iPhone

March 18 2009, By ANDREW VANACORE , AP Business Writer



In this Sept. 11, 2008 file photo, a shopper looks at two new second generation Apple iPod Touches at an Apple store in Palo Alto, Calif. A handful of applications on Apple Inc.'s iTunes store will let you make phone calls with the second generation iPod Touch, as long as you're in a Wi-Fi hot spot and have Apple's new ear buds, which have a tiny microphone on the back of the volume control along the cord. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, file)

(AP) -- I try to keep a stiff upper lip about not having an iPhone. Just couldn't afford it - not with the \$75 a month or so AT&T charges for service on top of the \$199 upfront cost for the device.

I could, however, afford the \$229 [iPod Touch](#) - and got it as a gift, as it happened. It has most of the same goodies: a Web browser, e-mail, [YouTube](#). And it stores way more music than the [iPhone](#). (Ha!)

Plus, the other day I used it to call China.

Yup, a call around the world - on a device that doesn't have a phone. A handful of applications on [Apple](#) Inc.'s iTunes store will let you do this, as long as you're in a Wi-Fi hot spot.

My iPhone complex hasn't disappeared, but at least now I have a device that looks just like it, has no monthly service fees, and lets me make free or cheap phone calls.

The best part of these applications - which require the second-generation iPod Touch that came out last year - is that they are free to download, and calls to other people using the same app won't cost you anything.

Two of the services I've tried, Truphone and Fring, will also let you make free calls to Google Talk users and type instant messages to friends online. Both automatically queue up a list of buddies from different services you might have, including Gmail chat, AIM and MSN Messenger, once you log in.

But it's Truphone's pay feature that puts it ahead of the others. TruPhone charges you to make calls to landlines or regular cell phones, but generally at better rates than most wireless carriers. And it's upfront about what you pay.

Your balance - which you can add to with a credit card, either on the device or on your computer browser - pops up with the dial screen. Calls in the U.S. are all 5 cents per minute (2 cents if you sign up to pay a \$4 monthly fee).

Rates outside the U.S. vary wildly but you can check in the application before you dial. To call cell phones in China, for instance, is only 5 cents per minute, while France is 25 cents. Antarctica? A whopping \$2.25.

You can make regular calls with Fring using a Skype account, but that's another layer to deal with.

The calls on these services sound pretty good, a little tinny but clearer than my regular cell phone connection. iPod Touch users will need Apple's \$29 ear buds that have a tiny microphone on the back of the volume control along the cord.

The most serious drawback is the most obvious: While the iPhone uses AT&T's wireless network to provide Internet access anywhere, on the iPod Touch you'll need to stick to Wi-Fi hot spots. For rural or suburban dwellers who don't encounter lots of free Wi-Fi zones, that may very well mean limiting yourself to your house, or other places where there's a computer with the same Internet phone call capabilities anyway.

That means these apps probably won't replace your cell phone. But they can moderate your iPhone envy.

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