

You Need a French Number to Get a French Number

Getting connected in France: the dependency chain that catches new arrivals, and the four ways around it

A reference for international students and new arrivals · checked October 2026.

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Why this exists

Every arrival guide tells you to buy a French SIM card when you land. None of them tell you the order in which things have to happen — and the order is the problem.

This document maps the dependency chain that catches new arrivals, sets out the four ways to be contactable in France, and says plainly which one suits which situation. Including the situations where the answer is not us.

1. The chain nobody draws

Work backwards from a *forfait*, the normal French mobile contract and by far the best value for a long stay:

- a **forfait** needs a **RIB** (French bank details)
- a RIB needs a **French bank account**
- a bank account needs **proof of address**
- proof of address needs **accommodation confirmed**
- accommodation applications ask for a **French mobile number**

The chain closes on itself. **You need a French number to get a French number** — you cannot reach the cheap, sensible, long-term option without first having the thing it would have given you.

This is not hypothetical. Student accommodation platforms, letting agencies and private landlords all ask for a contact number, and a foreign one reduces your chance of a reply. French landlords and agencies do not call back international numbers as a matter of habit, not policy — which is harder to argue with than a rule.

2. The four ways to be contactable

	Prepaid SIM	Forfait (contract)	Travel eSIM	Roaming
Arrange before you fly	No	No	Yes	Yes
Where you get it	Shop, tabac, supermarket	Online or in store, once settled	Online, from anywhere	Nothing to arrange
Identity document	Yes, at the counter	Yes	No	No
French address	No	Yes	No	No
French bank account / RIB	No	Yes	No	No
Earliest you can have it	Day you arrive	Weeks — after the bank account	Before departure	Now
When you learn the number	After the SIM is in a phone and used	On signup	At purchase	It is your own
Typical cost	€5–20 / 30 days	€10–20 / month	€16–50 / 30 days	Free from the EU · costly from the US, Canada, Australia
Suits	The first weeks, no commitment	A full academic year — best value	Before arrival and the first weeks	Short exchanges, EU students

What the operators themselves say

Every figure and requirement below was read from the provider's own published pages in October 2026. Prices move; the structural requirements rarely do.

Prepaid is genuinely open to everyone. A French-language advice source for foreigners in France states it without qualification:

“que vous soyez touriste, demandeur d'asile, étudiant ou sans papiers, vous pouvez obtenir une carte SIM en France. Le plus simple reste d'acheter une carte prépayée, accessible à tous.”

Whether you are a tourist, an asylum seeker, a student or undocumented, you can get a SIM card in France — prepaid is the simplest route and is open to all. No proof of address is required for prepaid. That requirement belongs to contracts.

You still have to be in France, with a document. France permits no anonymous mobile line. Lebara's registration page, titled *Enregistrement légal*, states what you need: “la pochette de votre carte SIM et une pièce d'identité valide” — the SIM holder and a valid identity document.

And you are not told your own number in advance. The same form asks for the mobile number, describing it as the one “*reçu par SMS lors de la première utilisation de la carte SIM*” — received by SMS on

first use of the SIM card. The card is posted, inserted, used, and only then does the number exist for you. This is the most important line in this document for anyone with a form to complete before they travel.

Ordering online is not always a route in. SFR's prepaid page states that buying a prepaid offer "*nécessite au préalable d'être déjà client et de posséder une carte SIM SFR La carte*" — requires you to already be a customer holding an SFR La Carte SIM. Their online prepaid offers are top-ups for existing cardholders, not a way to start.

Delivery exists, but it goes to an address. Lebara posts a free SIM "*sous 5 jours ouvrés max. par courrier*" — within five working days. Their prepaid plans run 30 days from €7,99 for 30Go, €9,99 for 200Go and €13,99 for 350Go on the SFR network. SFR's own prepaid plans run 31 days, €4,99 for 10Go up to €19,99 for 350Go.

3. What to do, and when

Before you fly

Check your handset is unlocked and, if you want an eSIM, that it supports one — most iPhones from the XS onward and most recent Samsung, Pixel and flagship Android models do. A carrier-locked phone will refuse a second profile. Decide whether you need a French number for any form you must submit before departure. If you do, that narrows you to one column of the table.

Week one

If you did not arrange a line in advance, a prepaid SIM from a shop, tabac or supermarket takes minutes and needs only your passport. Keep the receipt and the SIM holder — you will need the card number to register.

Weeks two to twelve

Open a bank account once you have proof of address. Several French banks run student accounts with simplified requirements. Once the RIB exists, the forfait becomes available.

Once settled

Move to a forfait. For a full academic year it is clearly the cheapest route — typically €10–20 a month with unlimited domestic calls and generous data. If you are staying a year, this is where you should end up, and no travel product beats it on price.

Before you leave France

Prepaid and travel plans lapse on their own. A forfait is a contract and must be cancelled — check the notice period when you sign.

4. Keep your home number for your bank and for government

This matters enough to state on its own.

Banks tie security codes to the number already registered against your identity. So do government services. Moving those to a new French number, or expecting them to arrive on one, is the wrong approach and can lock you out of your own accounts at the worst moment.

Keep your existing number active — in dual SIM, or on your old handset — for anything to do with banking, tax, healthcare or government portals. Use a French number for everything local: accommodation, the university, transport and delivery apps, marketplaces, appointments and anyone who needs to ring you.

There is a second, technical reason. National SMS short codes — the five-digit senders domestic services use — are country-scoped and do not reliably route to a number registered in another country. Most ordinary sign-ups use standard international SMS and are unaffected, but a service sending from a short code may not reach a foreign line. Test anything critical before you depend on it.

5. Where Europe Number fits, and where it does not

We publish this document and we sell one of the four options above, so here is the honest position.

A travel eSIM with a number included is the strongest way to start, and it is the only option in the table that gives you a French number before you leave home. Every other route — prepaid, forfait, or waiting — requires you to already be in France. If a form wants a French mobile number while you are still packing, this is the only column that answers it.

The number is issued at purchase, so you can put it on an accommodation application or an enrolment form weeks before departure. The line runs on the Bouygues Telecom network, one of France's four national networks, so it is a real French mobile line that appears in your phone's own settings — not an app number or a forwarding service, both of which some French platforms screen out.

The limits, stated plainly: plans run 30 days and do not currently renew or extend. If you need longer you buy again, and the number changes. That makes it right for the start and wrong for the long haul.

For a full academic year, a French forfait is better value than anything we sell. Once you have a bank account, move to one. We are not the answer to that part of the problem and we are not going to pretend otherwise.

Sources and currency

All operator requirements and prices in this document were read from the providers' own public pages in **October 2026**. Prices change frequently; the document requirements change rarely. This document is reviewed quarterly and carries the date it was last checked.

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