

## ■ safe community



by David Thomas

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David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. He has recently formed ISECA, the *Independent Security Agency*, and Safe Communities Algarve, an online platform here in the Algarve to help the authorities and the community prevent crime.

# Driving away car crime

In Portugal in 2011, theft of vehicles and theft of items from vehicles amounted to a total of 58,568 crimes or, to put it another way, some 14% of all crime.

Of these, around 38,090 were thefts from vehicles and the remaining 19,478 thefts of vehicles themselves. This represents a decrease of 7.1 % and 4 % respectively compared with the previous year.

Although this decrease is welcome, it is fact that most vehicle crime is preventable and we should be doing more to protect our investments from this type of crime.

This article covers a number of ways to help motorists be more aware of how such crimes can be prevented.

### Theft of vehicles

During the last 10 years, this type of crime has been decreasing in Portugal as it has in many other countries. One of the reasons for this is that it has become more common to fit cars with immobilisers and other security technology. As a result of this, there has instead been an increasing tendency for thieves to steal keys for the vehicle first rather than simply break into a car and try and start the engine.

In fact, in Portugal a number of burglaries and indoor robberies have involved the criminals finding the car keys and escaping using the victim's car. This is more

common if it is a luxury vehicle. It therefore makes sense that when a car is not in use the keys to it are kept in a safe place and that the key fob does not have the car registration number on it.

Cars should always be locked when parked in your driveway or garage at night. An interesting piece of advice I recently learned is, if you hear or see an intruder in your driveway particularly at night time, to quickly deactivate and reactivate the alarm using your remote from the safety of your house, which is a clear indicator to the intruder that he has been observed!

When parking at night, clearly it also makes sense to only park your car in well lit areas where possible.

### Theft of items from vehicles

Many victims of such thefts are tourists, some of whom disregard simple common-sense security precautions when coming here on holiday.

Unfortunately, some car hire companies do not help the situation by conspicuously displaying their company logo and name on their vehicles. This is an open invitation for criminals. Personally, I would never hire a car from a company displaying their logo.

*Safe Communities Algarve* has raised this with one of the largest car hire companies in

Portugal, but it appears that commercial interests outweigh security precautions.

Some of the main causes of theft of items from cars are leaving items on display on seats, doors unlocked and windows left open when the vehicle is unattended. Vehicles parked in areas frequented by tourists or in dimly lit places at night are potentially at greater risk as are those with foreign number plates.

Another *modus operandi* employed by some criminals, usually working in pairs particularly in supermarket car parks, is to distract you when you are getting into or out of your car. One of them asks you for directions to somewhere and whilst engaged in discussing this the other criminal steals your handbag or other belongings from the seat of your car. Be alert to this.

Advice is that whilst driving and parking keep your handbag on the front floor rather than the seat. Another distraction tactic is to put a notice under your rear windscreen wiper. They then wait until you have got into your car and suddenly notice this bit of paper. Upon getting out of your car to remove the paper the thief jumps in and drives off. You have been warned!

Most vehicle crime is preventable, so please do your part in keeping the Algarve a safe place to live and visit.



Photo: SUPPLIED

## Top 10 vehicle crime prevention tips

1. Lock doors and close windows when leaving your car for however long. This includes, if alone, when paying for petrol at petrol stations.
2. Keep your car locked in your driveway and use the garage where possible. Try to avoid leaving foreign plated cars in driveways.
3. When parking at night, use well lit areas where possible.
4. Always keep photocopies of your vehicle documents securely and away from the car.
5. Do not leave any valuables in vehicles nor other items on display.
6. Keep your vehicle's keys in a safe place.
7. If your vehicle does not have an immobiliser, use a good quality steering wheel lock.
8. Do not park anywhere where your vehicle may obstruct others or entrances – as you may find when you return it has been damaged.
9. If hiring a vehicle, try to hire one which does not display the car hire company's name on the car. Ask beforehand when making the booking.
10. Remove portable SatNav equipment including cradle and suction pads when leaving vehicle and take with you.

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