

Safe Car Hire

Fortunately the vast majority of people who hire cars on holidays and for business purposes do this trouble free. Doing your homework before you travel, as well as following some well trusted tips can reduce the risk of any problems occurring.

Protection - Whichever company you opt for, it can be worthwhile making sure the hire firm is a member of the European Car Rental Conciliation Service (www.ecrcs.eu) if you're hiring on the continent. This scheme can act as an arbiter in disputes that cannot be resolved

Excess insurance - Scare tactics are a tried-and-trusted sales technique for car hire companies. And there are few things to make a motorist shudder more than the threat of being forced to pay £1,000 or more if there is an accident or the car is stolen. The best option is to buy excess waiver insurance independently before you go.



Upgrade Option - When you arrive at the rental desk to pick up your pre-booked car, you may be told the company has run out of vehicles in the category you chose and be offered an upgrade – at a price. Don't fall for it. You should either be offered a higher-category car for no extra charge or a lesser one with the appropriate refund. Make sure this is the case before you sign your contract and drive away.

Payment - Car hire firms will usually want to take a deposit or copy of a card. Never give them your debit card, as this allows them to dip into your bank account. Plus, you have more protection with a credit card if there are any disputes.

Check car for damage - No matter how harassed and tired you are, take a good look at the car when you collect it. If you spot any marks at all, draw them to the attention of the attendant and insist they are noted on the paperwork. Don't be shy and make sure you take photographs of any problem — if possible with a smartphone, as this automatically adds the date and time to the picture. Tuck a small flashlight. You'll need this to poke around in your rental car if you pick it up at night.

Car hire Vehicle inspection tips:

Take a few extra minutes to inspect your rental vehicle - this will provide peace of mind and contribute to your safety on the road. Specific attention should be given to the following:

- The condition of your vehicle – You will be held responsible for undocumented damage i.e. scratches etc

- Look at the tyres for inflation, good tread, and even tread wear. Uneven tread wear hints at a suspension, alignment, or tyre maintenance problems – Do not accept the vehicle if not satisfied
- Check the lights: headlights, turn signals and interior/dashboard lights. Even if you'll only be driving during daylight hours—you might suddenly find yourself driving through a tunnel or facing a weather front in which you would want to turn on your lights. Do they work on bright as well as dim?
- Test the brakes—with the engine running—to get the "feel" of them. Some brakes are "softer" than others and you don't want any surprises
- Make sure the hand brake is in working condition. Familiarize yourself with electric hand brakes if you are not used to them.
- Spray the windshield to ensure that the washer system works and the wipers are in good shape
- Ensure that there's an Owner's Manual in the glove box
- Check the boot for a spare tyre (push on it to ensure that it's actually inflated), jack and other tools required for a tyre change
- Take a few moments to familiarise yourself with the control panels and instruments
- Adjust the seat, seat belts, rear view and side view mirrors so that they're in the right positions for you
- Find the hazard lights and check if they are working
- Make sure that the vehicle has sufficient petrol/ diesel

It might be a good idea to drive across the parking lot once or twice to become more familiar with the vehicle. If you are not comfortable with the vehicle—go back to the rental agency immediately. Do not leave the parking lot with a vehicle you are not comfortable with!

Car safety equipment - You should also check that the car has the correct safety equipment. In many countries high-visibility jackets, a warning triangle, first-aid kit, fire extinguisher and spare bulbs are compulsory. You, as the driver, will be held responsible and could face prosecution if they are not there.

Security – Many car hire companies display a commercial sticker on the car thus advertising that it is a hire car. This could become a target for criminals, so take this into account when selecting the company. **Always ensure that you do not leave valuable items in the car and ensure it is locked and windows closed when unattended.**

Speeding/drink driving - Speeding fines and the like will follow you home because the car hire firm has your address. And, obviously, don't think you can get away with drink-driving, either. It's just as dangerous abroad as at home and the drink-drive limits in most countries are lower than in the UK.

Payment of Fines - **Be aware, too, that you could face on-the-spot fines for some offences, so you will need local currency.**

Return of car - If there are no staff around, again photograph the car using your smartphone to get pictures with the time and date. Make sure you return the keys to a secure location. Thieves work at airports outside office hours pretending to be staff of car hire companies. If you are told to post the keys into the letter box, do not hand them to anyone who happens to be wandering around, even if they look smart and official. **Car hire firms have attempted to hold drivers responsible when cars have been stolen in this way.**

Hidden charges - Always read the small print of your car hire policy to check for any hidden charges or exclusions. Some car hire companies, for example, charge extra if you've been driving for less than four years, while others charge more for including a second driver. And others will levy an "admin" fee for theft or damage

to the car – even if you’ve bought an excess waiver policy. To put it in a nutshell: being thorough in your research when hiring a car is the way to get the best deal.

Finally as a consumer, if you do find yourself in dispute with your car hire company, for instance cases such as non-return of deposit, then contact www.econsumer.gov This works across borders.