

Rural fire safety for off-roaders and campers

The recent tragic fires in Greece that resulted in the death of over 80 people in a busy tourist resort, has given renewed focus on the importance of ensuring that not only residents are aware of fire safety prevention and protection, but also tourists as well.

This is a subject that Safe Communities Portugal has been campaigning for some time in our dealings with government here in Portugal.

We are now in the Critical Fire Period, which is also the height of the tourist season. Apart from those who will be staying in coastal hotels enjoying everything package holidays have to offer, there will be many others who will be exploring the countryside, experiencing some of the traditional Portuguese culture.

There are also those participating in off-road activities such as: cycling; hiking, camping, Buggy, 4 x 4 and Safari tours as well as touring in motor caravans. Although these are great ways to explore, the combination of low humidity, high temperatures and high winds greatly increases the fire risk, which both tour operators and visitors should be aware of.

Some off-road operators do not mention or promote fire protection and prevention when advertising and selling their tours. In addition many tourists coming from northern Europe may not be aware of fire risks in Portugal, and the special precautions particularly during the Critical Fire Period.

There are two aspects that visitors should be aware of: “prevention” and “self- protection”.

Government traditionally has focused on prevention aimed at residents, and because we are in Portugal such advice has naturally been in Portuguese. Through the efforts of Safe Communities Portugal, however, such advice is now being developed in English to cater for non-Portuguese residents as well as tourists. There is more that will be produced during the course of this year.

Daily Fire Risk

One of the steps taken recently is the translation of the daily fire risk into English which prohibits the following activities, relevant to visitors, between 1st July and 30th September namely: the use of stoves, BBQs and grills is prohibited in all rural spaces, except where used outside of the critical areas and in places duly authorised for the purpose and smoking and all types of naked flames are prohibited in woodland and forests.

Additional Prevention measures

Whereas most off-road operators commence tours with a safety briefing, Safe Communities believes that as an added safety measure, all operators, conducting such activities in rural areas should have, and publish in their terms and conditions, their own rural fire prevention and protection guidelines relevant to their particular type of activity, and this should be available to all their clients and potential clients.

Such guidelines should include the following preventive steps in addition to the standard government list mentioned above, for example: prohibiting smoking in vehicles; avoid parking on land where there is tall grass or inflammable vegetation underneath and prohibited areas. . Remember your exhaust pipe can get very hot, especially after a long drive. This should also include avoiding discarding glass bottles and indeed any rubbish, which could cause a rural fire. If you are booking an off road tour check that the operator, is properly registered for this activity, that indemnity insurance is in place and satisfy yourself concerning safety matters.

Motor caravans parks and campsites.

Wild camping, e.g. anywhere outside camping parks is prohibited In Portugal due mainly to the fire risk.

Official camp sites are divided into a number of categories providing different types of facilities and services, but all are required to be registered with government.

Campsites can, if not properly regulated, give rise to a higher fire risk due to: insufficient distance between combustible accessories like tents, random car parking, use of fire wood, gas to light and to cook, poor maintenance of accessories, fire suppressant equipment not properly located, and lack of training of campers and sometimes of the site staff in fire safety and prevention procedures are among the main issues to be addressed in campsites in order to reduce the fire risk.

Depending upon the category, registered campsites in Portugal can accommodate tents, caravans and motor homes, either together or in separate areas. These invariably cover all the necessary fire prevention and protection measures, so it is important to follow the requirements laid down. Surprising however is the fact that safety conditions are not always stated in the terms and conditions, prior to booking, so if in doubt users should clarify this with the campsite concerned, particular concerning the use of BBQs. Again remember to check if they are properly registered and covered by liability insurance.

Apart from wild camping being illegal, unregulated use of the countryside for this purposes can pose a safety risk to users and others, so be aware.

Last year Safe Communities produced leaflets especially for tourists to help create awareness and prevent fires. These included special provisions for caravans and motor homes namely “carry a first aid kit, fire extinguisher, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, and check gas pipes and seals regularly. Setup camp only in designates places.” It is particularly important that owners of these vehicles do not simply pull over in a wooded layby and light a BBQ.

To avoid fires starting in a campsite take special care when cooking – don’t leave pans unattended; turn off all appliances before you go out or to bed; and never smoke in bed. Remove any litter and rubbish near the caravan to reduce the risk of fire spreading. Importantly when parking ensure there is at least a 4m gap (unless stipulated otherwise) between your vehicle and the next one in order to avoid the spread of fires between vehicles.

If you are in the countryside and you are affected or near a rural fire, the actions in the Portuguese Government’s Safe Village – Safe People program’s advice should be followed. This can be found in English at: www.safecomunitiesportugal.com – Civil Protection – Rural Fires – During Fires

