

GUIDE TO CAR HIRE

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Introduction

Hiring a car, particularly overseas, can seem a complicated business: different languages, laws, road rules and charges can make the whole process seem less than easy. However, with some simple explanations and advice, the experience can be totally pain-free.



Choosing a car

There are many car hire companies and website car hire brokers so do your research online and consider all the options available.

You can either go direct to the actual car companies - Hertz, Avis, National and Alamo are four of the biggest - or book through an agent that consolidates car companies, such as Holiday Autos, Expedia or Carrentals. Check what you are paying in advance and what you will need to pay at the car hire counter. With agents you sometimes only pay a deposit, with the remainder of the booking paid at the counter or at the end of your holiday.

It usually pays to book your car in advance to save money, and there is rarely any benefit in leaving it to the last minute. Always get a few quotes first from a number of car hire companies. Obviously the price will play a major part in your choice but also consider where you will pick up and drop off the car and any extra costs.



Extra costs to consider

The extras can sometimes cost as much as the car hire. Here are some examples:

Fuel

If on offer, choose a car with a full tank of fuel and you will then return the car with a full tank. Apart from the practical reason of wanting to start your journey with a full tank, it is also often cheaper to pay for fuel at a petrol station than pay for fuel through the car hire company.

Additional drivers and surcharges for young or old drivers

Decide who will be driving the car and if you add an additional driver expect to pay a surcharge. The minimum car hire age is normally 21, although if you are under the age of 25 you often have to pay an additional charge.

Child Seats

If you are travelling with small children then you will have to pay for a child seat (infant and booster seats for children under 12 years old are mandatory in most countries in the EU). You may want to take your own child seat to ensure you get one (they are not always available), although make sure it fits the car you are hiring.

Winter holidays

Skiing and snow holidays need to be considered: you may need a larger car to accommodate equipment such as from ski boots, skis and snowboards. Hiring a ski rack with your car can help to save space. You might also need snow chains or winter tyres if there has been heavy snowfall at your destination, and in some counties this is a legal requirement.

Late return fees

If you return your car late you may be liable for late return fees. There is usually an initial grace period, then charges per hour for the first few hours and then per day. Ahead of returning the car, you can always call the car agent or hire company to extend your booking.

Mileage

Booking in advance usually gives you unlimited mileage, although if you wait until you get to the car hire counter to book your car there may be a mileage restriction with an additional charge per mile over the daily allowance.

Excess Waiver

Usually the insurance that comes with your car hire has an excess, which is deducted off the amount paid to you if you have to make a claim. The exact amount will be detailed in your car hire policy. Excess Waiver is additional insurance that is sold to you at the car hire counter when you collect your car to either reduce your excess in part or in total. Depending on where you go and the type of car you take, the excess you are liable for can be anything up to £1500, and the excess waiver can cost up to £10-£15 per day. However, by purchasing Excess Waiver insurance at the time you hire your car, all excess amounts become null and void. So, for a small cost and peace of mind, buy 'Excess Waiver' before you go away.

PAI (Personal Accident Insurance)

This insurance pays out if you kill or maim yourself or a passenger. Your own travel insurance should cover you for injury or death, plus medical expenses. Check the details of your travel insurance policy.

Personal Effects Insurance

This should also be covered with your travel insurance, or home insurance cover if you have opted to take cover for personal possessions away from home.

Explaining Insurance

Understanding what insurance is included and what is excluded is often the most difficult aspect of hiring a car, so let's make it simple. Your car hire usually comes with inclusive insurance to cover three areas:

- LDW/CDW (Loss/Collision Damage Waiver) - to cover damage to the car.
- TP (Theft Protection) – to cover the car, or part of the car, if it is stolen or damaged during an attempted theft.
- Liability/SLI (Third Party Liability) – the minimum cover that's mandatory in most countries

HOWEVER, on the Damage and Theft portions, the insurance is only reducing what you are personally liable for, and there is often an excess to pay in the event of having to make a claim. In Europe this can be a few hundred pounds. In other countries it can be as much as £1500.

The final point to make clear is that windows, tyres, the roof and the undercarriage of the car are usually excluded (i.e. not covered). These are the parts of the car most prone to damage and often not covered by the car hire company's insurance.

There are a few options to reduce your excess to zero:

Super CDW: A top up policy from the car rental company itself, usually payable when you arrive at the counter to collect the car. This can cost up to £15 per day and often excludes cover for damage to the windows, tyres, roof and the undercarriage of the car.

Damage Excess Waiver (DEW): Holiday Autos, which is the biggest broker in the UK, charges £2.50 per day, at the time of writing, for its zero excess policy making it considerably cheaper than buying cover directly from the car hire companies. However, it does not cover damage to the windows, tyres, undercarriage and the roof of the car.

Excess Insurance: There are a number of businesses which focus on just selling insurance to reduce the excess to zero. You can take a daily policy or, if you are travelling and hiring a car more frequently, an annual excess policy. www.carhireinsure.com offers both of these policies – only £4.50 for the daily policy and annual policies from £49. These will cover all named drivers on the car hire agreement plus any damage to the roof, windows, tyres and undercarriage of the car. Companies like carhireinsure.com (who have written the article you are now reading) are often a cheaper alternative and if you rent cars a few times a year then their annual policies prove very cost effective.



Collecting Your Hire Car

When you collect your car it's worth remembering to do the following things:

1. Have your passport, driver's licence (both parts of the license), copy of your car hire agreement and your credit card handy. Most car hire companies require you to provide a credit card at the counter (debit cards and cash are not accepted).
2. Check what you are signing at the car hire counter – especially what the exclusions are.

3. Make sure you walk around the car and inspect the vehicle. Even the smallest scratches or dents should be noted on the vehicle damage report before you leave the car park. It's a good idea to take photos of any existing damage.

4. Make sure that the petrol tank is full if you have arranged to hire a car with a full tank.

5. Make sure you keep your car hire documents with you at all times (don't leave them in the car in case the car is stolen). It is also worth making a note of the registration number and car hire company's telephone number and keeping it with your passport.

Starting off

Before you hit the road make sure that you feel comfortable with the car, including your seat position, lights, heating, wipers, indicators and warning lights. Also set the radio or load up a CD and have your map and directions to hand.

It is also important that you understand the laws of the country you are visiting. Visit http://www.theaa.com/motoring_advice/overseas/index.html for a useful summary of international road rules.

Returning Your Hire Car

The key things to remember when returning your hire car are:

1. Ensure that there are no costs you might be charged for later.
2. Try to return your car during normal office hours so you can go through the full return process. If you just drop the car off without checking it in, you are still liable for the car until the car hire company opens the following day.
3. Inspect the car with a representative of the car hire company to ensure that there are no problems. If this is not possible then take photos of the car in case you need to prove that there is no damage.
4. Wait for a printed copy of the final report.
5. Check the seat pockets, glove compartment and boot for any items that you might have left in the car.
6. Finally keep your copy of the car rental agreement and any damage report until your next credit card statement arrives. That way if you need to claim on your insurance or dispute the transaction you will have the information to hand.

Most of all enjoy your hire car and enjoy being out on the open road. Hiring a car is a great way to see parts of the world that are difficult to get to on public transport, and is often a very cost effective way to travel with your family and friends.