

Don't get taken for a ride

Savvy Traveller



*A hire car is an important part of many holidays, but it can also prove an expensive one. **Nick Trend** offers advice on how to find the best deal and keep costs down*

A year ago in these pages I gave warning that car hire companies in major tourist destinations, such as Malaga and Majorca, had cut their fleets so drastically in response to the recession that they were running out of cars at peak times. Car-hire brokers have recently been saying that the problem looks likely to crop up again this summer – especially at Easter and during the main school holidays.

So it is vital to book a car several weeks in advance – but how do you ensure you get the best price? As with virtually every service we buy

now, it involves a battle for the consumer – either to establish whether the price you have been quoted includes everything you need, or to avoid paying for “extras” you don’t want. Often, these extras and exclusions are so highly priced that they can total more than the headline cost; they make it very hard to compare prices quoted by different companies.

I don’t think I have ever collected a hire car without being offered some kind of extra, and made to feel anxious or foolhardy if I didn’t buy it. It happens for three reasons, I think. First, when most of us arrive at the airport to pick up the car we

are tired and impatient, and in a very weak bargaining position. We have probably been travelling for several hours and then had to queue at the desk. All we want to do is pick up the keys and get to our final destination. Airport car hire desks

know this and play on it. Second, the way the industry is structured means that these local desks are often run by franchisees, so there is little central control as to how they operate. Lastly, there are so many variables – from the size and style of the car to the age of the driver – that prices are bound to vary enormously in any case. That said, as long as you avoid the pitfalls, you should find



prices keener than ever: you just have to do some research.

Comparing like with like

When looking for the best deal, you can't make a perfect comparison between what's on offer on different websites because few car hire companies will guarantee the exact make or model you will get when you arrive at the airport. However, you can pin down most of the variables – the size of the car, the number of doors, air-conditioning and type of fuel (petrol or diesel), for example, and brokers and price-comparison websites are usually transparent about these features.

Some sites – notably travelsupermarket.com – also make an effort to be transparent about which other variables, such as insurance terms, are included in the quotes, but in practice, the only way to ensure you are getting the best deal is to research the full details of the contract and add in any extra costs yourself.

Note that it may also not be possible to pay some of the charges in advance – often extra costs for

drivers under a certain age, or for child seats or roof racks, for example, can only be paid locally at hugely varying prices. So it is vital to have a clear statement of what those charges will be and to take it with you when you travel. For reasons of cost and security, you may want to bring your own child seat.

Insurance

This is the biggest bugbear. Even companies that claim to be selling you a car at a “fully inclusive” price will very often not include the cost of an “excess waiver”. This is an extra premium you have to pay – usually locally – to avoid being liable for the first few hundred pounds of any repair bill. The problem is that the amount of the excess and the premium required varies enormously. The only constant is that you can be sure the premium will be disproportionately high – perhaps £5-£10 a day (£70 to £140 for two weeks) to waive an excess of anything from £300 to more than £1,000.

There are often better deals. The broker, Holidayautos.co.uk offers to waive excesses

for £2.99 a day and last week I noticed that Carhire3000.com was offering a zero excess (and a free additional driver, see below) as a “special deal” on some cars. But even when there is no excess charge, you may still be liable for damage to some parts of the car – notably the windscreen, the underside and the wheels.

If you hire regularly you may feel, as I do, that it is better to look for a car with a relatively low excess and take the risk. Or, you can buy an independent insurance policy.

Daily Excess (dailyexcess.com) and Insurance4carhire.com (insurance4carhire.com); Questor Insurance (questor-insurance.co.uk); and Worldwide Insure (worldwideinsure.com) – all offer policies that cost less than the cover offered by most car hire companies.

Drivers

Many people like to share the driving when hiring a car. That's fine, but unless you check when you book, you may find you have to pay a hefty premium for a second driver – so look out for special offers (see above). The driver's age will also

affect the premium. Most prices are based on drivers aged 25 (sometimes 21) to 75 (sometimes 65). Outside these ages you will have to pay more, or you may even be refused a car. I intend to look at issues concerning older drivers in the next few weeks.

Fuel

An age-old problem. There are two golden rules. First, never pay for a full tank in advance – this “service” is often offered at the pickup desk (you will probably pay a premium for the fuel and waste a lot when you return the car). Second, always refuel a car that has been supplied with a full tank just before you return it. Otherwise you will find a hefty refuelling charge added to your credit card. Some companies still supply cars with a virtually empty tank – it means that you won't get stung for charges, but you have to fill up as soon as you leave the airport.

Be sure also that unlimited mileage is included in the deal

when you book, or that additional mileage charges are reasonable and will not bump up your bill too much.

Damage

Despite having hired dozens of cars over the years, I have never had a problem with a company trying to charge me for a scratch or dent that was already there when I picked up the car. I do regularly get letters from readers who have, however, and I have also noticed that companies are becoming far more attentive to the condition of the bodywork – and even check the spare tyre. Recently, at Geneva, my car was photographed from all sides before we drove it away. Given the unsatisfactory nature of most forms that indicate existing damage to bodywork, it might be worth doing this yourself – on pick-up and return.

Bargain hunting

Here is a shortlist of three brokers that take bookings direct, followed by three price comparison sites (which forward you to a broker or car hire company) specialising in car hire: ArgusCarHire.com; Carhire3000.com; Holidayautos.co.uk; Kayak.co.uk; Travelsupermarket.com; Carrentals.co.uk.

Often extras and exclusions are more expensive than the headline cost





IAN SHAW/ALAMY

**Driving through the
French countryside:
make sure you book
your car well in
advance this year**