

Taken for a ride

How car hire in Europe can often mean ‘Rent-a-Problem’

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1 FOREWORD

Background

After the first few days of a holiday, when the initial enthusiasm for the beach and the pool has been sated, restlessness often makes families think of getting away from the hotel and seeing something of the country away from its immediate surroundings. For some walking or taking a local bus or taxi will suffice but for many exploring means hiring a car.

Popular holiday resorts are full of firms advertising vehicles to suit your every need. But as a stranger in a strange land how do you avoid the many pitfalls that surround hiring cars abroad?

To help families get the best deal and the safest vehicles, the EuroTest consortium of European motoring organisations, of which The AA Motoring Trust is a leading member, looked at what consumers could expect when hiring abroad, and what advice could be offered to help them.

The Survey

EuroTest sent inspection teams to five popular holiday destination to get a 'snap shot' of the car hire experience around the Mediterranean. Each team was made up of a technical expert who assessed the road worthiness of each car, and a 'mystery shopper' who evaluated the standard of customer service at each of the companies. In all they hired 58 cars on a 'spontaneous, day-trip' basis. The teams each rented cars from a variety of car hire firms, ranging from internationally known operations to regional chains and local outlets.

Well over half the cars were found to be in a satisfactory condition, but that still left a sizable minority with safety-related failings. And inspectors also complained of the inadequate customer service they received from many of the hire companies. Overall, companies in Italy were judged to be best while those in Turkey were, by some distance, the worst.

The report's main conclusion is that there is good and bad to be found everywhere. The two best companies inspected and the second worst were all found in Greece, which highlights the recommendation that if you are not happy with the car you are offered or the service you receive, walk away.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hiring a car anywhere in Europe should be a relatively easy and transparent process. But very often it is not and it is something that can cost you dear when you get home. The AA Trust's latest EuroTest survey of hire cars available in ten Mediterranean resorts in five European countries found a range of quality and experience ranging from very good to very poor.

The good news is that over half the hire cars on offer were modern, clean and safe, but over a third were rated "poor" or "very poor" with serious safety defects including dangerous tyre pressures and damaged tyres, defective seat belts and electrics, and missing safety equipment. Two of the cars hired in Turkey were unfit for the road and described by the inspectors as 'belonging on the scrapheap'.

The inspectors compared a range of operators, both large international companies and local outlets. They found that 13 out of 15 cars hired out by big operators were in very good condition and 12 had less than 10,000 miles on the clock. Among local firms, just under half of the 43 cars hired were in very good condition with a quarter having mileages of less than 10,000. Three local firm cars had done more than 100,000 miles.

The messages from this extensive survey of holiday car hire is that consumers need to be vigilant and on their guard; they need to understand all of the rules and requirements they are signing for, and they should reject any car that is not relatively new and clean. But the array of insurances and confusions of conditions of hire make it virtually impossible for the average customer to make an informed judgement. The hirer is likely to either take out unnecessary insurance or face additional and often considerable costs later.

The bad news is that confusing insurance and dubious post-hire charges can mean hirers being ripped-off, with little or no protection or ways of getting their money back. Even an experienced EuroTest inspector with extensive knowledge and natural caution had €300 taken from his credit card for alleged damage to the car that he knew he did not do, with little chance of getting it back.

At car hire desks at the resorts our inspectors were offered a whole range of confusing insurance, examples include:

- Additional Liability Insurance
- Collision Damage Waiver
- Loss Damage Waiver
- Personal Accident Insurance
- Personal Effects Protection
- Carefree Personal Protection
- Super Collision Damage Waiver
- Theft Protection / Theft Waiver
- Super Theft Protection
- Uninsured Motorist Protection

And added to this was confusion over whether prices included VAT, charges for additional drivers and for child seats, requirements on filling the tank on the car's return, and pre-hire inspections to check for any damage (even minor chips and scratches) which the hirer will be charged for later.

The inspectors noted that at most car hire desks the company insisted on them signing what amounted to a blank credit card slip, allowing the hire company to take money from the

- A Fiat Punto from City in Taormina, Sicily, had four almost bald tyres

Tyre damage was the second most frequently found defect in seven vehicles. The Fiat Punto from City Car Rental in Taormina was the lowest rated. Tyre pressure was the most frequent technical failing: nine vehicles had tyres with incorrect pressure. A Fiat Punto from Smeralda Express, in Porto, was running on tyres that were up to 12psi below the manufacturer's specifications. Incorrect pressures ranged from 12psi below to 24psi above the specified level.

Although the overall rating for brake discs and linings was 'Good', the inspectors found three vehicles that had badly or completely worn linings: a Citroën Saxo from Olympic in Faliraki, Rhodes, the Tofas Sahin from Star in Alanya, and the Citroën Saxo from Luna Cars in Playa de las Américas, which had linings down to 0.5 millimetres.

Inspectors also found that the hand brake was defective in the Tofas Sahin from Star and in the Suzuki Samurai from Avsar, both in Alanya. Excessive lever travel and little or no braking performance were found in both vehicles.

The inspectors reported significant defects in the steering of four cars. The vehicle with the lowest rating was the Suzuki Samurai from Avsar, where the steering linkage was found to be badly bent and had too much play. The Daihatsu Cuore from Rental-one in Chersonisos, the Fiat Punto from City Car Rental in Taormina, and a Renault Clio from Montemar in Torremolinos were also criticised.

Lighting and Electrics

Ratings: 43 'Very Good', 7 'Good', 3 'Acceptable', 4 'Poor', 1 'Very poor'

The inspectors rated this category as second-best overall. The three main problems found were defective low-beam headlights, defective brake lights and broken indicators. Three other vehicles were criticised for broken, bent or worn windscreen wipers and defective spray nozzles.

The Fiat Panda from Europcar in Porto Cervo, the Fiat Punto from City Car Rental in Taormina, the Suzuki Samurai from Galaxia in Playa de las Americas, and the Citroën Saxo from Luna Cars, also in Playa de las Américas, were all rated 'Poor'. The Suzuki Samurai from Avsar in Alanya was rated 'Very Poor' in this category.

Equipment and passenger safety

Ratings: 6 'Very Good', 31 'Good', 12 'Acceptable', 5 'Poor', 4 'Very Poor'

Equipment and Passenger Safety was the worst of all the vehicle-related categories. Of the 58 cars tested, inspectors found that

- In 35, there was no car manual
- In 42, the required one or two warning triangles were missing
- In 57, the car did not have a first-aid kit (although this is not mandatory in most countries)
- In seven, the spare wheel had significant failings

A Daihatsu Cuore and a Tofas Sahin had no airbags -- a significant failing in terms of passenger safety.

One positive finding was that 57 cars had a complete set of tools, and that seatbelts (with two exceptions), windows and mirrors (with one exception in each case) were intact. Moreover, 44 companies had a child seat readily available.

