

Taken for a ride: UK holidaymakers enter a car hire minefield

UK holidaymakers enter a minefield of hidden charges, complex insurances and unhelpful service when they hire cars across Europe, a new AA Motoring Trust survey reveals. Even a seasoned consumer expert carrying out the research was stung 300 on his credit card statement for damage the car hirer couldnt explain.

Car condition was generally good across the 10 resorts in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Tenerife and Majorca. However, two resorts stood out as glaringly bad, with four out of six cars hired in Playa de las Americas, Tenerife, in poor or very poor condition and five out of six in Alanya, Turkey.

The real danger for holidaymaker drivers is unexpected charges swiped on to their credit cards. They also face pressure to take out expensive insurances or foot the bill for damage they may or may not have caused. Unhelpful service, poor and sometimes non-existent documentation , and the failure to explain the most basic procedures, such as dealing with an accident and refuelling, leave customers in the dark and vulnerable to financial loss.

The survey, conducted by the EuroTest consortium of which The AA Motoring Trust is a leading partner, shows that even the international car hire firms let themselves down, with the customer service for more than half of the 15 cars hired from these firms judged to be poor or very poor. Among the more local firms, the level of dissatisfaction rose to almost two-thirds.

The AA Motoring Trust believes that car hire is an area that now needs to be addressed by the European Commission. The AA Trust is working with the other motoring organisations in the EuroTest partnership to persuade the Commission to come forward with proposals to make car hire contracts simpler and transparent, and to put in place procedures to help consumers get redress in their state of residence, not in the state the car was hired.

It is common for holidaymakers to ask whether international operators provide better cars than local firms. The survey, carried out mostly in August at the height of the holiday season, 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.

Checks on the brakes, steering and chassis of cars hired out to the Eurotest inspectors, who included qualified vehicle engineers, found that one in the 15 cars from international companies were in very poor condition. This rose to 10 in the 43 from the local firms.

"Hiring a car anywhere in Europe should be a relatively easy and transparent process. Very often it is not, and becomes an exercise in risk that can cost you dear when you get home," says Paul Watters, EuroTest project manager for The AA Motoring Trust.

"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. The bad news for hirers 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.

"The messages from this extensive survey of holiday car hire is that consumers need to be 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. However, the array of insurances and confusions with company 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."

NOTES TO EDITORS: Examples of poor service and vehicle condition include:

- A translation error in the car hire paperwork for a car in Tenerife set the collision damage excess at 480,000, not the actual 480. The cars front tyres were so badly worn that the tread was starting to come away from the tyre.
- A car hired in Turkey with substantial body damage was returned and the firms representative, who was looking worse for wear himself, told the inspector to park the car and it would be checked later. When the credit card statement arrived, the firm had charged 300 for damage that already existed when the car was hired. It responded to complaints, by sending a bill that itemised the 300 as the excess on an insurance policy not mentioned when the car was hired nor included on the insurance agreement.
- Any chance of fulfilling the refuelling requirements of a car hire firm in Greece collapsed when the fuel gauge broke.
- A car hired on the island of Rhodes had a damaged tyre, bent wheel, low tyre pressure, brakes almost worn out, brake fluid below minimum and windscreen washers broken.
- Poor service let down a Ford Fiesta hired from a local firm in Spain. The car was in very good condition with just over 4,000 miles on the clock. However, the rental agreement was in Spanish only, no damage check was done before or after it was hired, the fuel level wasnt checked when it was returned, and the customer wasnt provided with the vehicles registration document, as required by law.

