

Car Rental Tips to Save Money and Avoid Hassle

When it comes to planning a relaxing business or family trip, begin with your car rental agreement.

The car rental process will vary depending on the country, city or even the company that you're dealing with. Even still, many people fail to make their car rental plans ahead of time. They assume that car rentals will be available at the airport or hotel, and leave the plans to the very last minute.

The opportunity to rent a vehicle in any choice of style, size and model is a virtual blessing for travelers all around the world. But while there are many options available, the process of renting a car can be almost as tricky as buying a new one. You will be expected to meet specific requirements set forth in order to qualify for a rental agreement. For example, most car rental companies require that a renter must be at least 25 years old. Other companies will allow drivers as young as 21 rent a vehicle, provided they pay additional fees. All renters must hold valid drivers licenses with picture identification.

If you're not familiar with the process, these car rental tips should help you to avoid any contract shock:

* Every car rental company has its own particular method of charging for rented vehicles. Some charge a daily rate, with a certain number of "free" miles allotted per day. Others charge a daily rate with unlimited mileage. There are also plans that allow for different rates, with free mileage available after an extended period. Never assume that the plan you enjoyed last year will still be available today.

* Consider the period of time that you'll be using the rental car. If you will be renting a car for a week or less, you'll likely be able to find good rates with a nationwide car rental company. Check rental agencies like Alamo, Avis, Budget, Doll, Enterprise, Hertz, and Thrifty. On the other hand, if you're looking for a car for a longer rental term, check with local companies or car dealers for their best rates.

* Don't be fooled by every deal that you see online or in the papers. Car rental agencies will often advertise incredible savings, but remember that there is always "fine print". Not every discounted price offer is the real deal. Many advertised prices are just the "tip of the iceberg", with a mass of hidden charges hiding beneath the surface. You'll also be subject to sales taxes, concession fees, airport taxes and more. These can really add up your rental cost and eat up your travel budget.

* Be aware of the nature of your insurance. Car rental companies are not authorized to place insurance "on sale". Instead, many companies will try to sell you waivers stating that you are not liable for any damages that may occur to your rented car in the case of an accident. Before blindly agreeing to purchase this extra insurance, contact your personal car insurance provider to find out if car rental damage is included in your existing policy. If it's not included, you should be able to have it added on for the term of your vacation. Otherwise, you may choose to accept the insurance waiver as offered by the car rental company.

* Understand the fueling plan for your rental car. This is a major consideration that's often overlooked. Under most agreements, you're free to return the rental car with a partially empty tank, or even with a dry tank. Be aware, however, that the car rental company will charge a premium price for refueling. You may find that an additional charge of \$5 per gallon of gas has been added to your credit card for refueling. The best way of avoiding this form of highway robbery is to return the car with a full tank. In doing so, you're not only paying market price for fuel, but you're assured that you're only paying for the fuel that you have used. Allow a little extra time to stop at the gas station before returning your rental car.

* Finally, make sure that you're able to return the car on schedule or ahead of schedule. Late returns can be subject to steep fees and additional charges.

Renting a car is a great way to get out and explore the world up close. Take advantage of these car rental tips, and you'll be able to save time and a little extra money on your next vacation.