

What you should know about renting a car in Europe in 2018



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WHY RENT A CAR IN EUROPE?

A rental car remains the most flexible, liberating way to see Europe. Except in Switzerland, where there are a handful of car-free villages, the automobile offers access to the tiniest hamlets. Keep in mind, the European continent has many more miles of paved roads than passenger rail lines.

Car rental in Europe has become more complicated in recent years. The car shopper must be knowledgeable about insurance, currency exchange, European automobiles, and the ways rental companies and online sellers obfuscate the charges—many of them mandatory—added to basic rental rates. Making the right decisions regarding type of car, insurance coverages, pickup and return point, can save the renter hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of dollars.

This booklet has been designed to assist the reader in making those decisions.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

'Keep it simple' is good advice in many of life's endeavors, including renting a car in Europe. Avoiding frills and extras will reduce costs and headaches.

As we begin the year, the best and most straightforward European rental car deals are in France and Germany. There, for from about \$135 to \$175, including the 20% or 19% value added tax, you can get a compact car, VW Golf or similar with air-conditioning and four doors, for a full week. That price, however, can quickly escalate if you start adding such extras as additional drivers, automatic transmission, navigation (GPS), starting and ending the rental in different countries, and so on. Such embellishments can also add complications.

Picking up a car in one country and returning it another is guaranteed to add a substantial—perhaps prohibitive—cost element, often more than the cost of the rental itself and not all companies will allow one-way rentals.

Every day we hear from people who, with just a small adjustment, could save hundreds of dollars. The idea of picking up a car in Salzburg and dropping it somewhere in Germany is a case in point. Why not instead take a 10-minute train ride to Freilassing in Germany and begin your rental there? You'll get the car in Germany where rates are much lower than in Austria, and also avoid the \$125-to-\$300 international drop charge.

BEYOND THE BASIC PRICE

Most car rental quotes for Europe include unlimited kilometers, value added tax, and third-

party liability insurance. However, to make their prices look as low as possible, some companies advertise the basic price of the car without tax or extras, but when all is said and done you'll pay a lot more than the basic price.

Value Added Tax

Most car rental quotes include this tax. It ranges from 8 percent in Switzerland to 25 percent in Norway. Germany is 19 percent, France 20 percent, Italy 22 percent, and Austria 21 percent. It is mandatory and, except in very rare, extraordinary circumstances, not refundable.

Premium Station Fees

In Germany, (with the exception of Avis whose downtown and premium station rates are very similar), if your rental originates at an airport or rail station the fee is an additional 22 to 23.5 percent. Here's how it's figured: if the base rate of the car is \$100 you add the 19 percent VAT to get a price of \$119. That's if you pick up downtown. If the rental commences at an airport or rail station, however, the price becomes \$119, plus the 22 percent "premium station" fee, for a total of \$145. Remember, too, that the 22% or 23% fee also applies to items added at the rental counter such as ski racks, child seats, GPS, etc.

Austria's "premium station" fee is 17 percent, Switzerland's is 20 percent; and Italy is 15 to 17 percent. Holland is 18 percent with a minimum €65. For these countries, substantial savings can be achieved by arranging to pick up the car at an off-airport/rail station office. Some countries charge a flat fee; in France it's about €40 and Belgium around €60. There is no additional charge for returning a rental car to an airport or rail station.

✓ **Tip:** Premium station charge only applies to rentals *originating* at premium stations; you can return the car to these locations for no added fee.

Road Tax

Almost every driver of a European rental car these days pays some kind of road or license fee. These range from about \$1.10 to \$5 per day, often there is a maximum charge. Sometimes the road tax will be built-in to the overall rental cost, sometimes it's a separate fee paid locally.

Eco Fees

Some countries charge environmental fees. France, for example charges €8 per day to a maximum €48 on all automatics.

Navigation

When available, some GPS (Global Positioning System) devices work only in the country of rental, though the trend seems to be toward devices that cover other countries. The larger and more expensive the car, the better the chance it will come with factory-equipped GPS. Technically

challenged renters may find limited availability of rental agents to assist in learning how to operate the car's nav system. In Germany, if your car is midsize or above, and the supplier is Avis or Europcar, you have a good chance of getting a free GPS. In other countries, however, there is less availability. When GPS is an option, charges range from about \$8 to \$25 per day. You should also consider relying on a smartphone or tablet; Google has announced that its app Google Maps works offline, without the Internet

OTHER COSTS

There are plenty of other ways rental companies pile on extra charges. The most common are registration fees, contract fees, cross-border fees, winterization charges, even credit card fees. Inquire when booking. Also see page 5, *Other Rental Car Charges*.

INSURANCE

This is a complicated topic but here, in general, is what you need to know:

All European rental companies are required by law to protect themselves and their rental customers with millions of euros in third-party liability insurance. In other words, the rental company covers you for damage to property and persons outside your vehicle. What you are responsible for is damage to, or theft of, the car you rented. For that you need Collision (CDW) and theft insurance.

CDW/Theft: Credit Card or Purchase?

Except in countries where you are required to purchase CDW/theft, we recommend rentals be paid for with a credit card that provides free CDW/theft coverage. Those who sell CDW/theft point out that most credit cards offers only "secondary" coverage. While that is true, it's also irrelevant. Since you won't *have* any other coverage in Europe unless you purchase it from the rental company (something you don't want to do, especially since the credit card coverage is so much better) your credit card becomes primary. The CDW/theft insurance sold by rental companies costs \$10 to \$40 per day and usually has a high deductible, between \$800 and \$4000. Your credit card...provided it offers CDW/theft insurance (be sure to check)...is free and zero deductible.

Proponents of buying CDW/theft are fond of saying that in the event of damage you "just walk away" at the end of the rental. Not so. You don't walk away until you've paid the deductible. In addition, failure to file a police report is often grounds for invalidating purchased insurance. Some CDW coverage sold by rental companies excludes one-car accidents. In other words, if you

get a dented fender while your car is parked and you can't locate the other car's driver, you're on the hook for the repairs. Most CDW policies also exclude damage to the car's roof, glass, wheels, undercarriage, side mirrors and interior.

CDW/Theft in Italy, Ireland & Israel

In both Italy and Israel, CDW and theft coverage must be purchased from the rental company. Some credit cards offer coverage in Italy, but it means nothing because all major rental companies require the purchase of CDW and theft. The only question left is will your credit card reimburse the deductible in case of damage or theft? Apparently only Visa will, but confirm with them. This a murky area.

You may also wind up purchasing CDW/theft in Ireland as not all credit cards provide coverage there. Check with your credit card company. In addition, to avoid purchasing CDW/theft from most Ireland rental companies, the renter must produce written proof of credit card coverage.

Rules for Credit Card CDW/Theft Coverage

Prior to your departure, contact your credit card company to confirm that your card provides free CDW/theft coverage in Europe. If you are covered there are just a few basic rules you must follow to ensure reimbursement if the rental car is damaged or stolen.

- Decline the CDW/theft coverage offered by the car rental company. Don't sign any contract unless you are certain that by doing so you are NOT accepting the company's offer of coverage.

If you accept the proffered insurance two bad things happen: one, you pay for expensive CDW/theft insurance, and, two, your better credit card coverage is invalidated.

- Protect yourself at the rental counter. Every year a few of our customer inadvertently sign for CDW/theft coverage they don't need or want. But once a signature is on a rental contract that call so for insurance, there's no avoiding the charge. To protect yourself we suggest an unusual strategy. First, record the transaction at the rental car counter with a smartphone, and then, just above your signature write: "I hereby decline optional CDW and insurance." Be sure to also carry a letter of insurance certification from your credit card company. The purpose is to show, if your credit card is charged, that you clearly did not intend to purchase insurance. If you have a problem at the counter, call our 24/7 help line from the rental counter

- Pay for the entire rental — deposits, taxes, extras, everything—with the same credit card you used to reserve it. Don't pay that 20 euro road tax at the end of the rental in cash or

with a different credit card. You'll invalidate the insurance.

- Notify the credit card company of damage or loss within their specified time period. This period varies, depending on the card, but we recommend immediate phone notification. It is likely your credit card company has a toll-free number you can use overseas.

- Submit your reimbursement claim within your credit card's specified time limit, typically within 45 days after the damage or loss, though that may vary by credit card company.

Credit Card Insurance Limitations

- Coverage applies to the cardholder whose name appears on the car rental contract. Other drivers listed on the rental contract are also covered.

✓ **Caution:** If you use your card to pay for another person's rental, that person will not be covered for CDW/theft. For coverage, the rental must be in the name of card holder. If additional drivers are added they are also covered.

- Be aware that some vehicles are exempt from credit card CDW/theft coverage. Exotic cars and expensive vehicles such as Porsche, Bentley, Ferrari, 9-passenger vans, trucks, and top categories of Mercedes, BMW and Audi are usually not covered. However, most 7-passenger vans and selected BMW, Mercedes, and Audi cars are covered. Check with your credit card company. For a small charge, Amex offers expanded coverage for more expensive vehicles.

- Your credit card limits its CDW/theft coverage to a certain number of rental days. Some Mastercards cover rental contracts of up to 15 days. Most Visa, American Express (see Tip below), and Diner's Club cards provide coverage to 31 days. If your rental period exceeds those limits you will not be covered for any portion of the rental. Check with your credit card.

In some cases, in order to decline the rental company's offer of insurance, you may have to provide proof of insurance. Your credit card company can email you a letter that proves you have CDW/theft coverage. We suggest you carry that letter with you to Europe to show at the rental counter.

Another purchase option that offers better rates than those offered by car rental companies is Travel Guard's \$9 per day CDW and Theft coverage. The deductible is \$250. Other travel insurers have similar policies.

✓ **Tip:** American Express card members may find it worthwhile to enroll in the company's Premium Car Rental Protection. Enrollees in this

plan get CDW/theft coverage on rental contracts as long as 42 days. The cost is \$19 to \$25 per rental but coverage is "primary" and there are other benefits, including coverage of more expensive cars and the 9-passenger van.

When CDW/Theft is Included in the Rate

It is standard procedure for online, Europe-based car rental brokers to offer insurance for collision (CDW) and theft as part of their basic price, not as an option. Sounds great but there's a catch. *Frankly speaking, you want to avoid this.* Your credit card provides better coverage for free. The rental company's included CDW and theft insurance often carries a substantial deductible, usually in the \$1,000 to \$3000 range and you do not have the option of declining this coverage and relying on the insurance coverage provided by your credit card. In order to reduce the deductible or "excess" to zero or near zero you will have to purchase additional insurance, often referred to as "Super CDW." For more on this see page 11.

OTHER RENTAL CHARGES

Knowing in advance precisely how much your European rental car will cost is becoming ever more difficult. Most of us know there is a basic rate plus value added tax but after that it gets complicated.

Following is a checklist of possible extra charges and strategies for dealing with them:

- **Extra Drivers:** Adding an extra driver is seldom free and can cost as much as \$6 to \$25 per day. ✓ **Your strategy:** Use one driver. If that's not practical, then determine the cost in advance and factor it into the rental decision. The lowest rental rate may not be the best overall deal once you add extra driver charges.

- **In Which Currency is the Price of Your Rental Guaranteed?:** If you pay for the rental in Europe, the rate will be guaranteed not in US dollars but in local currency, so you won't know the exact amount in dollars until your credit card bill arrives. ✓ **Your strategy:** Pay in advance in the U.S., making sure, of course, that you can cancel without charge.

- **Credit Card Fees:** If you wait until you get to Europe to pay for your rental, most credit cards will charge a 3-percent foreign transaction charge. The same goes if you book through an overseas broker. ✓ **Your strategy:** Pay in advance in the U.S.

- **Late Charges:** Bring the car back a few minutes late and you're likely to get an extra day's rental charge tacked on to your bill. Gone are the days of a one-hour grace period for late returns. ✓ **Your strategy:** Check the pickup time stamped

on your rental contract and make sure you return the car earlier than that time.

- **Fuel Charges:** If the rental company has to fill the fuel tank when you return the car, you'll pay as much as \$18 per gallon, and perhaps a refuelling charge as well. Bring back a near-empty tank and you might pay more than \$200 for fuel plus a refueling charge. ✓ **Your strategy:** Fill up as close to the return location as possible and save your gas receipt in case you are billed post-rental refueling charges.

- **More Fuel Charges:** Whether you want it or not, some European rental stations charge for the first tank of gas and expect you to return an empty tank. ✓ **Your strategy:** Not many options here other than to bring the car back on fumes.

- **Cleaning Charges:** Returning a rental car that requires extraordinary cleanup measures – pet hair on the upholstery, for example – can trigger extra charges on your credit card bill. ✓ **Your strategy:** Take care of the rental car; don't assume the supplier will accept it any condition.

- **One-Way Fees:** If you want to rent a car in, say, Paris and drop it in Nice, it's likely you'll pay no more than if you take the car back to Paris. With a few minor exceptions (Hertz now charges 27 euros for all one-way rentals in Germany), this is true of most European countries; seldom will you be charged a one-way fee within the same country. However, if you want to drop the car in a different country, you'll pay an international one-way charge. Usually it's expensive.

Why? Cars registered in France, for example, cannot be rented in another country, so the rental company must ship the car back to France or find a renter who will return it to its point of origin. That can take several days which removes the vehicle from revenue service. One-ways between cities such as Frankfurt and Paris are more affordable because it's fairly easy for a rental company to find a customer who will return the car to where it came from, thus making the one-way charge fairly low (about 200 euros). But make the cities Frankfurt and Caen and the one-way can double or triple.

One-way fees on rentals that involve Italy or Spain are very expensive, typically in the \$500 to \$1500 range, *not including the cost of the rental itself*. A one-way rental between Scandinavia and Italy, provided you can find a rental company that will do it, will be at least \$1500. High fees also apply when pickup is in an eastern European country and return is in a western European country (and vice versa); and sometimes it's just not possible. So don't paint yourself into corner by booking "open jaw" travel that has you arriving in,

say, Frankfurt and leaving from Rome or Warsaw, without first fully understanding the cost of travel between the two cities, be it by car, air, or rail.

- **Other Charges:** Some rental cars in France, mainly automatics and larger cars, pay an environmental fee. In Ireland, some companies charge a one-time credit card fee. There are often "cross border" fees for driving between countries in Eastern Europe.

EXTRA EQUIPMENT

- **GPS Navigation:** Sometimes free on upscale cars but seldom on economy, compact or midsize vehicles. Prices vary from about €8 per day to €19, with maximums as high as €200 for longer rentals. Some GPS systems operate only in the country in which the car was rented.

- **Seats for Children:** These are mandatory in most countries. Expect to pay about from €10 to €65 per rental, per seat.

- **Winter Tires:** Mandatory in some countries, but often unavailable in countries other than Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The winter tire fee is usually included in the basic rate.

- **Ski Racks:** Available for most cars at about \$10 per day to a maximum of about \$60 per rental.

- **Luggage Racks:** Generally, these are no longer available in Europe.

TRANSMISSION

An ability to drive a car with standard transmission will save on your European rental car. In addition, automatic transmissions are rare in vans and station wagons. In some countries, automatic transmission costs 50-percent more than the same car with manual transmission. The message is clear, learn to drive a 'stick.'

AGE RESTRICTIONS

There is no upper age limit for renting a car in most countries. However, a few companies in Ireland, the U.K., Denmark, and certain eastern countries won't rent to older drivers, though exceptions are often possible. Minimum renting age ranges from 19 to 24 and in almost all cases drivers in this age category must pay extra fees and/or purchase CDW.

GEOGRAPHIC RESTRICTIONS

Most European rental cars can be driven anywhere in Western Europe and even into such former Eastern bloc countries as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary. Cars bound for countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, and former Soviet Union

countries will substantially cost more and may require additional insurance. Certain expensive cars may not be taken to Italy and most cars rented in Europe are not permitted to travel to Africa or certain islands. When reserving the car be sure to ask about geographic restrictions.

INTERNATIONAL DRIVING PERMIT (IDP)

An IDP is required to rent a car in Austria and Poland, though some renters report not being asked to show it. Even though you won't need an IDP to rent a car in most places, in some countries you can be fined if you don't have one. The IDP is not a separate license but a translation and verification of your regular driver's license. All rental companies in continental Europe recommend North Americans carry the IDP. The document supplements but does not replace your home driver's license which you must have to rent a car anywhere in Europe. The IDP is available for about \$15 at AAA and National Auto Club (NAC) offices.

✓ **Tip:** Beware online scammers who sell IPDs for from \$35 to \$100; only AAA and NAC are authorized by the U.S. State Dept. to issue the IDP.

ABOUT WINTERIZATION

Germany

German law requires winter tires when driving in "wintry" conditions and rental car companies charge extra for them, though the charge is usually included in the basic rental car rate. The penalty if your car doesn't have winter tires, and you are caught driving in snow, is about €40. Worse, however, you may be financially liable if you don't have them and are involved in an accident on snow. And, since you would be breaking the law, driving without winter tires might also void your insurance coverage.

Winter tires in are now mandatory for Avis, Europcar, and Hertz rentals commencing November 1-March 31.

The good news is if you're not in the mountains, your chances of actually driving on snow are pretty low. And when it does snow in Germany, roads are quickly cleared.

Austria

Winter tires are mandatory and included in the basic rental car price.

Switzerland

Mandatory and included in the rate.

France

Europcar, which dominates the France rental car market, offers winter tires only on a few vehicles. Hertz has snow equipment on request at

only a few, mostly high altitude, stations.

Italy

Some regions of the country now require winter tires

Other countries

Four-wheel drive vehicles in all countries are scarce and expensive. Some companies no longer offer tire chains as extra equipment. Some drivers feel more comfortable with front-wheel drive cars in ice and snow, though no rental company will guarantee front-wheel drive.

LEASE INSTEAD OF RENT

This a wonderful option for longer rentals; no insurance uncertainty, wondering what kind of car you will get, or where you can drive it.

There are numerous advantages to the lease/buy-back program:

- You get a brand-new-from-the-factory car to your specifications; exact model, engine type, and equipment
- You pay one price, there are no other charges
- The deal includes full, zero-deductible insurance
- The car can be driven virtually anywhere in Europe.
- No extra charge for multiple drivers

THE RIGHT RENTAL CAR FOR YOU

When choosing a car for Europe you should first come to grips with the reality that there are no Ford Victorias or Lincoln Town Cars in European rental fleets. That kind of passenger room and trunk space doesn't exist. You can rent S-class Mercedes, 7-series BMWs, and Audi A8s, but they start at more than \$800 per week, require two credit cards at pickup, can't be driven into Italy or any eastern country, and are probably excluded from credit car insurance. So get used to the idea of Opels, VWs, Fords, Peugeots, Fiats, Seats, Skodas, and smaller Mercedes, BMW and Audi.

Subcompact: Typical cars: Opel Corsa, VW Polo, Fiat Punto. Okay for two persons not interested in burning up the Autobahn. Trunk space is small and once in a while there is no air-conditioning.

Compact: Typical cars: Opel Astra, VW Golf, Ford Focus, Peugeot 308. Comfortable at 80 to 90mph. Good trunk - figure one big suitcase and two small ones, or two large ones. Should also be room for a garment bag and/or a soft duffel or two. Both two-door and four-door models, occasionally with a sunroof. Fine for three adults

who go easy on the luggage. Air-conditioned.

Intermediate: Typical cars: Opel Insignia, VW Passat, Renault Laguna, Skoda Octavia. Our recommended category for two couples. O.K. on the Autobahn but a bit underpowered with four people and luggage.

Full-size: Typical cars: Mercedes C-class, Audi A4, Peugeot 607. Full-size is a misnomer. Most of the cars in this category are no larger, in some cases smaller, than the intermediate VW Passat. If you want a nicer car, by all means rent a full-size; but if you're only moving up for extra passenger and luggage space you're wasting your money. (See *About Vehicle Categories* on page 13)

Station Wagon: Sometimes referred to in Europe as a Kombi. Come in three sizes: compact (VW Golf, Opel Astra), midsize (Vectra, VW Passat) and full-size (Volvo V70). You pay more for a wagon than for the same model sedan. Though wagons offer more luggage space, unless you pull the retractable cover—which reduces the luggage space to sedan size—your gear is exposed. For four people we like the midsize sedan over the compact wagon; more passenger comfort and almost as much luggage room. In a pinch, the midsize and full-size wagons can carry five people but someone has to ride in the rear center seat.

MPV (Multi-Purpose Vehicle): A recent addition to European rental fleets has been "crossover" vehicles such as VW Touran, Opel Zafira and Renault Grand Scenic. These combination SUV/wagon/van vehicles have created a new rental category, "Intermediate Special." Though sometimes sold in Europe as seven seaters, in rental fleets they almost always come with just five seats, leaving the rear area for luggage. In passenger and luggage room they are comparable to a midsize station wagon. In our opinion these cars are more comfortable for four persons and luggage than a regular intermediate sedan or even an intermediate station wagon.

✓ **Warning:** Some companies advertise these cars for six and seven passengers. Yes, some MPVs come with two folding jump seats but they occupy ALL the luggage space and are not suitable for more than five passengers.

Vans: You're taking the family to Europe and everybody wants to ride together in the same vehicle. One of those seven-passenger minivans sounds like just the ticket for your party of six. There are two important reasons why you may be better off with two midsize cars; luggage space and money. A seven-passenger vehicle may be OK for hauling kids to soccer games but will it have enough storage space to handle luggage for

six persons traveling in Europe? You can move up to a roomier nine-passenger van but your credit card (unless it's Amex with Premium Car Rental Protection) will probably not provide collision and theft insurance coverage; you'll have to buy it from the rental company. Often two midsize sedans will be less expensive.

Seven and nine-passenger vans have three rows of seating, similar to US minivans. The nine-passenger assumes three persons per seat—three in front, three in the center seat and three in back. Seven-passenger vans have front buckets, a shorter center bench seat or two buckets, and a rear bench. Minivans are fine for four or five people, but beyond that, luggage space can be a problem.

✓ **Tip:** Do not plan to rely on a credit card for CDW and theft insurance when renting a nine-passenger van. Some credit card companies exclude it from their insurance coverage (except for the American Express Premium coverage). Vans become scarce every summer. Book early.

Luxury Cars: Power and engineering make them somewhat safer than the run-of-the-mill Opels, VWs, Skodas, and Fords, but at a hefty price. Expect to pay more—sometimes much more—than \$500 per week for an E-class Mercedes, 5-series BMW, or Audi A6. Weekly prices start about \$900 for S-Class Mercedes, 7-Series BMW, or Audi A8.

SAVE MONEY & AVOID PROBLEMS

Here are a dozen recommendations every Europe car rental customer should ponder when deciding on a rental car. Not every recommendation will apply to every renter:

Avoid Airport Pickups

Commence your rental at a European airport and you're likely to pay a tax of 15% to 22%. Notable exceptions are France, Spain, Ireland, and the U.K. where airport and rail station charges range from \$35 to \$80. In Germany, however, that midsize VW Passat you can get at an off-airport location for, say, \$200 costs \$244 at an airport or rail station, thanks to a 22% tax. This so-called "premium station" fee also applies to rail stations. It's worth noting there is no extra charge for returning a car to a "premium station."

Avoid Sunday Rentals

The vast majority of off-airport rental locations in Europe are closed Sundays making it likely you will pay an expensive airport pickup charge if you plan to start a rental on that day.

Avoid Small Towns

Fewer cars to choose from and less savvy

agents make renting a car in a small town a bit more adventurous than in Europe's major cities. The small-town rental agent, who deals mainly with European rentals, may not be completely familiar with the terms and conditions of bookings made in North America. Most Europeans, for example, do not rely on a credit card for optional collision and theft insurance and the small town agent may assume you want that coverage when you do not. As a result, you may find unwanted charges on your credit card when you return home. Not understanding that North American credit cards provide free insurance, the agent may insist you buy his coverage.

Another problem is the skimpy selection of cars. You may have a confirmed reservation for a car with automatic transmission but some smaller stations don't have them in their fleets; they are brought in on as-needed basis. Occasionally the system breaks down and when the renter arrives there simply is no automatic available. When that happens, the customer is left with what's on hand and if there's no automatic.....

Avoid Small Companies

Most of the rental cars in Europe belong to the "big three": Europcar, Avis, and Hertz. Sixt is prominent in Germany and growing rapidly elsewhere. Enterprise is now a European presence. If your car breaks down, you want to be as close to help - and a replacement car - as possible. Avis, for example, has more than 350 locations in Germany alone. Thrifty, on the other hand, has offices that the company says "serve airports in Munich, Düsseldorf, and Frankfurt" and "20 other suburban locations." Suppose you're somewhere up around the Baltic and the transmission in your Opel starts making noises like a wounded cat; would you rather it be an Avis or a Thrifty rental car? Make sure, too, that if you're picking up a car at an airport, your chosen company really is at the airport. In Germany, for example, some smaller suppliers require that you phone from the airport and request a shuttle ride to their off-airport location. That means you'll ride the shuttle both ways, the start of the rental and at the end. The major companies mentioned above usually have rental counters and vehicles right at the airport; you'll sign the contract and walk to your car.

Understanding Full-Size & Larger Cars

If it's a nicer car you want, then go for it, spend the money. But if it's space you're after, think twice before renting luxury and premium category car. The price increase from midsize to full size is substantial. In Germany, the base price for a midsize station wagon may be as little as half the price of a full-size wagon. And, though most rental companies slot the BMW 320 wagon into

the "full size" category, it has slightly less luggage space than the midsize Opel Vectra wagon. (See *About Vehicle Categories* page 13).

Stick With One Driver

Nearly all rental companies charge a fee if you want to list more than one driver on the rental contract. Early in this report we mentioned a "best deal" price of less than \$175 on a compact car in Germany for one week. However, the deal is not so good if there will be more than one driver. Avis and Europcar in Germany, for example, both charge €9 a day to a max of €50 for additional drivers. Hertz charges €13 per day, €65 per week to a maximum of €195 per month.

Think Twice About International One-Way Rentals

Two problems with a one-way rental between countries: it can be expensive and sometimes is simply not possible. The one-way charge is always in addition to other rental charges and can range from around \$100 to \$4,000. At the lower end of the scale are one-ways between such cities as Munich and Vienna, Paris and Frankfurt. Anything involving Italy, Spain, former eastern-bloc countries, and Scandinavian countries will be expensive. Stick to major cities. One-ways involving small cities are frequently not possible or much more expensive. Recently a customer slated to drop a Frankfurt car in Paris decided to instead leave it in Tours. The drop fee went from \$125 to \$350. One-way rentals within the same country, however, are usually free.

WHY WE DON'T LIKE HOTEL DELIVERY

Yes, in past years this was a convenience some rental companies offered free. Now, however, you'll pay at least \$35 and what if the delivered car isn't what you want? If you go yourself to the rental car station you'll likely have a choice of cars.

BEST RATES? GERMANY & FRANCE

Though itinerary may limit your choice, it's useful to know which countries have the best rental car rates. Generally, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and the Scandinavian countries have the highest prices and Germany and France the lowest. Get a quote at 800-521-6722.

EUROPEAN RENTAL CAR CHECKLIST

So you've made your Europe car rental reservation, and your trip is fast approaching, but you fear that upon your weary arrival something will go wrong at the rental desk. Even the most savvy travelers have encountered problems. You will need to be on your toes. Begin by reading this valuable checklist:

Before You Go

- **Read your voucher/reservation carefully.** This document covers all vital aspects of your rental. Some rental details may not be discussed through e-mail or telephone correspondence in the booking process.
- **Print copies of your voucher/reservation confirmation.** Put these with other trip documents and you will always have contact info for the company you booked the car with, as well as the rental supplier (Avis, Hertz, etc.).
- **Local charges, know what to expect.** These can include road tax, airport tax, additional drivers, optional insurance, and any optional equipment you request. Local charges vary by country, location, and company. Know what they are before you go. READ THE VOUCHER. That way there are no surprises.

At the Pick-up Location

- **Present your auto rental voucher.** The voucher or written confirmation of your booking will have a booking number (upper right corner, page 1) enabling the agent to easily find your reservation. It also confirms the cost of your rental and is your defense against overcharges
 - ✓ **Tip:** If you reserved more than one car with the same supplier, be sure to cancel any extra bookings prior to the rental date. Otherwise the rental agent may locate the wrong reservation in his computer and issue a contract at a different—higher—rate.
- **Call the 24/7 help line.** For our customers, most problems that arise at the rental counter can be solved in minutes via a toll-free, 24/7 customer service help line (emergency numbers are in the email sent with your voucher... do not call Gemut.com as we are not open 24/7). Let's say you've booked an automatic transmission, but it's not available when you arrive. Call the number. Promised an upgrade, but the rental agent offers a Lupo? Call one of the numbers. It's your safety net.
 - ✓ **Warning:** *Do not leave the rental location unless you are satisfied with the vehicle you have been given, and the contract you have signed. Exchanging the car later on can be difficult and if you have signed a contract that calls for payment of unwanted insurance, for example, a refund is extremely unlikely.*
- **Changes to the rental while in Europe:** Use the same toll-free number mentioned above.
- **Decline insurance.** Most credit cards issued by North American banks offer CDW/Theft protection for auto rental in most of Europe. There are exceptions such as Italy, where the customer must

purchase CDW and theft. In all other countries, we recommend that clients decline CDW/Theft in favor of the coverage offered by the credit card. Call your credit card issuer for details.

If you plan to rely on coverage from a credit card you want to be certain you're not charged for expensive CDW and theft insurance by the rental company. First, tell the agent you do not want or need any additional insurance, and that you are covered by your credit card. Prudent renters will carry a "Letter of Coverage" provided by their credit card company. Unfortunately, you will be required to sign a rental contract in the local language - German, French, Italian, Spanish, etc. That is the law and, though it may do so as a courtesy, the rental company is not required to provide a copy in English (be sure to ask for one, however).

Complicating this process is the fact that several rental companies no longer obtain customer initials that indicate acceptance or rejection of additional services; just one signature on the bottom of the contract is required. This signifies that you agree to all terms of the contract—which may include a charge for optional insurance. Though with scant knowledge of the local language it may be difficult to determine exactly the terms of the contract, you still should look it over and ask to be shown the parts that relate to CDW (most European rental companies use the term CDW or LDW—Loss Damage Waiver) and theft insurance. In German, you're looking for the word *abgelehnt*—declined.

Customers booked through Gemut.com/Auto Europe have a safety net. If they suspect they are being incorrectly charged for CDW/theft they can call a toll-free-from-Europe number and request a note to that effect be placed in their booking record. Of course, the signed contract is the controlling legal document but in a post-rental dispute where you are claiming an unauthorized charge, that note in the record, made at the time of rental, may influence your credit card company in your favor. Some customer append this phrase under their signature when signing the contract: "I decline LDW, CDW, Theft insurance."

- **Decline pre-paid fuel.** Prepaid fuel is a bad deal. The offer works this way: you pay for the first tank and return the car empty. Not as easy as it sounds and who wants to be driving around on fumes, especially when heading to a European airport to catch a flight home. Any fuel left in the tank at the end of the rental is yours, but you won't get a refund.

- **Ask for instruction on vehicle operation.** It once took me a full five minutes just to figure out how to turn on a BMW's windshield wipers. Radios, too, are often not user-friendly and may

have unfamiliar features. If you get a car with a GPS be sure it's set on English language mode. Finally, be sure you know whether you have a gas or diesel engine. Figure on a charge of about \$500—and major inconvenience— if you fill the tank with the wrong fuel.

- **Inspect the car.** If the car is dirty inside or out, refuse it. Check for obvious and not-so-obvious damage (even small scratches). Make sure any damage is noted in writing. If you have a digital camera, it's a good idea to take pictures of the car from all sides. Visually inspect tires for wear and inflation level. Make sure there's a spare.

- **Extending the Rental.** Once you're in Europe, you may want to add days to your rental. Don't just return the car late and expect the same daily rate. If you booked with us, use the 24/7 toll-free number to call back to the U.S to find out what the extra day(s) will cost.

- **When in doubt, call the toll free help line.**

The End of the Rental

- **Return the car full of gas.** If pre-paid fuel is a not a good deal, then the cost of having the rental company fill the tank is an horrific one. It likely will more than double the price you pay at a normal retail filling station.

- **Keep your fuel receipt.** Even if you just top-off the tank and pay in Euros, you NEED a receipt. If the agent makes a "mistake" and marks the tank even 1/4 empty, at \$18 per gallon the charge will be substantial. Your receipt is the only proof otherwise.

- **Inspect the car again.** Be sure no new dents or dings are present. If you are returning after-hours, take a few pictures of the car as proof of it's condition.

- **Get written proof that the car was returned full of gas with no damage.** This can be tricky and sometimes impossible which raises the importance of the items above.

- **Pay any balance due with the same credit card you used to reserve the car.** If you use a different card or pay in cash you will invalidate your credit card insurance. ✓ **Tip:** Debit card and the Discover card will not be accepted.

- **Decline Direct Currency Conversion (DCC).** When the time comes to pay car rental charges in Europe you may be asked if you'd like to be billed in U.S. dollars. This is called Direct Currency Conversion and is simply a device whereby the purchaser pays for a worthless service. DCC enables the vendor, and the company that sells DCC to the vendor, to use an exchange rate favorable to them, not to you. Estimates by consumer advocates estimate DCC on an overseas

transaction will cost the customer between an additional 3- to 5-percent. Demand to pay in euros with your credit card and take advantage of the best exchange rate available.

OVERSEAS CAR RENTAL BROKERS

In the last few years a number of non-US-based, European car rental websites have come online. For the most part, they are headquartered in the U.K., Ireland, Greece, South Africa and New Zealand. All target the U.S. market and sometimes their prices are quite attractive. However, before you provide a credit card online for a car rental in Europe be sure you're aware of the following.

Insurance

Since most European credit cards don't provide free CDW/theft insurance, many of the prices quoted by overseas brokers include this insurance. That sounds good, but there is a catch. The included insurance carries a very high deductible or "excess," frequently more than \$2000. In order to reduce that to zero you'll have to purchase additional coverage at about \$15 to \$30 per day. Since your credit card requires that you decline any CDW/theft coverage offered by the rental company, to accept the rental car company's insurance invalidates your free, zero-deductible credit card insurance.

Beware, too, overseas brokers who advertise "Full Insurance, No Excess." In the event of damage, you will pay the "excess" or deductible and seek reimbursement from the overseas company. Read the fine print. There are many posts at online travel forums made by customers who were unable to obtain this reimbursement. Below, in italics, verbatim, is one broker's rules for getting your money back:

To obtain the refund we need you to strictly follow the instructions below in case of an accident, damage or theft:

- *You have to inform immediately our local car rental partner.*

- *You have to contact the police and take a written report, even for the smallest damage made. When you pick up your rented car, please ask for details.*

- *When you return the car to the rental station, you also have to make a theft or damage report with our local car rental partner.*

To get back the excess, you must send these documents to Economy Car Rentals by post:

- *Theft / damage report and police report. Vehicle must never be removed from the place of accident until the police report has been completed. In case of any accident to the car, you must immediately contact the nearest police*

station and make an accident report. If you do not report it to the police and comply with the requirements under the country's law, the insurance becomes invalid. The report should state if there was any influence of alcohol or drugs. It is essential that you also report any accident or damage to the Car Rental Company. In case of other damages to the rented car, the above procedure should also be followed. If the vehicle is damaged while parked, you have to report the damage to the police and to the car rental company before the car is moved.

- Copy of the rental agreement / contract.
- Receipts of payment, to prove how much you have paid, and your credit card statement where we can see the amount that was taken from your credit card.

Currency Guarantee

"Off shore" online quotes are invariably in euros or pounds sterling, with an accompanying estimate of what the US dollar amount will be. Some sites use conversion rates that make their dollar prices look very attractive. However, since your booking will be guaranteed in a foreign currency, you won't know the price in dollars until your card is actually charged. Thus it is difficult to determine what your final cost will be. The exchange rate used with the quote at the website is often not the one used when your card is charged.

Rentals made through Gemut.com and Auto Europe are guaranteed in U.S. dollars and, once booked, the quoted rate locks-in and does not change regardless of currency fluctuation. And remember, if you pay for your car in euros overseas you are very likely to be assessed a 3% foreign transaction charge by your credit card company. Click for a quote.

Cancellations and changes

Typically, there is a charge to change or cancel bookings made through "off shore" companies. These change and cancellation fees range from about \$10 to the full amount of the rental. Read the site's "terms and conditions."

Virtually all bookings made via Gemut.com, however, can be changed as often as necessary, or canceled without penalty. As long as cancellation is prior to the time of rental, all money is refunded.

However, unless you can prove a medical emergency, it is unlikely you will receive a refund for any unused rental days.

What if Something Goes Wrong

It would be nice if all of the hundreds of thousands of North Americans who rent cars in Europe each year had a smooth-as-silk experience.

Unfortunately, that isn't the case. Hertz, Avis, Europcar, National and Budget —the companies who supply the vast majority of the rental cars in Europe—employ human beings. And, given the fierce competition for your rental car business, rental car company jobs are not high paying ones. While 99% of European car rental employees are eager to serve, mistakes are made. Even with computers, reservations sometimes get lost and billing errors are all too frequent.

All this raises the question, how do you contact and deal with an overseas company when:

- You are at the rental car counter and are told they don't have the kind of car you booked or they can't find your reservation?
- You return to the U.S. and find an unexplained charge on your credit card?

When you book with Gemut.com, you are provided a 24/7 toll-free-from-Europe phone number. It is staffed day and night back in the U.S. by personnel trained specifically by Auto Europe to assist customers having trouble at the rental counter. They can and will go over the head of rental counter personnel. Should you have a breakdown (doesn't happen often but it does happen) you may have to deal with a rental company that is far from your location and you may have to wait days - not hours - to get a replacement car. Our major suppliers, Avis, Hertz, and Europcar, have thousands of offices all over Europe.

Adding It All Up

So, while it might seem that you're getting a low rental car rate from an off-shore website, any of the following occurrences could not only be inconvenient but wind up costing money you didn't plan to spend:

- If you get a scratch (or worse) on your car
- If the dollar drops
- If you need to change your rental
- If you need to cancel your rental
- If you are overcharged on your credit card
- If there is a mix-up in your reservation
- If you return the car a day or more early

Final Note: Gemut.com books all its European rental car and lease customers with Auto Europe, which, in many instances, provides special rates not offered to the general public. Phone us at 800-521-6722 or click for a quote

NAVIGATION: GPS - MAPS

Be aware that the GPS device provided with your European rental car may work only in the country in which it is rented. And don't expect

there to be an instruction book in English. A GPS does not replace, but supplements, good 1:200,000 or 1:150,000 scale maps. Even the best GPS devices sometimes create puzzling routes. So be sure that among the items you load into your European rental car are maps of the areas you will travel. That way you'll quickly know when the GPS is sending you the long way 'round. As old-fashioned as they may be, maps provide an overall perspective of the region and are useful in quickly locating interesting towns and sights. While the GPS is great in the countryside between towns and villages, it's positively indispensable in large cities.

Most experts say good portable GPS devices are superior to any automobile factory-installed GPS. Our own experience with a Garmin GPS bears that out...and, unlike many a European rental car's GPS, it works throughout Europe. Our portable not only directs us to our destination but provides other information such as points of interest. It's a useful device but most functional in a European rental car when supplemented with good maps.

▼ **Technology Alert:** The Google Maps app in your smartphone will work as well in Europe, probably better, than the vast majority of GPS devices rented from rental companies. It's very likely better than a rental car's factory-installed navigation device. The only hitch in Europe is paying for data (WiFi in rental cars is coming but is currently in its infancy.) However, you can probably buy a data package from your phone service provider that will be cheaper than renting a GPS. Just monitor your usage.

ABOUT VEHICLE CATEGORIES

The categories to which European rental companies assign their vehicles is often inconsistent and confusing. For example, some companies put the Audi A3 in the intermediate category. Size-wise, however, it's a compact; no larger than the VW Golf, Opel Astra, or Ford Focus. The full-size Opel Signum, which we drove in Germany recently, is built on the same platform as the intermediate Opel Vectra. The Signum just has more features and upgraded interior appointments. Most companies put the three-series BMW, with its woefully inadequate trunk, in the standard category (same size as intermediate). Some companies call it a full-size, though the trunk will not handle luggage for four.

The situation is better in France where full-size could mean a Peugeot 607—192 inches long and 21 cubic feet of trunk space. I say "could" because one should never forget that specific makes or models are never guaranteed by European car rental companies, only a category is promised such as economy, compact, intermediate, standard,

fullsize, luxury, etc. So the 64-euro question is, what happens when you show up at the rental counter in Paris expecting that 192-inch Peugeot and they hand you the keys to a "full-size" C-class Mercedes, which is almost a foot shorter and has much less luggage capacity? Even the luxury/premium category E-class Mercedes is just 191 inches in length.

If you're spending more money for a larger rental car in Europe, make sure the cars in the category you're booking are truly bigger, not just more luxurious than the category below.

WANT A CERTAIN MAKE/MODEL?

Many rental car customers have their hearts set on a specific make and model car: "It's what I drive at home;" "I might buy one;" "It's exactly what we need." "It's what I had last year and it was perfect." "Oh, and I gotta' have diesel."

Unless by chance the exact car you want is on the lot when you arrive for pick-up, you will get a car in the category booked. Instead of the VW Passat you desperately want, it may be a Ford Mondeo, Opel Insignia, Skoda Octavia or one of perhaps half a dozen other cars in the intermediate category. In fact, when you smartly booked several months in advance of your trip, the rental company may not have even known the composition of its fleet on the date of your rental.

Here, roughly, are the main categories: mini, economy, compact, intermediate, standard, fullsize, SUV, luxury, premium...plus station wagons and automatics in most of those categories. There are also vans, SUVs, sports cars, and convertibles... both manual and automatic.

A rental company's reluctance to guarantee a certain car with certain equipment at a certain future date, is understandable. It's difficult enough to guarantee a category, let alone a specific make and model. Let's say a multi-national company in Germany such as Europcar has 30 different car categories. It might be more. We'll use compacts as an example. There's a compact sedan manual, a compact sedan automatic, a compact station wagon manual, and a compact station wagon automatic. If Europcar decides to have a diesel version of each of those compact categories they have just doubled their compact categories from four to eight. Apply that to all categories and there are now 60 categories rather than 30. Instead of making sure 30 different car categories are available at the proper time at some 400 offices in Germany alone, it's now 60 categories. Realize there are no-shows, last minute cancellations, late returns, and customers with no reservations showing up at the rental counter, and it soon becomes clear that rental companies can only estimate their need for compact station wagons

with automatic transmission at the Frankfurt Airport at 3:30pm on June 15, 2017...let alone a specific make and model compact wagon with diesel and factory-installed GPS.

So, you may ask, why don't the rental companies have a cushion of extra cars? Cars in reserve in 30 different categories, around the clock, at 400 locations in Germany? Great for the customer, but when cars sit they don't earn and the cost of adding thousands of non-revenue vehicles to the inventory will only drive up rental prices.

This is what rental companies will guarantee: car category, number of seat belts, air-conditioning, and transmission. If the car description on the reservation says diesel and/or GPS then those items are also guaranteed. Nothing else; not a trunk or hatchback, color, sunroof, fold-down seats, nothing. However, you can be certain of some sort of sound system including a radio, Bluetooth and/or USB port to connect your smartphone or tablet. There will be an outlet to power your devices.

Frankly, it's time-wasting and futile to pursue a specific make or model. If the Europcar quote says BMW 3 Series and the Avis quote says Mercedes C-Class, it's probably because the company's marketing department feels those models attract more bookings when used in advertising and in issuing online quotes. There are other cars in the fullsize category and you may get one of them. Probably the best strategy is to visit the rental location a day prior to pickup and *very politely* ask if it might be possible to get an XYZ car equipped with blah, blah, blah. We say very politely because rental agents have little patience for customers seeking a specific vehicle and you might catch an agent at a bad time: "I've got four compact automatics on the lot for the six compact automatic reservations coming in the next hour and this guy wants a VW Golf with Turbodiesel and GPS?"

MECHANICAL PROBLEMS

European rental cars are mostly new, low mileage vehicles and breakdowns are rare...but they do happen. If you have such problems during your trip you may be able to exchange the car at another of the rental car supplier's offices or get it repaired at a dealer, but both those options may be inconvenient. If the car is no longer drivable, the rental company will have provided a number to call for 24/7 towing service. If that happens, don't expect a tow truck to arrive in 15 minutes, and depending on the circumstances, you may be expected to pay for the tow. If, for example, the clutch goes out on your manual transmission rental car, the rental company may take the position that you wore it out. Not only will they not pay for the tow, they will likely want you to buy a replacement clutch. Repairing a flat tire is another example of a

cost typically borne by the renter and not covered by any insurance.

"VIGNETTES"

European rental car drivers should be aware that certain countries require vehicles traveling on motorways and autobahns to display a special windshield or windscreen sticker known as a "vignette." A car rented in a country that requires a vignette will be properly equipped for that country, but will not come with vignettes for other countries. Thus, a traveler who picks up a car in a country which does not require a vignette will be responsible for purchasing the necessary sticker if the vehicle is driven into a country that requires it.

Which countries require vignettes?

Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland require a vignette sticker for driving on principal motorways that are similar to U.S. Interstate highways. The motorist must purchase a different sticker for each country that requires it. Cost and validity duration of a vignette varies by country.

Where to buy a vignette

Vignettes can be purchased at border crossings and nearby gas stations. Fines for not displaying the proper windshield sticker start at around €100. Cars without vignettes can be detected by roadside cameras. For more info on vignettes [click here](#).

RESTRICTED ZONES IN ITALIAN CITIES

We caution all customers who drive rental cars in Italian cities, particularly Florence, to avoid restricted zones. Vehicles entering these zones are monitored by roadside cameras and cars without permits are ticketed. Some unaware visitors who drive in and out of these zones multiple times receive multiple tickets. The fine for each violation is about €100. In addition, your rental car supplier will charge your credit card a fee to provide your name and address to the ticketing agency. Violators are notified by mail up to one year after the date of the violation. These restricted zones are signed, but the signs are in Italian. Rental cars do not come equipped with the necessary permits. Read more about this at http://www.bella-toscana.com/traffic_violations_italy.htm.

BEWARE MULTIPLE RESERVATIONS

It's easy to book rental cars online. Payment is often not required to hold a reservation. Problem is you might get one too many. Let's say you book Avis online, then call [Gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com) for a quote and find they have a lower price, also with Avis. You book the car with Gemut but, because there was no payment involved with the first booking, you forget all about it. Now, at the rental counter the

agent uses your name to call up your booking in his reservation system. Maybe he sees two bookings, maybe he just sees the first, higher-priced booking, and that is the one he uses to print your contract. In your jet-lagged state, you sign the documents that are put in front of you without giving them much scrutiny. When you return to the U.S. you get a nasty surprise, you paid the higher rate. Avoid this by canceling all bookings except the one you want, and make sure the rental agent is handed a copy of the voucher you were sent by Gemut.com. (Get an email quote on a European car rental at <http://www.gemut.com/rental-quote.html>, or, if you prefer, phone Andy at 800-521-6722 x 1)

TAKING A CAR TO EASTERN EUROPE

You may want to drive a rental car into Europe's "eastern" countries (essentially those that were behind the Iron Curtain until 1989). Since most travelers fly to western Europe, landing in cities like Frankfurt, Munich, Amsterdam, Paris and Rome, the most common eastern travel scenario is to rent the car in the west and drive into the east. The most visited countries by car from the west are the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Slovenia and Croatia are also popular. Only the most adventurous head for countries such as Bosnia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Lithuania.

Germany, it's probably the best place to start when considering an eastern auto tour. Vienna's proximity to several eastern countries, makes it the next-best starting point.

An "Open jaw" itinerary is appealing but expensive. The idea of picking up a car in Munich or Frankfurt and dropping it in Prague or Budapest, then flying home or continuing the trip by rail from there, is a good one but rental companies won't cooperate. Technically, it is possible. The few companies that will allow one-way rentals between eastern and western countries charge substantial drop fees. For a simple Frankfurt-Prague one-way rental, the one way fee...for those companies that will allow it...is about \$325. That's in addition to the usual rental costs. For less accessible eastern cities we've seen drop fees quoted of over \$2,000.

Rental companies aren't keen to let cars go east. Unintended "one-way" rentals (the car is stolen) are still not an uncommon occurrence. Thus, they only allow certain car categories and brands into the east. Forget Mercedes, BMW, or Audi. If you're taking a car east, it will likely be an Opel, Ford, or Skoda. You'll also find it difficult to rent an automatic transmission for east travel. No matter what kind of car you drive east, make sure you park it overnight in a locked or patrolled garage, and be careful where you park during the day.

✓ **East Travel Alert.** Now in 2018, most major suppliers will allow some cars to travel to "Zone 1" — Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—at no additional charge. Those \$135 to \$172 per week cars we referred to earlier are now OK for Zone 1 driving.

For "Zone two"—countries such as Romania, Bosnia, Serbia, et al—plan to pay substantially more. You may also be required to rent the car for a minimum period, pay "cross-border" fees, and purchase extra insurance.

Though borders are more open these days, and you may not need paperwork to cross them, don't let that tempt you to take a car east without permission of the rental company. To do so would violate the rental contract and thus void all insurance coverage. Check other requirements for driving in eastern countries. Poland, for example, requires an international driver's license. In the Czech Republic you'll need a "vignette" (see page 14) to drive legally.

If you get quotes online at websites such as Expedia, Travelocity, or the rental companies' own websites, don't assume the prices quoted will allow for east travel. Bottom line is, in almost every case, you'll need the car rental company's permission to drive into any eastern country. Best to get guidance at 800-521-6722.

DRIVING EUROPE'S SUPER-HIGHWAYS

Though written with Germany in mind, this advice applies to all European super-highways.

Driving the Autobahn is serious business. At 130 to 200 kilometers per hour (80 to 125 mph)—occasionally even higher—things happen much more quickly on European highways than on our more sedate, though less predictable, freeways and turnpikes. Here are some thoughts on driving them. Though they apply mostly to Germany, where there is often no limit, the principles are the same in other countries where the limit is typically about 80 mph.

Left lane, right lane, big difference

First-time Germany Autobahn drivers either enjoy the fast driving or are appalled by it. Very quickly, they learn that only the fastest drivers—those traveling 160 to 225 kilometers per hour (100 to 141 mph)—can stay in the left lane.

At speeds below that, they are repeatedly required to vacate the left lane by faster cars. Some come on so quickly they will virtually materialize in your rearview mirror with their left turn signal blinking and, if you're slow to react, headlights flashing. It doesn't take a car going 125 mph very long to overtake one going 90 mph.

Tips on passing

The major danger on the Autobahn is the huge difference in speed between lanes. If there are only two in your direction, the left will have vehicles traveling 50 to 80 mph faster than the big trucks in the right lane, which are plodding along at 60 miles per hour—slower on hills. Drivers traveling 75 to 100 mph are caught in a no-man’s land—too slow for the left lane and much too fast for the right. Imagine this: you are in the right lane cruising at a sensible (for Germany) 140 kph (88 mph). Ahead, just as you round a long curve, is a giant truck going 60 mph in your lane. Your rearview mirror reveals a BMW closing fast in the left lane at say 120 mph. Your choice is to stand on the brakes and pray you don’t rear-end the truck, or jump on the accelerator, switch to the left lane, and hope the Beamer doesn’t rear-end you.

A high level of concentration is required for this sort of driving, particularly if you venture in that 75 to 100 mph no-man’s land. A few hours of such driving takes it’s toll. You will be tired.

Rolling with the Big Boys

If you have a fast car and want to compete with the fliers in the left lane you’ll have to be especially alert. Passing a line of traffic going 75 mph when you’re hurtling along at 110 mph becomes a major problem rather quickly if someone in the right lane decides to change lanes in front of you. There might be room on the left shoulder, but that’s your only out. Watch every vehicle in the right lane like a hawk for any sign that they have a lane change in mind.

Etiquette

In the United States, one sees stubborn drivers camping in the left lane at precisely 65 mph. Blithely they roll along, secure in the knowledge that they’re traveling the speed limit and breaking no laws. Well, in Germany they *are* breaking the law, and German drivers will quickly deal with them. It is difficult to imagine anyone withstanding the onslaught of flashing lights and tight tailgating that European drivers use to deal with slow left lane drivers. Almost never will they resort to passing in the right lane. Instead, they will ride the slower car’s bumper, flash headlights, and even blow the horn. If you’re a “left laner” who resists everyone, no matter who wants to pass, you may wish to rethink that practice. German drivers have a way of making nonconformists conform.

Traffic Tickets

Most European countries have now developed dense networks of traffic cameras. In rapidly increasing numbers, rental car drivers are being cited for such violations as speeding, failure to stop

at red lights, following too closely, and driving in restricted zones. You probably won’t know you’ve been caught until your credit card is charged weeks or even months after your trip. That charge will be an administrative fee the rental company imposes for providing your name and address to the police thereby enabling them to notify you of the violation. Some renters pay the fine, others ignore the notices received by mail from Europe. Neither we nor the rental company can help you with a traffic ticket and you must pay the administrative fee. You agreed to that charge when you signed the rental contract.

SUMMARY

We covered much ground in these 16 pages and you may still be confused. Since we can’t be with you at the rental counter we suggest you clip the list below and use it at a reference in Europe.

Clip and save

Picking up the Car:

- Present written confirmation
 - Decline optional insurance
 - Decline pre-paid fuel
 - Get summary of extra charges
 - Pay in local currency, not dollars
 - Use same credit card as used to book
 - Read contract. Don’t sign if unsure
 - Request contract copy in English
 - Request instruction for vehicle operation
 - Inspect car, get damage acknowledged in writing
 - Take photos of car
 - Don’t leave rental location until satisfied
 - For assistance, call 00 800 223 5555 5*
- (* Gemut.com & Auto Europe bookers only)

Returning the Car:

- Fill tank, keep receipt
- Avoid cleaning charges, return car clean
- Remove all personal gear
- Pay any charges with same credit card
- Obtain final invoice
- Inspect car, take photos

Rent a Car in Europe
Web: www.gemut.com
Phone: **800-521-6722**