

CAR HIRE ABROAD –

HIRE AND REWARD

All Of Us Appreciate A Little Freedom On Our Holidays. Even So, Relatively Few Take The Plunge And Hire A Car So That They Can Really Get To Know Their Chosen Destination. Jonathan Crouch Wonders Why?



Thinking of booking a package holiday? Or perhaps you've already booked one and the date is drawing near. Either way, you probably just want to get there, collapse on the nearest sun lounger and relax

Which is fine for the first few days. Maybe even for the first week. But if you're lucky enough to have a bit longer at your chosen destination, then your hotel's four walls will probably be getting a bit familiar by the time you reach the second week. Your tour operator will have anticipated this of course and will try to dilute the boredom by arranging a series of excursions. You'll be herded on and off a stuffy bus and taken to all the same commercialised tourist spots everyone else goes to. Then, just as you've finally found something that's worth being, you'll be herded back on the bus so everyone else can get back.

Doesn't sound too appealing when you put it like that does it? But this is the kind of holiday existence that thousands of British package tourists put up with around the world each year - one step up from a school trip. To inject a welcome element of freedom into your holiday, the obvious answer is to hire a car, but thousands of us don't due to prejudices that range from expectations of high expense to a fear of driving on unfamiliar roads. Years ago perhaps, those kinds of concerns might have been justified. Smaller islands and popular package destinations were ruled by groups of operators who kept hire prices high. Moreover, the roads - and road users in some places - were primitive enough to scare the most adventurous of tourists.

It isn't like that anymore. Where previously, smaller destinations only offered a couple of rental companies you could use, now the choice can be bewildering and where previously, you had to use one of the huge multi-national operators when booking in advance, there's now increasing competition from a number of low-price organisations who'll provide exactly the same service for significantly less.

As for the driving conditions you're likely to encounter, well you really do have to go to the back of beyond these days to find a place without decent roads and acceptable standards of driving behaviour. There are exceptions of course, but the kinds of places likely to be on the typical package tourist's itinerary are not likely to be among them. Those who've taken the plunge and hit the road around their particular tropical paradises will of course understand all of this already. For those who haven't, we thought a practical example might be of interest. Hence, on a recent holiday trip to Barbados, we booked a car with low-cost international operators Suncars and waited to see what would happen.

As with many of their rivals, Suncars use franchise operators who supply on their behalf in many countries they serve. Not that this appeared to be a problem when we arrived in Bridgetown. On the contrary, an operator was there to greet us as soon as we cleared customs and swiftly dealt with what had promised to be a mountain of paperwork – just what you don't need at the end of a nine hour flight.

The Barbados authorities are not unusual in requiring visiting drivers to buy a visitors Driving Permit which costs Bds \$10 (just over £3). What is rather irritating is the need to visit a police station or a Licensing Authority Office (open weekday mornings only) in order to purchase one. That sounded like another hassle we could do without, so it was pleasing to find that our local representative had thoughtfully already done it for us. In fact, our only problem was the lack of the child seat we had specified: apparently, it couldn't legally be fitted to an open Moke-type car, something we ought to have been informed about at booking.

We had been briefed that driving standards in the island's roads had 'something of a fairground quality' but to be fair, it was nothing like as bad as we had expected. This is despite the fact that the national speed limit (less than 40mph in most places) is universally ignored and almost never enforced. As for the roads themselves, it's something of a mixed bag. The main highway is alright: there's even a dual carriageway in a couple of places. The problem is that once you get off it, it's almost impossible not to get lost, so bad is the signage. The tourist road maps aren't much help and what signs there are serve only to confuse, sometimes pointing to the same destination in opposite directions. For all this, it's hard

to get upset. For a start, exploring and getting lost is all part of the fun – and it's not like you're fighting the clock.

And the cost? Well you'd spend a lot of that on optional excursions if you went without wheels and probably a lot more on hotel extras if you opted out of the excursions. Yet most package people stay resolutely in their rooms ticking off days before the charter flight back. Suncars are typical of the new breed of car rental operators that have been springing up in recent years specifically to serve the needs of the holiday driver. Using one central booking number (0870-500-5566), you can reserve a car almost anywhere in the world. All rates are all-inclusive of things like unlimited mileage, insurance and local taxes, so there are no nasty extras to bite you when you least expect.

Finally, the following checklist should cover most eventualities. Happy driving!

FACTS AT A GLANCE

- Make sure you get value for money by checking whether the price includes unlimited mileage, third party insurance, collision damage waiver, bail bond in Spain, local taxes, delivery to and collection from your accommodation.
- Get the insurance you need – don't be talked into buying personal accident insurance cover if its already included under your travel insurance policy. Always read your policy thoroughly before you go so that you understand the cover.
- It's a good idea to take out collision damage waiver and theft protection if its not included on your policy. In the US, supplementary liability is essential.
- Check legal requirements of the country you're visiting – usually drivers must be at least 21 to hire a car but the age limit can be as high as 25 in some countries.
- Check the car over before you drive away - paying particular attention to tyres, bodywork, seat belts, wipers and lights and take a test run to make sure you're confident of the brakes.
- Take a contact number to call if there are any mechanical problems with the car.
- Don't forget to take your driving licence with you. Everyone who is going to drive the car must be named and show their licence. Usually you must have held a licence for at least a year.