

## Sneaky car hire tricks?

### Read these horror stories and prepare to be alarmed.

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We've all read the horror stories about unscrupulous car hire firms.

From forcing you to buy rip-off insurance to charging penalties for scratches that don't exist — they use every trick in the book to hit you with extra fees.

But if you're booking a holiday this month in a bid to beat the January blues and thought you'd heard it all, think again.

My trip to Sicily last September exposed an alarming new car hire catch which is on the rise — now, some holidaymakers say they are being wrongly accused of causing damage they would never have thought to check for before leaving the airport.

When I booked my Fiat 500 from hire firm Sicily By Car, through broker Auto Europe, I took all the proper precautions.

If you're booking a holiday this month in a bid to beat the January blues watch out for the car hire tricks

At the pick-up point, we had the few small bumps and scratches recorded before driving away.

For ten days we used the car without a problem. It ran smoothly on the short trips we took to explore local sights and was kept safely locked on the gated driveway of our secluded villa each evening.

Yet when I returned the car to Catania airport, the assistant took a cursory glance at the exterior, walked straight to the driver's door and wiggled the key in the lock.

'This lock is broken,' he announced smugly. 'It must have been tampered with. I explained that I'd never even tried the manual lock, as the doors opened using a remote locking system via the keyfob. But he just shrugged, put the key back in his pocket and told me to go to the office in the terminal if I wanted to dispute it.

At the main office, my protests fell on deaf ears. I could either pay €500 (£444) up front or they would hold onto my entire €800 deposit (£710) and 'wait to see' if their head office believed my side of the story.

Why does it matter to you anyway... your insurance will cover it

'Why does it matter to you anyway,' they said, 'Your insurance will cover it.' Refusing to pay for something I believed was broken previously, I risked the whole deposit and rushed to catch my flight.

When I returned home I challenged Sicily By Car and it said it 'firmly confirmed' the lock was damaged during my trip.

However, when pressed, it finally agreed to refund my deposit as a 'gesture of goodwill'.

A spokesman for Auto Europe says: 'We are very sorry for the inconvenience our client experienced. We are in constant consultation with our suppliers to make sure incidents like this do not happen again'.

Richard Denning, pictured with wife Christine, was charged £178 by rental firm Goldcar three weeks after he returned home to Bournemouth from a week's holiday in Spain last May

#### **CHARGED FOR DAMAGE THAT WASN'T THERE**

Richard Denning was shocked when he was charged €200 (£178) by rental firm Goldcar three weeks after he returned home to Bournemouth from a week's holiday in Spain last May. He immediately contacted broker Auto Europe, who sold him the rental.

It said the charge was for 'damages', but couldn't give any more details.

Luckily, computer programmer Richard, 51, and his wife Christine had the foresight to take dozens of photographs of the Opel Corsa when they dropped it off at Malaga airport.

He said: 'I was suspicious when I came to drop the car off because they said they were 'too busy' to check it. So I went back and took literally 100 photos of it.

I was concerned about charges, so I really made an effort to look after the car when we were away, even paying extra to leave it in a secure underground car park.

'Having done that, I knew there was nothing wrong with it.'

Neither firm provided Richard with proof of the damage he had supposedly caused and it was not until he threatened Auto Europe with legal action that he received a refund.

Richard adds: 'They didn't even pretend they had evidence that I had done whatever it was they were going to accuse me of. They just took the charge from my card.'

'I got my money back after I said I would sue, but most people just don't have the heart for a fight like that. These companies must get away with it all the time because people write it off.'

Goldcar said it had not had an official complaint from Richard and it had photographic evidence of the damage caused, but would not provide details to Money Mail.

Auto Europe said it had refunded him and it was important it offered 'exceptional service' to customers.

Do you pay attention at the car hire desks? When travellers arrive and pick up cars they are often tired and want to get on their way

### **STUNG FOR DAMAGE THEY NEVER KNEW ABOUT**

Since the debacle, I've found that the internet is littered with examples of travellers who've faced almost identical situations.

And it's not just locks — each time they've have been accused of damaging hire cars or mislaying bizarre parts they would never have thought to check, including spare tyres, mats, aerials and steering locks.

One disgruntled holidaymaker visiting Sicily for New Year was charged €128 (£114) on return for a tube of glue missing from the car's tyre inflation kit.

Another was charged €300 (£267) after being accused by a rental firm in Rome of taking the air compressor — used instead of a spare tyre — from the boot. In both cases, the drivers said they were not even aware the kits were in the car.

Other customers have complained about being made to pay for hidden problems, including scratches to the roof or underside of the car, or billed huge amounts for minor damage — even if it was not their fault.

Amanda, who wanted to keep her surname anonymous, was hit with a €200 (£178) bill by Goldcar at Spain's Almeria airport in February.

Being out of sight without scrambling around under the car, we felt she knew that the damage was already there

She says: '[The woman checking in the car] proceeded immediately to the front bumper, getting on her hands and knees and finally locating some scratches on the underside. She said we were liable and would have our credit card charged with €200.'

'We said that we had not been or parked anywhere such damage could have occurred, and the damage must have been there when we collected the car.'

'Being out of sight without scrambling around under the car, we felt she knew that the damage was already there as she seemed to go straight to this area.'

A spokesman for Goldcar says Amanda has not officially complained, but its evidence 'suggests that the charges were applied correctly'.

Mike Pitt had carefully looked over his Ford Focus Estate from Avis before leaving Faro airport in Portugal in April. But when he took the car back 17 days later, he was told the lock was broken. Staff seemed to know exactly which lock was faulty.

He says: '[The attendant] asked for the ignition key, so I went round and got it and gave it to him.'

'He immediately went round the front of the car, I followed him and he proceeded to try and put the key manually into the door lock and said to me 'lock broken'. I was stunned and told him I knew nothing about that as I had always used the remote on the key fob.'

Back in the UK, he found Avis had taken £425 out of his bank account.

Avis says Mr Pitt had signed a form accepting there would be charges for damage, but later complained. A spokesman adds: 'We always take complaints of this nature very seriously and work with our customers to make sure any additional charges have been applied properly.'

Stanley Matthews had the same problem with Goldcar in Majorca in July. He claimed the firm took €250 (£222) from his credit card for 'repairs to a broken front lock' despite him having no problems with the locking system on his five-day trip.

Goldcar said Mr Matthews signed a contract on collection showing the car was in working order and the problem with the door lock was found on his return.

A spokesman added: 'Customers are often unaware that damage has been caused to their vehicle during the rental period and this can occasionally lead to disputes.'

British holidaymakers paid out £475 million in extra car hire charges in 2015, according to TravelSupermarket.com. The average charge for damages was £258.

Emma Coulthurst, of TravelSupermarket.com, says it's vital that customers make a note of the condition of the car and everything in it — even if it doesn't appear to be damaged.

'It's a lot of work, but it'll be worth it in the long run,' she says.

Malcolm Tarling, of the Association of British Insurers, says that fraudulent or exaggerated claims of damage from car hire firms are pushing up the cost of the insurance.

'Ultimately it is the honest customer who ends up paying,' he says.

### **FORCED TO PAY £625 FOR A NUMBER PLATE**

Carmel Ardrey was charged £625 after one of her number plates was stolen from her Avis hire car near a beach in Sardinia in July.

The English tutor, 59, from Wiltshire, tried to report the theft to police twice during her week-long break, but said officers weren't interested.

When she returned the car, staff informed her she would have to pay for a new number plate and for the days the car was off the road while it was replaced.

But as soon as she left the desk at Olbia airport, Avis charged €702 (around £625) to her credit card — more than 40 times the £15.99 it costs to replace a number plate at Halfords.

They took the money straight away, before I was even on the flight, so they can't have known how long the car would be off the road for

Carmel describes the situation as 'absolutely ridiculous', especially as she had been a victim of crime.

'They took the money straight away, before I was even on the flight, so they can't have known how long the car would be off the road for,' she said. 'They just plucked a figure out of the air.'

She complained to both Avis and British Airways, through which she had booked the rental.

But it was only when she threatened the firm with legal action that she was refunded the money.

'It was stressful,' she adds. 'It wasn't a cheap holiday and I simply couldn't afford that extra amount.' Avis said its charge reflected the cost of re-registering at €200 and the fact that the car would be off the road as vehicles in Italy cannot be re-registered for 20 days. It has updated its customer policy to explain this. BA declined to comment.

### **How to Steer clear of hidden charges**

- Walk around the car and take photos of any bumps and scratches already there.
- Use a smartphone to take pictures with a time and date on them. If your digital camera has this function, make sure it's turned on.
- Download a free app from iCarhireinsurance.com called Snaps. It will store time and date-stamped pictures in an online database.
- Ask your rental company to make notes as well and take a picture of the form they use if they'll let you.
- Check the glass, roof, wheels and the underside of the car for damage where possible.
- Try the key in all the locks — even if there's an electronic system installed.
- Ensure the car has everything the hire document says is in it, such as a spare tyre kit and jack.
- Buy insurance in advance. Car hire companies routinely charge £168 per trip. Third party policies — which can be bought ahead of your holiday — start from £40.

- Do not let any company talk you into taking out its own insurance. Some will tell you their cover is better than the cheaper policies you can buy online, but that's very rarely the case.
- Take out excess damage waiver insurance to protect yourself against a hefty bill if you do need to make a claim. It costs less than £2 a day through comparison sites such as [travelsupermarket.com](http://travelsupermarket.com) and [moneymaxim.co.uk](http://moneymaxim.co.uk).
- Check the terms and conditions of your policy before you sign up. Some firms levy charges of around £10 if you need to alter the policy to amend holiday dates, for example.
- Pay for your car hire on your credit card. This will give you better protection under Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act if something goes wrong.
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