

# What you should know about renting a car in Europe



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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 hamlet. Keep in mind, the European continent has many more miles of paved roads than passenger rail lines.

Renting a car in Europe has become more complicated in recent years. The rental car shopper must be knowledgeable about insurance, currency exchange, European automobiles, and the many ways rental companies and brokers obfuscate charges—many of them mandatory—added to the basic rental rates. Making the right decisions regarding type of car, insurance coverages, origination 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.

In the spring of 2010, the best and most straightforward European rental car deal is in Germany. For under \$250, including the 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 a variety of complications.

Recently, a customer wanted to rent a car in Dublin then drop it in London. Yes, that's possible we told her - provided you're willing to spend several thousand dollars. However, since Avis, Hertz, National, Europcar, et al, simply won't allow it, the only option would be a vendor that specializes in exotic rentals.

While that's a rather extreme example, we hear every day 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 lower than in Austria, and

you'll avoid the \$75-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 7.6 percent in Switzerland to 25 percent in Norway. Germany is 19 percent, France 19.6 percent, Italy 20 percent, and Austria 21.2 percent. It is mandatory and, except in very rare, extraordinary circumstances, not refundable.

### **Premium Station Fees**

In Germany, if your rental originates at an airport or rail station the fee is an additional 20 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 19 percent "premium station" fee, for a total of \$142.

Austria's "premium station" fee is 15 percent, Switzerland's is 19 percent; and Italy is 14 to 17 percent. 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 \$45, Holland is around \$80, and Belgium about \$40. There is no additional charge for returning a rental car to an airport or rail station.

✓ **Tip:** The premium station charge only applies to rentals *originating* at airports and rail stations; you can return the car to these locations and still avoid the charge.

### **Road Tax**

Almost every driver of a European rental car these days pays some kind of road or license fee. These range from about \$1.50 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.

### **Navigation**

When available, GPS (Global Positioning System) typically only works in the country of rental, though some devices may cover major highways in other countries. The larger and more expensive the car, the better the chance it will come with a factory-equipped GPS. 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, though it may be a portable. In other countries, however, there is much less availability. Except on one-way rentals, GPS is usually an option and charges range from about \$6 to \$20 per day.

### **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 (usually to go into eastern countries), winterization charges, and eco surcharges. 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 \$400 and \$3000. 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. Many CDW policies also exclude damage to the car's roof, windows, wheels, undercarriage and interior.

### **CDW/Theft in Italy, Ireland and Israel**

In both Italy and Israel, CDW and theft coverage must be purchased from the rental company. Your credit card won't offer coverage. The only question remaining is, will your credit card reimburse you for the deductible in case of damage or theft? This a murky area. Check with your credit card company.

You may also wind up purchasing CDW/theft in Ireland as only Mastercard's World Card, Business Card, and Diner's Club cards provide coverage in Ireland. In addition, in order to avoid purchasing CDW/theft from most Ireland rental companies, the renter must also produce written proof of credit card coverage.

### **Rules for Credit Card CDW/Theft Coverage**

Prior to your U.S. departure, be sure to contact your credit card company to find out if your card provides free CDW/theft coverage in Europe. Once you know you're covered there are just a few basic rules to follow to make certain you will be reimbursed if your 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.

- 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 credit card to pay for another person's rental, that person will not be covered for CDW/theft unless you are listed as a driver on the rental contract.

- 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.

- 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 \$10 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. The 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 CAR CHARGES**

Knowing in advance precisely how much your European rental car will cost is becoming an ever more difficult proposition. Most people understand 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 \$23 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 rental 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. If that doesn't work, you might get a credit if you return the car with at least a quarter of a tank, but you'll probably have to stand in line to request it and then wait while the tank level is confirmed.

- **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 your rental car; don't assume the rental agency 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 very likely you'll pay no more than if you returned the car back to Paris. With a couple of minor exceptions (Hertz charges 20 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. These range from about \$100 to over \$3,000. One-way fees on rentals that involve Italy or Spain are expensive, typically in the \$500 to \$1500 range. A one-way rental between Scandinavia and Italy, provided you can find a rental company that will do it, will be at least \$1500. It's the same when pickup is in an eastern European country and the drop is in a western European country (and vice versa); very expensive or impossible. 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 not on economy, compact or midsize vehicles. Prices vary from Avis's 4 euros per day to Hertz's daily charge of 17 euros. Most 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 \$60 per rental, per seat.

- **Winter Tires:** Mandatory in many countries, prices range from about \$4 per day in Austria to about \$23 in Germany, maximum charge about \$150. In most cases winter tires must be requested in advance.

- **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 you money on your European rental car. In addition, automatic transmissions are rare in vans and station wagons. In some countries such as Germany, 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 ages range 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. Cars that can be driven to former Eastern bloc countries such as Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary are available at a slightly higher price. Cars bound for countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and former Soviet Union countries will 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)

You'll need this document to rent a car in Austria and Poland. In addition, Europcar in Germany says it requires an IDP, though legions of renters report otherwise. In some countries you will be fined if you don't have an IDP, which 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 when driving in Europe. The document supplements but does not replace your valid U.S./Canada 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 Department to issue the IDP.

## ABOUT WINTERIZATION

### *Germany*

Though German law now requires winter tires when driving on snow, rental car companies charge extra for them. The penalty if your car doesn't have winter tires, and you are caught driving in snow, is about 40 euros. 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 are expensive and don't come as standard equipment, so you must request them prior to U.S. departure. Avis charges about \$20 per day to a maximum of about \$190. Europcar and Hertz also charge about \$20 per day, but their maximum is around \$140. National wants \$23 per day to a maximum of 20 days.

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

If you are picking up a car and haven't ordered—or don't want—winter tires, be sure you aren't charged for them.

### *Austria*

Winterization in Austria is much less expensive, though of course basic rental car rates are much higher than in Germany. All Europcar rentals, for example, are equipped with winter tires at no charge from November 1 to March 31. Avis imposes a \$5.50 per day fee to a maximum of seven days.

### *Switzerland*

Here, winter tires are mandatory. National charges \$6.15 per day and offers winter tires on request from November 1 to March 31. Europcar charges \$6.50 per day to a max of \$64, November 1 through April 30. Avis get \$7 per day from December 1 through March 31, and Hertz charges \$6 per day to a maximum \$115, November 15 to March 31.

### *France*

Europcar, which dominates the France rental car market, offers winter tires only on 4x4 vehicles at a cost of about \$38 per day, minimum five days. Hertz has snow equipment on request at only a few, mostly high altitude, stations.

### *Other Winterization Options*

Four-wheel drive vehicles in all countries are scarce and very expensive. Several rental 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 vehicles.

## LEASE INSTEAD OF RENT

French auto manufacturers Renault and Peugeot offer the use of brand new cars for from 17 to 175 days. Prices range from about \$1,100 for a small car for 17 days to about \$9,500 for a fullsize with automatic for 175 days. For an additional fee, pickup and return can be arranged in major cities outside France. These delivery charges range from about \$150 to \$500, each way. "Lease" is the term most often used to describe this transaction, but it is more properly a buy-back or purchase-repurchase. The manufacturer agrees to sell the car for a certain price and then buy it back at a lower price; the difference between those two figures is the cost to the driver who, instead of having to come up with the full price of car, signs a promissory note.

Unless you require a car for more than six weeks to two months you probably will spend more money on a buy-back than a straight rental.

There are several advantages to the buy-back program:

- You get a brand new 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 to drive in 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 \$2,000 per week, require two credit cards at pickup, can't be driven into Italy or any eastern country, and are probably excluded from insurance coverage by your credit card. So get used to the idea of Opels, VWs, Fords, Peugeots, Fiats, Seats, Skodas, and smaller Mercedes, BMWs and Audis.

It is also very important not to get hung up on specific makes and models. Every rental car company in Europe guarantees bookings by category, not make or model. So even if your reservation says Mercedes Benz C-Class, the words "or similar" will be appended and thus you could get an Opel Signa or another car in the fullsize category.

**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 sometimes 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 Vectra, VW Passat, Renault Laguna, Audi A4. Our recommended category for two couples. O.K. on the Autobahn but underpowered with four people and luggage.

**Full-size:** Typical cars: Mercedes C-class, Opel Signum, 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, forget it, you're wasting your money. (See *The Myth of the Full-Size Rental Car in Europe* on page 15)

**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 that 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.

A recent addition to European rental fleets has been "crossover" vehicles such as the VW Touran and the Opel Zafira. 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.

No European sedans or wagons we know of have a front bench seat, so carrying six passengers is not an option in these vehicles.

**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 it simply doesn't 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 will probably not provide collision and theft insurance coverage; you'll have buy it from the rental company. In most countries two midsize sedans will be less expensive.

Seven and nine-passenger van 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 is a problem.

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 \$750 per week for an E-class Mercedes, 5-series BMW, or Audi A6. Weekly prices exceed \$2000 for S-Class Mercedes, 7-series BMW, or Audi A8.

## **SAVE MONEY & AVOID PROBLEMS**

Here are a dozen suggestions every Europe car rental customer should consider when deciding on a car rental. 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 14% to 20%. Notable exceptions are France, Spain, Ireland, the U.K. and Holland where the airport and rail station charges are about \$35 to \$80. In Germany, on the other hand, the midsize VW Passat you can get at an off-airport location in Germany for, say, \$275 costs \$330 at an airport or rail station, thanks to a 20% tax. This so-called "premium station" fee also applies to rail stations. It's worth noting there is no extra charge for dropping off a car at a "premium station."

### ***Avoid Sunday Rentals***

The vast majority of off-airport rental car locations in Europe are closed on Sundays, making it likely you will have to 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. National, now owned by Europcar, is mostly limited to major towns and airports. We recommend sticking with these five. 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. For the most part, the major companies mentioned above all have rental counters and vehicles right at the airport; you'll sign the contract and walk to your car.

### ***Avoid 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 a full-size, 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 *Myth of the Fullsize Car* on page 15).

### ***Stick With One Driver***

Most, but not all, rental companies charge a fairly substantial 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 \$250 on compact car in Germany for one week. However, the deal is not so good if there will be more than one driver. Avis in Germany, for example, charges \$20 a day to a max of \$140 for additional drivers. Europcar in Germany allows immediate family members to drive free, and Sixt doesn't charge at all in Germany for extra drivers.

### **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 \$70 to \$4,000. At the lower end of the scale are one-ways between such cities as Munich and Zürich, Paris and Frankfurt. Figure anything involving Italy, Spain, former eastern-bloc countries, and Scandinavian countries will be expensive. If you decide to do an international one-way, 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 one-way fee went from \$125 to \$350. One-way rentals within the same country, however, are almost always free.

#### **Request a Diesel**

Diesel engines are no longer noisy, smelly and underpowered and they get great mileage. The fuel is cheaper than gas in Europe and available at every service station. For the most part, you can't guarantee a diesel but you lose nothing by asking and, depending on the country and vehicle, you have about a 50-50 chance of getting one. By the way, don't put gasoline in a diesel-powered car—and vice versa.

#### **Don't Have the Car Delivered to Your Hotel**

Yes, in past years this was a nice convenience that some rental companies offered as a free service. 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.

#### **For the Best Rates, It's Probably Germany**

Though your itinerary may limit your choice, it's useful to know which countries have the best rental car rates. Generally speaking, Italy has the highest prices—partly because purchase of CDW/theft insurance is required— and Germany the lowest.

### **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 extra copies of your voucher.** Stash them with other important travel documents and you will always have contact information for both the rental company and Auto Europe at your fingertips.
- **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. 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 confirmation number 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 toll-free-from-Europe help line.** If you have booked with us, most problems that arise at the rental counter can be solved in minutes via a toll-free, 24/7 customer service help line (the number is under *Terms & Conditions* in your voucher) Say, for example, you have booked an automatic transmission car, yet one is not available when you arrive. Call the number. Promised an upgrade, but the rental agent offers a Lupo? Call the number. It's your safety net.
- **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 full-coverage. 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 or travel insurance company, you want to be certain you're not charged for expensive CDW and theft insurance by the car rental company. First, tell the agent that 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 shows agreement to all terms of the contract, and that might 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.

- **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 a picture of the car from all sides. Visually inspect tires for wear and inflation level.

- **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 will approximately 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 \$15 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, virtually all 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 have to send the following 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 be assessed a 3% foreign transaction charge by your credit card company.

### **Cancellations, Changes, Early Returns**

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." In addition, if you return the car a few days early you may not be given a refund for the unused portion of a rental.

Virtually all bookings made via Gemut.com can be changed as often as necessary, or canceled at any time for any reason without charge or penalty. In most cases, even if you are a no-show, all money is refunded. In addition, if you cut your rental short you can receive a pro rata refund for 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, Sixt, 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, Europcar, and Sixt, have hundreds of offices in almost every corner of 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 by them to the general

public. Auto Europe puts more North Americans into European rental cars than any other U.S. car rental company, including Hertz and Avis.

### **NAVIGATION: GPS - MAPS**

Don't harbor the notion that your European rental car's GPS will work in any country other than the one in which it was 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 regions you plan to 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 Nuvi 660 bears that out...and, unlike a European rental car's GPS, it worked throughout Europe. The 660 not only directs us to our destination but provides other information and services. There are basic things such as the distance to the next turn, distance already covered, distance remaining, estimated time of arrival, and current speed. It also records the highest speed attained (our ICE train between Brussels and Frankfurt clocked out at 170mph). The user zooms in and out of the two-dimensional or three-dimensional maps by simply touching the screen. It also comes with a points-of-interest (POIs) database with hotels, restaurants, fuel, ATMs and more. Extra features include an MP3 player, Bluetooth hands-free technology and an integrated FM receiver that picks up TMC traffic reports. Small, light, and easy to deal with on a recent trip, it was almost flawless in Belgium, Germany and Poland. It's a great device but most functional in a European rental car when supplemented with good maps.

### **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 euros. In addition, your rental car supplier will charge your credit card a fee to provide your name and address to the ticketing agency. Violators can be notified by mail for 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](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 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. Of course, Gemut.com will fully refund your second, unused, prepaid booking but you're stuck with a rental that cost more than you planned. 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://is.gd/bhC2v>, or, if you prefer, phone Andy at 800-521-6722 x 3)

## **TAKING A RENTAL 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, Vienna, Paris and Rome, the most common eastern travel scenario is to rent the car somewhere 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.

Since rental cars are the least expensive in

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, Hertz and Avis charge about \$450 to \$500. That's in addition to the usual rental costs. For less accessible eastern cities we've seen drop fees quoted of over \$2,000.

Auto rental companies aren't keen about letting their cars go east. Unintended "one-way" rentals (the car is stolen) are still not an uncommon occurrence. Thus, rental companies only allow certain car categories and makes 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 car that's allowed to go east. 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.

Depending on the countries to be visited, there is usually a premium charged to drive east. To take a car to "Zone 1" — Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—expect to pay 10 to 20-percent more than if the car were to remain in the west.

For "Zone two"—countries such as Romania and Lithuania—plan to pay 50 to 80-percent more. You may also be required to rent the car for a minimum of 10 days, pay "cross-border" fees, and purchase extra insurance.

Though borders are 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 windshield sticker to drive legally.

If you're getting quotes online at websites such as Expedia, Travelocity, or the rental companies' own websites, don't assume that the

prices quoted will allow for east travel. Bottom line is, in almost every case, you'll need the car rental company's written permission to drive into any eastern country, so it's best to pick up the phone and speak to a live reservationist. (Of course, the best prices and the most knowledgeable advice on eastern travel by car is at 800-521-6722.

### THE MYTH OF THE FULL-SIZE RENTAL CAR

You and your good friends are about to rent a car in Europe. Because you're a party of four, you're worried about legroom and trunk space. You reason that a midsize (in rental-speak an "intermediate") car won't be big enough. You begin shopping for a full-size. But if it's just room you want, you could be making an expensive mistake. What most travelers don't know is that, unlike the U.S., so-called full-size European rental cars are often no larger than cars in the intermediate category. Usually, they just have a more prestigious brand name.

The best example is Germany, where the most common vehicle in the full-size category is the Mercedes C-class sedan. The 2008 Mercedes C-300 is 182.3 inches long, 56.9 inches high and 69.7 inches wide. The two most widely rented cars in the intermediate category are the Opel Vectra and the VW Passat. Surprisingly, the Passat is longer (188.2") and wider (71.7") than the Mercedes, while the Vectra is virtually the same size as the MBZ. But guess which car costs more to rent? The "fullsize," of course.

The price difference is even more pronounced when it comes to station wagons. Since the Volvo V70 is popular in the U.S., Gemut.com's rental department gets a lot of calls for it from customers who insist they must have more luggage space than they can get in a midsize wagon. But there's a much better deal. At 188 inches in length, 72 inches in width, and 35.8 cubic feet of luggage capacity, the VW Passat Wagon's specs are comparable to the Volvo's 190 inch length, 73.7 inch height, and 33.3 cubic feet of luggage space. When it comes to cost, however, the Passat's one-week rental tab is about 40-percent less than the Volvo's.

The categories to which European rental companies assign their vehicles is 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, but 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 emphasize "could" because one should never forget that specific makes or models are never guaranteed by European car rental companies, only a category such as economy, compact, intermediate, standard, fullsize, luxury, premium, etc., is promised. 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 about half the 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.

### DRIVING THE AUTOBAHNS, AUTOSTRADES & AUTOROUTES OF EUROPE

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

Driving the Autobahn is serious business. At speeds of 130 to 200 kilometers per hour (80 to 125 mph)—and 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 the speed has no limit, the principles are the same in most other countries, where the limit is typically about 80 mph.

#### **Left lane, right lane, a 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 that line 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.

### ***Speed Traps***

Though you won't get a ticket on the German Autobahn for speeding (unless there is a posted speed limit), you can get fined for other violations. On lesser highways, particularly in the countryside, there are radar speed traps. You pay on the spot. We were stopped outside a tiny village by hidden radar a few years ago and escorted to a police van containing several beer-sipping *polizei*. They spoke no English, but the atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, particularly when they saw our U.S. passports. We had a jovial conversation about American film and music stars, and for a time I thought we would get off. But after a few minutes came a big smile and a big bill, about \$100 if memory serves.

### **SUMMARY**

We covered a lot of ground in these 16 pages and you might still be a bit confused. Since we can't be with you at the rental counter we suggest you clip the list below and use it as 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
- For assistance, call 00 800 223 5555 5

#### **Returning the Car:**

- Fill tank, keep receipt
- Remove all personal gear
- Pay any charges with same credit card
- Inspect car
- Take photos

## **Rent a Car in Europe**

Web: [www.gemut.com](http://www.gemut.com)

Phone: **800-521-6722**