

How To Save Money On Vacation

Rental Cars

By Alice Kay

Renting a car doesn't have to break your vacation budget. With a little advance preparation it's possible to rent a vehicle that will make your trip more enjoyable for a very affordable price.

Airlines are one of the most overlooked places to save money on rental cars. Many airlines offer promotional package deals to popular destinations like Florida, California and Hawaii. The price includes airfare, hotel accommodations and the use of a rental car for four or five days.

You will save money if you choose a standard size sedan or compact vehicle rather than an SUV, minivan or luxury model. Mileage fees can increase your rental cost considerably if you are planning to travel great distances, such as exploring a large national park or stretch of scenic coastline. Try to choose reputable companies that offer low cents per mile deals or rates that include unlimited mileage.

In some cases you can get a better rate if you rent from an agency that isn't located at an airport. Many agencies supply shuttles that will pick you up at the terminal and transport you quickly and conveniently to the rental facility.

Review your auto insurance and credit card policies before you leave home. Some may cover the cost of repairs if you decline the rental company's collision insurance while others won't. There may be exclusions for certain locations or types of vehicles, so be sure to read the fine print. If you're nervous about driving in an unfamiliar city, or if it will give you more peace of mind, it may be worth it to pay extra for the rental agency's extended coverage.

Call several car rental agencies for price estimates and ask about special weekly or weekend deals that may be available. You may be able to get a rental car at a lower rate if you're willing to arrive on Sunday and return the car on Thursday, for example. Watch for advertised specials in newspapers and magazines but be sure to read all the details. There may be restricted dates or only certain size cars available at the budget rate.

Charges that increase the base rate you see advertised include deposits, collision damage waiver fees, airport surcharges, drop-off fees, fuel charges, mileage fees, taxes, additional driver fees, etc. If you will be taking the car out-of-state some agencies charge an additional fee for crossing

state lines.

If you have an auto club membership you may qualify for a discount rate at certain car rental agencies. Check on the availability of car rental discounts with other membership organizations you may belong to such as Costco or Sam's Club. Some agencies also offer discounts to seniors who are members of AARP.

Be aware that some car agencies check driving records and may reject your application if you have received any serious driving violations in the last few years.

Time your travel for off-peak periods to negotiate a better rate. Most rental car agencies will lower their rates in the off-season and charge top dollar when cars are most in-demand during spring break or the summer months. If you can schedule your rental for late March or mid-May you will probably get a better rate than if you travel in April or July.

Renting a subcompact or economy car can also save you money on gas. Since you will be responsible for keeping the car filled with fuel and refilling the tank before you return it, renting a car that gets better gas mileage is a smarter choice than choosing a gas-guzzling SUV.

If you are traveling with several children or a group of friends, shop around for the best deal on a larger vehicle. Cars that are in great demand like SUVs, convertibles and sporty coupes usually rent for higher prices. Only you can decide if paying for a premium vehicle is worth it.

Keep in mind that the length of time you will be keeping the vehicle can make a big difference in the price. Weekly rentals are usually a better deal than a daily rate. If you will be staying longer than a week, you may be able to get an even better price. Joining a frequent renter club can also save you money or boost you into a higher class vehicle as you accumulate points.

In many cities there are agencies that rent used budget rental cars at rates lower than the well-known car rental agencies. If driving a newer car isn't that important to you, a budget rental might be a more affordable option.

If you can plan your trip far in advance you can save money on a rental car by booking it in the low season even if you will be traveling during peak times.