



Rental Car Safety Checklist

Provided as a public service by Pat Goss and Frank Whyte

Before You Rent a Car

- Talk to your insurance agent to verify what coverage you have when renting a car, and determine when that coverage is effective. Seek advice on what type of supplemental insurance—if any—is necessary; bearing in mind that “at the counter” insurance is some of the most expensive insurance sold.
- Talk to your road service provider to see if they cover service calls on rental cars. The good news here is that the larger, reputable providers do provide this service.
- Tuck a small flashlight into your carry-on bag. You’ll need this to poke around your rental car if you pick it up at night.

At the Rental Car Counter

- Ask the representative how they know the car you’re renting has completed its pre-rental maintenance check. You’re really checking to see if there’s good company-wide training on vehicle maintenance. If a clerk can’t answer a simple question about a car’s road readiness, be very suspicious.
- Ask the representative what to do if the car breaks down. Ask the representative what will happen if you lose the car key. Don’t save these questions for a less opportune time.
- Ask the representative for a few paper towels. If he or she doesn’t have any, grab a handful from the restroom on your way to the car.

At the Car

- Take a walk around: Look at all four sides of the car, just to ensure that there’s no obvious damage. Keep in mind that you can be held responsible for undocumented damage once you leave the rental car lot.
- Make sure the license plates are current.
- Look at the tires for inflation, good tread, and even tread wear. Uneven tread wear hints at a suspension, alignment, or tire maintenance problem. Significantly uneven tread wear is good cause for rejecting a vehicle.
- Get in and check the cleanliness and smell of the car. While not safety items per se, griminess and foul odors are major sources of consumer dissatisfaction with rental cars.

- Check the odometer. Be a bit more thorough in your inspection if the car has more than 25,000 miles. Rental cars live a rough life, and 25,000 miles is an “old timer.” This isn’t cause for rejection, but it should raise your antennae.
- Check the lights: headlights, turn signals and interior/dashboard lights.
- Spray the windshield to ensure that the washer system works and the wipers are in good shape. The wiper/washer system is one of the most common sources of safety-related consumer complaints pertaining to rental cars.
- Ensure that there’s an Owners Manual in the glove box.
- Get out of the car for your under-hood and under-trunk inspections. You might need the Owners Manual for instructions.
- Check the trunk for a spare tire (push on it to ensure that it’s actually inflated), jack, and lug wrench. Check the Owners Manual for any other tools required to change a tire. Some cars require additional tools, and the mini-toolkit disappears from many rental cars.
- Open the hood and check the fluids (You brought paper towels for this). At a minimum, check the oil, antifreeze, and washer fluid. If you’re suspicious of the car, you’ll want to take a look at brake fluid, transmission fluid, and power steering fluid. If this seems too much like work, time yourself: You can do this in less than two minutes. It’s worth it.
- Get in and familiarize yourself with the cockpit. Adjust the seats and mirrors. Find the hazard light switch. Learn how to switch the headlights from low to high beam. Turn off the radio and put away your cell phone. Lock the doors.
- Drive the car inside the rental lot before taking to the open road. Go as fast as you safely can within the lot. If there’s a handling problem, a braking problem, an odd noise, or a performance snag, you’re much better off discovering it before you accept possession of the car.
- Look at your map. Figure out where you’re going and how you’ll get there. Do this before you hit the highway to avoid being map-eyed on the open road.

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Frank J. Whyte is a corporate trainer. His extensive travel schedule led to his emergence as an expert in business travel. After a nightmarish experience with a rental car, Whyte became an advocate for rental car safety, which he describes as the “untamed wilderness” of the travel industry.

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