

Car Rental Success

Driving a rented car can be just as easy and safe as driving your own automobile—with the right preparation. How can you be sure that you're properly prepared each time you drive a rental? Here are some National Safety Council suggestions that can help to put you on the road to car rental success, especially where your safety is concerned.

Getting to Know You

Don't rent a vehicle larger than you are physically capable of controlling.

Spend a few minutes getting acquainted with your rental car.

Take a look at the dashboard. Note the location of the speedometer, the temperature gauge, the gas gauge and so on.

Locate the air conditioner, heater, windshield wiper and washer, defroster, and light switches. Turn them on and off to make sure that you know how they work.

Test the brakes—with the engine running—to get the "feel" of them. Some brakes are "softer" than others, and you don't want to discover this when you're stopping for the first red light. At the same time, get the "feel of the wheel" by testing the "play" in the steering wheel. And make sure the hand brake works.

Check It Out

It's a good idea to inspect the rented car to make sure that everything's in working order.

Be sure the tires are properly inflated. Underinflated or overinflated tires can greatly affect your safety, especially at high speeds.

Check the headlights. Know where the switch is even if you'll only be driving during daylight hours—you might suddenly find yourself driving through a tunnel or facing a weather front in which you would want to turn on your lights. Do the lights work on bright and dim?

Test the turn signals, windshield wipers and horn for any operating problems.

Inspect the contents of the trunk. It should have a spare tire and a jack in it. Inquire about the availability of an emergency road kit if you're interested in extra protection, or provide your own.

If you need special equipment, such as chains for driving on ice or child restraint seats, be sure to ask for it before you leave the rental lot.

Check for any scratches or dents and report them to the rental agency before you leave the premises. Although these will probably not affect the car's performance, you do not want to be held responsible for them when you return the automobile.

Some Things are "More Different" Than Others

The differences between the rented car and the car you own may be more significant than simply the layout of the dashboard or the positioning of the gear shift. Following are some examples.

A Stick-y situation

If you're used to driving an automatic and the rented car is a stick shift—or vice-versa, it's important to reacquaint yourself with handling the new transmission before you begin driving.

More power to you!

Power steering and power brakes require a light touch. If you're not used to driving with them, you may want to get a "feel" for them before moving into heavy traffic.

Sizing things up

You may be used to a big car and the extra power that it affords you. Or, you may be used to squeezing your little compact into the smallest of parking spaces. In any case, if your rental car is significantly larger or smaller than the car you usually drive, be aware of its limitations.

Another alternative

If you're concerned about the differences between the car you rent and the car you own, you might want to request a rental that is similar to the make and model of your own automobile. Most rental agencies will be happy to oblige if they carry that model.

A Few Minor Adjustments, Please

Now it's time to customize the rented car to your personal driving habits.

Position the driver's seat so that you feel comfortable and at ease behind the wheel. Be sure you are seated at least 10"-12" from the steering wheel to allow airbags to inflate if necessary.

Be sure the headrest is level with the top of your ears.

Adjust the rearview and sideview mirrors so that they're in the right positions for you.

Getting the Hang of It

Take the rented car for a simple trial run, especially before you head for the freeways or a crowded downtown area. You may be more comfortable if you drive across the parking lot once or twice, or around the block, to become even more familiar with it. If you've got any questions, or if the car isn't performing up to par, go back to the rental agency immediately.

In Case of Emergency

Be prepared to deal with a crash or other emergency situation while on the road.

Review your insurance options with the clerk when you sign out the car. Know what your personal insurance will cover, and use that information to determine what additional coverage, if any, you may need to purchase.

Be aware of the rental agency's emergency road service provisions. If they have no specific road service available, inquire as to whom you can contact in the event of an overheated engine, a tire blowout, or similar emergency situations. A good company will give you an information sheet with an 800 number to call in an emergency.