

Don't clutch over rental transactions

By **Susie Woodhams**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In the introduction and first chapter of his new book, “Palmento: A Sicilian Wine Odyssey,” Robert Camuto writes of breaking more laws in 20 minutes than anytime in his life, driving behind a winery employee to a restaurant in Sicily’s countryside. He lauds the island as his kind of “terra santa,” or holy land, from “the anarchic street markets of old Palermo, to the morning stillness of the vineyards and lava flows of Mount Etna.”

What the book doesn’t describe is how he broke that stillness one morning in 2008. He smashed a window of his rented Fiat Panda with a hammer — provided by his hotel owner.

With a scheduled appointment looming and only two hours before his flight at Catania Airport, Camuto had accidentally locked his car keys in the trunk. Calls to the Hertz desk went unanswered. (This was, after all, Italy, on a Saturday morning.)

“There was nothing else to do,” Camuto said.

Of course, this isn’t the kind of experience most travelers seek, but it happens. And too often, tense moments involve rental cars. In her years covering Lance Armstrong’s record seven consecutive Tour de France victories, Suzanne Halliburton, a sports-writer in Austin, Texas, was a victim of two faulty clutches, two blown tires, and a lost car key — luckily found before Avis sent a tow truck to bring the car from Nantes to Paris.

Just as much as bad luck, poor rental-car planning can slow down a European trip and sour your mood.

“Probably of all the decisions you make planning a trip, from buying airline tickets to finding hotels, you can get in more trouble faster renting a car,” said Bob Bestor, who founded Gemüt.com, a travel agency based in Ashland, Ore., that specializes in car rentals in Europe.

You may think it’s easy to go online and rent the car, whether directly from one of the big companies or a price-comparison



SUSIE WOODHAMMS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Car rental customers in Bordeaux, France, or on the Internet should be prepared for fine print, insurance complexities, credit card contradictions — and fewer automatic transmissions.

website. Expedia recently gave me a quote of \$331 for a five-day Avis rental in October, picking up a midsize four-door with automatic transmission at the Bordeaux airport. The rate dropped to \$283 if I picked it up at a location eight miles from the airport. In both cases, “estimated taxes and fees” were included.

But while you often save money on the basic rate paying online in dollars, you still have to make some potentially costlier decisions involving other “extra” fees, particularly the company’s insurance for collision and theft. Depending on the country, car, and rental agency, that can combine to cost \$13 to \$65 a day. Europcar lumps it together and calls it “super” loss damage waiver, while others sell the coverages separately, and in most cases, only offer no deductible (or greatly reduced) if you pay for the “super” variety.

I had always assumed it was best to decline the rental company’s coverage and rely on my credit card insurance, because

it’s free, there’s no deductible, and it covers collision and theft. But some credit card companies won’t cover you in countries such as Ireland and Italy, and some car rental companies won’t let you decline their insurance at the counter unless you provide written proof that you are covered.

In most cases, your credit card company will not cover you unless every cost involving the rental is charged to the card. They won’t cover you if you accidentally accept the rental car company’s insurance when signing the contract; if you exceed the number of days they allow; or if you rent a vehicle they don’t cover, such as trucks, vans, SUVs, motorcycles, or some exotic car.

Bestor recalled a client once disregarded his advice to bring one of the two Mastercard premium cards that an Irish rental company accepted for insurance (with written proof of coverage).

“He thought his American Express would cover it, which it wouldn’t,” Bestor said. “He ended up paying something like \$600

[for insurance] for an eight-day rental, which is amazingly expensive for collision and theft, and he wasn’t aware that there was a 1,200 euro deductible. Then he messed up a wheel, so he ended up paying about \$2,000 even though he had insurance.”

CreditCards.com posts on its site a chart comparing various credit card companies’ rental car insurance policies, while Gemüt.com also has an extensive guide to renting cars in Europe. But it’s best to thoroughly read and compare rental car policies and your credit card policy on line before you rent. You should also bring a printed copy of your credit card coverage with you if you choose that route, and be prompt alerting both companies to problems as well as filing accident reports and claims.

Also be prepared to study the paint on your rental car more carefully before leaving the lot as well as before handing back the keys. Take pictures, or better yet, take video. And make sure the rental clerk signs off on the car’s

condition when you do — or else you may find out a month later that you’ve been billed for not only repairing a scrape you didn’t cause, but also the amount the rental car company believes it lost because the car was in the shop (its “loss of use” fee).

College students studying abroad might be surprised to find the rental age varies — from 25 in Ireland to 21 in other countries to 18 in Italy — and contracts often include hefty “young driver” fees and insurance.

And don’t forget there’s a scarcity of automatic transmission cars to rent in Europe. Before a trip to Spain last March, Joe Basconi, 23, a graduate student at the University of Virginia, reserved an automatic online through Europcar. Just in case there was a mix-up, he asked his mom for a refresher course in driving a stick shift. Sure enough, when he arrived in Valencia, the agency only had manual transmission cars.

“I had to give it a try, but I realized pretty quickly if I couldn’t take it out of the lot, I shouldn’t take it out on the road,” said Basconi, who needed to drive four hours and through mountains to his sister’s college.

Fortunately, Europcar let him out of his agreement, and suggested he try National across town, where the only automatic available was a Smart Car — a tight squeeze for Basconi, who is 6-foot-1, his 5-foot-11 sister Gina and their suitcases. But at least he felt more secure than with a manual transmission.

Camuto, meanwhile, confessed he’s no stranger to rental car accidents, which is why in Sicily he didn’t think twice about buying the “super sicuro,” no-deductible insurance that cost an extra 85 euros (at the time about \$120) for five days — and covered the window he broke.

“I don’t want to have to fill out reports and deal with the bureaucracy,” Camuto said. “All that can ruin the tail end of an otherwise good vacation or trip.”

Susie Woodhams can be reached at susiewoodhams@gmail.com.



GO-GO BABYZ

Transport baby and car seat

When we don’t need our beefy stroller on a trip, we take the Infant Cruiser AT, made by Go-Go Babyz. This compact, foldable travel

system has a platform where we can securely attach our daughter’s car seat, and four airless tires that never go flat. Once we reach our destination, we can collapse the telescoping handle and lock it flush with the platform, and then gate-check the Infant Cruiser or stash it in a trunk.

The only downside: No space for stashing supplies. The Infant Cruiser AT comes with adapters for certain Graco, Combi, Britax, Chicco, and Peg Perego car seats.

It sells for \$149.99 at Go-Go Babyz (408-360-0653, www.gobabyz.com).

KARI BODNARCHUK

FEB. & APR. SCHOOL VACATION TOURS JUST OUT!
February ^{from} \$1749 (Sorrento, Italy ^{to} Florence/ Venice/Rome) ♦ April ^{from} \$1999 (Spain, Ireland, Malta, Sorrento/Rome)
SUPER AIR RATES ^{to} EUROPE. CALL NOW!

DURGAN TRAVEL SERVICE STONEHAM, MA
781-438-2224 800-234-9959
Signup for email deals at www.durgantravel.com

Be a part of the **LARGEST** consumer travel event in the United States:
The Boston Globe Travel Show

February 11-13, 2011

Seaport World Trade Center, Boston

Mark your calendar and get ready for the 2011 Boston Globe Travel Show! With over 200 exhibitors, great vacation bargains and all kinds of fun activities on site, it’s no wonder we’re expecting over 22,000 attendees. Last year’s exhibitors booked over \$4 million in travel packages right on the show floor!

Shouldn’t your business be here too? Become an exhibitor at The Boston Globe Travel Show. Excellent booth locations are still available! Visit boston.com/travelshow or call Rich Ryan at 330-686-0353 for details.

These are just a few of the leading travel companies that will be exhibiting:

Air Malta	www.worldaviationgroup.eu
Alaska Land & Cruise Adventures	www.anchorage.net
AMA Waterways	www.amawaterways.com
Amazing Irish & Scottish Tours, LLC	www.amazingirish tours.com
Best Single Travel	www.bestsingletravel.com
Boston Upper Deck Trolley Tours	www.superducktours.com
Bretts Luggage and Gifts	www.suitcase.com
Cayman Islands Dept. of Tourism	www.caymanislands.ky
China National Tourist Office	www.cnto.org
Costa Rica Tourism Board	www.visitcostarica.com
Couples Resorts	www.couples.com
Cruise Planners	www.cruiseplannertravel.com
Cruiseport Boston	www.cruiseportboston.com
Cruises Inc	www.cruises-inc.com
Cultural Travel	www.culturaltravel.com
Destination Quebec	www.bonjourquebec.com
Divi & Tamarijn Aruba All Inclusives	www.diviaruba.com
Divi Resorts	www.diviresorts.com
Globus Family of Brands	www.globusfamily.com
Greater Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce	www.portsmouthchamber.org
Israel Ministry of Tourism	www.goisrael.com
Jamaica Tourist Board	www.visitjamaica.com
Kings Creek	www.kingscreekplantation.com
Maine Office of Tourism	www.visitmaine.com
Massport Boston Logan Airport	www.flylogan.com
Mount Washington Valley Chamber of Commerce	www.mtwashingtonvalley.org

Mt. Washington Valley Accomodations	www.mtwashingtonvalleyaccomodations.com
North Fork Promotion Council & Hamptons Visitors Council	www.northfork.org ; www.gonorthfork.com
Ocean Properties Limited	www.oplhotels.com
Okemo Valley, Vermont	www.yourplaceinvermont.com
Olympic Hotels	www.innbythesea.com
Omni Mount Washington Resort	www.omnimountwashingtonresort.com
Pacific Holidays	www.pacificholidayinc.com
Penguin Windows	www.penguinwindows.com
Poland Spring Resort	www.polandspringresort.com
Puerto Rico Tourism Company	www.seepuertorico.com
Rick Steeves Collection	www.suitcase.com
Ross Travel Service	www.rosstravel.com
Sarnsonite Luggage	www.suitcase.com
Sandals & Beaches Resorts	www.sandals.com
South Africa Airways	www.flysaa.com
Stowe, Vermont	www.gostowe.com
TACV - Cabo Verde Airlines	www.flytacv.com
The New York Times	www.ontheavenuemarketing.com
Tourism Malaysia	www.malaysiamydestination.com
Trafalgar Tours	www.trafalgar.com
Universal Orlando Resort	www.universalorlando.com
Utah's Canyon Country	www.utahscanyoncountry.com
Utah's Zion & Bryce	www.utahszionandbryce.com
Vacation Outlet	www.vacationoutlet.com
Visit Florida	www.visitflorida.com
Zara Tours Inc.	www.zaratours.com

Sponsors

