

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

The end might be near for unexpected rental car costs



ISTOCK

By Christopher Elliott
THE WASHINGTON POST

When Jeremy Epstein rented a Nissan Altima from Hertz in Albuquerque recently, he couldn't believe the car rental fees. They made the extras charged by the rest of the travel industry look like the work of amateurs.

They do. But not for much longer.

Epstein's base rate for a weekly rental came to a reasonable \$280. But then the car rental company added daily and weekly surcharges, including "government supplements" of \$25, a "concession fee recovery" of \$34, plus a \$3 "vehicle license fee," a \$1 "energy surcharge," an \$11 "facility charge," a \$10 motor vehicle lease tax, and a \$45 state sales tax.

By the time the dust had settled, Epstein, a research scientist from Fairfax, Va., was on the hook for \$411.

"That's a 46 percent increase," he says.

He believes that customers wouldn't tolerate that kind of nickel-and-diming otherwise.

"Imagine going to the grocery store and getting a receipt when you check out," he says. "In addition to the cost of the food, there's a fee for delivering your food to the store, the space for the cash register and a fraction of the bill for keeping the refrigerators cold. This is what rental car companies are doing."

There's good news for motorists like Epstein. The industry is gradually changing. Hertz dis-

closed the fees at the time it quoted his initial price (although he didn't see it because someone else made the reservation for him). Regulators only require that rental companies show the full cost before buyers complete the reservation. Car rental companies break down the fees before the final purchase screen as a service to drivers.

"This also helps provide transparency to our customers," says Hertz spokeswoman Lauren Luster.

Car rental companies are moving from a business model that too often relied on deception to one of full transparency. The progress is slow — sometimes agonizingly slow — but it's measurable. It could soon put car rental businesses in the enviable position of setting an example for the rest of the travel industry.

The extra costs you see on your bill fall into two general categories: taxes, which are imposed by the city, county, or state; and fees added by the car rental company. Both are a predictable source of customer outrage. The fees don't make any sense to drivers, and the taxes often seem arbitrary.

Consider what happened to William Shallcross, a real estate developer from Altamonte Springs, Fla., when he rented a car in Manchester, N.H. He did a double take when he found a 9 percent "Meals and Rooms (Rentals) Tax" on his bill. Shallcross didn't recall any meal service in his vehicle.

"That looks like a junk fee," he says.

In fact, it's a tax levied on New Hampshire restaurants, hotel rooms . . . and rental cars. But Shallcross is right: It looks bogus, and it should be part of his rental rate rather than an add-on.

More than 40 states levied a charge on short-

term rental cars, according to a 2015 survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures. Among states that tax car rentals, the rates were as much as Maryland's 11.5 percent.

But not all the fees are outside a rental company's control. Julie Codrington, a computer technician from Gibraltar, Mich., contacted me recently after being broadsided by fees for "counter processing recovery," "shuttle recovery" and "facility recovery" on her bill. "I rented a car for \$200 online," she says. "After all the additional fees and charges, I ended up paying \$421."

Those are junk fees — the kind that industry experts agree should be folded into the price of your rental.

Car rental companies and online agencies that broker rentals have taken important steps toward fixing the problem. When I recently checked on a sample rental rate, for example, Enterprise quoted an all-inclusive price upfront. Hertz offered two rates — a low base rate above a "total" rate that included taxes and required fees. Avis quoted a low base rate and revealed the total cost three screens into the reservation.

Online travel agencies' disclosures also varied. Expedia quoted a low base rate in bold, but disclosed the total cost below it in regular type. Priceline quoted a low per-day base rate, but waited until the second screen to reveal the full cost, which included taxes and fees.

Just a few years ago, most car rental companies and online agencies hid the real costs. Often, a search would result in an unbookable "base" daily rate. Later in the booking process, the company would add fees, finally leaving you with an all-in price that included mandatory

taxes and fees. By then, many customers had already made a booking decision.

"That kind of pricing has no place in the car rental industry," says Chris Brown, executive editor of Auto Rental News, a trade publication.

It won't in the future. Industry newcomers like Silvercar, which offers fully transparent pricing, have nudged the industry into better disclosure of its rental fees. But an even bigger push has come from customers, who are fed up with rental costs that end up being hundreds of dollars more than the initially quoted daily rates.

So why isn't everyone showing an all-in price yet? It takes time to move from the old way to the new one. Some companies still withhold fee information until later in the booking — a process called "drip pricing" — for competitive reasons. It makes their rates look a few dollars lower, enticing travelers who may not pay attention to the details.

But that competitive edge is rapidly disappearing. When selling through online agencies, for example, car rental companies can't mislead customers in that way because the sites compare rates on a matrix. "You can't fool the matrix," Brown says. In other words, companies have to play by the online agency's rules, which force them to tell the truth.

That's the takeaway for people renting cars in this age of transparency. Shop around carefully before you book a car. Check the car rental site and an online travel agency. Call the company to find out if there is a better rate. You can't negotiate taxes and junk fees off your bill, but you can ensure that the price you're quoted — and not a penny more — is the price you pay.

HERE

STYLISH HOTEL DEBUTS IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Granite State's capital city is debuting style accommodations in its historic downtown. The Hotel Concord, a 38-room boutique hotel, is located on the fourth and sixth floors of Capital Commons, a six-story mixed-use building overlooking the Merrimack River and the New Hampshire State House. Amenities include over-size bathrooms, luxurious bedding, an executive lounge on each floor, a fitness center, and an attached garage. Business travelers will appreciate two conference rooms with state-of-the-art audiovisual capabilities. In a nod toward the state's pivotal role in the US election process, hallways are decorated with black-and-white framed photographs of iconic moments in American politics. The first-floor lobby, designed as a community gathering spot, features a high coffered ceiling, cozy seating areas, and fireplace. Also on property: O Steaks & Seafood, and the Red River Theater, a nonprofit three-screen cinema and café. *Seasonal rates from \$179. 603-504-3500, www.hotelconcordnh.com*

POP UP COCKTAILS IN A STEAMER TRUNK

Belly up to the Bellhop Bar, a limited-edition holiday pop-up for travelers and cocktail enthusiasts in lobbies of select Loews Hotels across the country, including Boston. Inspired by the golden age of travel — when wardrobe trunks were packed for extended journeys — handcrafted cocktails will be served from a retrofitted vintage steamer



trunk, from 5 to 7 p.m. daily. To signal the bar is ready for service, an opening bell ritual will take place at Loews Boston's Precinct Kitchen + Bar. In addition to red and sparkling wines, the Bellhop Bar is serving The Mayflower (Hangar 1 vodka, Luxardo, Crème de Violette, Yellow Chartreuse, and lemon juice) and The Midnight Ride (Angel's Envy Bourbon, poblano-orange syrup, mole bitters, and Jarritos Mineragua), inspired by the American patriot Paul Revere. *Available through mid-January 2019. 617-266-7200, www.loewshotels.com/bellhop-bar.*

THERE

NEW ARCHEOLOGY TOURS

Fans of archeology and history will want to check out the 15-day Tunisia & Morocco: From the Phoenicians to the Berbers itinerary, one of three new 2019 programs offered by Archeological Tours. (The other two are Western China, and the Baltics.) For more than 40 years, the



company has curated itineraries that are led by expert scholars. Dr. Allen Fromherz, director of the Middle East Studies Center and professor of Mediterranean and Middle East History at Georgia State University, will guide this tour. Highlights include visiting Carthage, founded by the Phoenicians in the 9th century BC; Kairouan, a holy pilgrimage city renowned for its Great Mosque and medina; National Bardo Museum, a Tunisian Heritage land-

mark; Morocco's Islamic Imperial cities of Rabat, Meknes, Fes and Marrakech; and excavations of Volubilis, the outpost at the heart of the ancient Roman-Berber kingdom of Mauretania. *Departing March 25. Rates from \$4,950 per person, double, excluding international airfare. 866-740-5130, www.archaeological-tours.com/tours/africa/tunisia-morocco-from-the-phenicians-to-the-berbers.*

IRISH HOSPITALITY IN THE HEART OF MANHATTAN

Get a warm Irish welcome in the heart of Times Square at the Merrion Row Hotel and Public House. Opening Dec. 1 — just in time for holiday festivities in the Big Apple — the intimate, 28-room hotel draws inspiration from Dublin, where the energetic strip of pubs referred to as Merrion Row meets the stately Georgian row houses encircling Merrion Square. Located in a revived Beaux-Arts building, the

contemporary guest rooms (with real white oak floors) feature beds with leather headboards, cashmere mattresses, and luxury linens; Irish-inspired plaid drapes; over-size windows; and original photography of the Irish countryside. Each en suite bathroom embodies classic New York style, with black and white subway tiles, white marble vanities, and glass paneled showers. The Public House, anchoring the building's first floor, offers playful twists on tradition-

al Irish and New American pub favorites. *Rates from \$299. 866-203-0912, merriownhotel.com.*

UPDATED SKI APP

Serious skiers heading west this winter will want to download Ski Utah, a new app that provides everything you'll want to know before hitting the slopes — from road conditions to resort-specific snowfall, 5-day forecasts, trail maps, webcams, and lift and trail status. Also includes information on ski bus routes and schedules, and opening and closing dates at resorts. The app is integrated with SNOCRU, a way to track your days on the mountain, and rank you among other Utah enthusiasts by reporting days skied (check-ins), vertical descent and number of runs. *Free. www.skiutah.com/resorts/get-mobile-snow-updates*

EVERYWHERE

TRAVEL BLANKET FAVORS FEET

Keep your tootsies warm on long flights, on the road, and even in your campsite hammock with the Bamboo Footie Blanket by adventure gear company, Grand Trunk. Made of eco-friendly viscose from bamboo, the blanket features a pocket at one end to keep your feet covered and cozy. This lightweight travel blanket, 76 inches by 40 inches, comes with its own travel sack, making it easy to stash when not in use. Available in three colors: bright crimson, peacock green, and slate gray. *\$49.95, www.grandtrunk.com/collections/travel-collection/products/bamboo-travel-blanket.*

NECEE REGIS