Key checks before renting a buggy in Santorini

Santorini's narrow roads, steep caldera edges and sudden gravel patches make driving a buggy or quad bike different from what most visitors expect. A few minutes spent checking the vehicle and your own paperwork beforehand can save you from a ruined afternoon or a costly repair bill. Below are the practical points that matter most on the island.

Driving licence requirements

Greek law treats quad bikes (ATVs) and buggies as vehicles that need a valid driving licence. For a standard buggy or a quad with a steering wheel, a full car licence (category B) is normally required. A motorcycle licence (category A) may be accepted for some three-wheeled buggies, but the rental company will confirm what they accept for each machine. If you hold a licence from outside the European Union, check whether an International Driving Permit is needed. Many Santorini rental offices ask for it, and driving without one could void your insurance cover.

Insurance and excess details

Basic rental prices often include third-party liability only. That means you pay for damage to the buggy itself out of your own pocket. Ask what the excess (the amount you pay before insurance kicks in) is for a typical scratch or a broken mirror. Some operators offer a top-up waiver that reduces that excess to zero. It costs extra but can be worth it on an island where stone walls and tight corners are common. Read the rental contract's small print on tyre punctures and underbody damage, because those are sometimes excluded from standard cover.

Vehicle condition check

Walk around the buggy before you drive away. Look for cracks in the plastic bodywork, worn tyre tread, and any fluid leaks beneath the engine. Check both headlights, turn signals and the horn. Test the brakes while the engine is still off, then again at walking pace inside the parking area. A rental company that rushes you through this check or dismisses visible damage is a warning sign. Take a phone photo of every existing dent or scratch so you cannot be charged for it later. If the steering feels loose or the pedals have a spongy travel, ask for a different machine.

Size of the vehicle for the roads you plan to take

Buggies are wider than most cars, and Santorini's older villages such as Akrotiri and parts of Kamari have lanes barely wide enough for a small hatchback. A large four-seat buggy can

become a problem in those streets. If your itinerary includes the inland villages or the narrow path to the lighthouse at Akrotiri, consider a smaller quad or a scooter instead. The rental office can tell you which routes are tight, but you can also check street-view maps beforehand. A vehicle that feels fine on the coastal road may be a headache in the pedestrian-filled centre of Oia.

Terrain and driving style

The island's roads combine asphalt, loose gravel and occasional dirt tracks. Buggy tyres that are too smooth lose grip on the unpaved sections near beaches such as Vlychada or the red beach. Ask whether the vehicle has all-terrain tyres or standard road tyres. If you plan to leave the paved road, a quad bike (ATV) with higher ground clearance and better traction may be a safer choice. Keep speed low on the downhill curves near Fira, where the surface can be polished by tourist buses. A buggy's centre of gravity is higher than a car's, so sharp turns at speed can tip it.

Fuel policy and refuelling stations

Most Santorini rental companies hand over the buggy with a full tank and expect it returned full. There are petrol stations in Fira, Kamari and near the airport, but none inside the caldera villages. Running out of fuel on a hillside road means pushing a heavy machine uphill or waiting for assistance. Ask where the nearest station is to your accommodation and whether the vehicle uses standard unleaded or a specific blend. Some buggies run on a petrol-oil mix; the rental office should show you the correct ratio and supply a small bottle to carry.

Parking and where you can leave the buggy

Free parking is scarce in Oia, Fira and Imerovigli during peak hours. Most official car parks charge a fee, and leaving a buggy on a yellow line or blocking a driveway can earn a ticket or a tow. Check with the rental company whether they have a recommended parking area or a drop-off point near the popular sunset spots. Some hotels offer reserved parking for guests renting vehicles from certain partners. Plan your day so that you park early and walk the last part, rather than circling narrow streets looking for a space.

Age and experience of the driver

Greek law sets a minimum age for driving a buggy or quad. It is usually 18 for a quad and 21 for a buggy, though some companies set their own limits. If a driver in your group is under 25, ask about the young driver surcharge that some insurers apply. A driver who has never handled a three- or four-wheeled vehicle should take a short practice loop in the rental yard before

heading onto the main road. The controls are simple, but the lack of a car body around you changes how you judge distances.

What to carry with you

Keep a paper copy of your driving licence and the rental contract in the buggy at all times. A police check on the road can happen, and officers may ask for documents on the spot. Carry water, a hat and sun protection, because a buggy offers no shade. A light jacket or long sleeve is useful for the evening ride back, when the temperature drops quickly. A phone charger that plugs into the vehicle's USB or cigarette-lighter socket can be a lifesaver if you rely on maps. Do not leave valuables in the open cabin when you park; use the small lockable compartment some buggies have, or take a backpack.

Return conditions and timing

Most rental agreements set a strict return time. Late returns can incur an extra day's charge or a penalty. Check whether the office closes for a midday break, because returning the vehicle when nobody is there may force you to leave keys in a drop-box, which leaves you with no receipt. If you plan to visit the southern beaches and then drive back to the rental office, allow an extra 30 minutes for the last stretch of road through Kamari, which gets congested in the afternoon. Companies such as Moto Empire, a vehicle rental company in Santorini that rents quads, motorbikes, scooters and buggies, will explain their return policy clearly when you collect the vehicle.

Renting a buggy in Santorini is a practical way to see the island's coastline and inland trails, but the vehicle you choose and the preparation you do before you set off determine whether it becomes a relaxed trip or a stressful one. Check the licence rules, inspect the machine, understand the insurance excess, and match the vehicle size to your planned route. A few minutes of paperwork and a walk-around can make the difference between a day spent exploring and a day spent dealing with a breakdown or a fine. The same careful approach applies whether you book with a large operator or a local office such as Moto Empire. Take your time at the rental desk, ask every question that comes to mind, and keep the contact number handy in case you need roadside help. With those checks done, you can focus on the views, the food stops and the winding roads that make Santorini a memorable place to drive.