What to check before riding a scooter in Santorini

Know the local driving rules

Before you pick up the keys, it pays to understand how traffic moves on Santorini. Greece drives on the right, which is familiar for most visitors from continental Europe and North America. But the island's roads are narrow, winding, and often shared with buses, delivery vans, and donkeys. Speed limits are posted in kilometres per hour, and you will see 50 km/h in built-up areas and 30 km/h near schools or busy squares. The police do check for speeding and for driving without a licence, so carrying the correct category on your permit matters.

A quick read of the Greek highway code - especially the rules on overtaking and roundabouts - can save you a fine. Many visitors find the biggest adjustment is the relaxed attitude towards lane markings on tight bends. Stay on your side, use your horn before a blind corner, and never assume the other driver will give way.

Check your licence and insurance cover

To rent a scooter legally in Greece, you need a valid driving licence that covers the vehicle category you are hiring. For most scooters up to 50 cc, a car licence from an EU country or a full motorcycle licence from elsewhere is accepted. For anything over 50 cc, you typically need an A1 or A2 licence. If your licence is from outside the EU, an International Driving Permit is often required alongside your home licence. The rental company will tell you what they accept, but it is wise to confirm before you travel.

Insurance is not optional. The basic third-party cover is mandatory and included in the hire price, but it offers limited protection. Consider topping up to full comprehensive cover if the rental company offers it. Check your travel insurance policy too - some exclude motor vehicle claims, while others cover you for riding a moped in Greece up to a certain engine size. Make copies of your licence and insurance documents and keep them on your phone or in a dry bag.

Inspect the scooter before you ride

A thorough walk-around takes five minutes and can prevent a breakdown on a remote clifftop road. Start with the tyres: look for cracks, bulges, and tread depth below 1.6 mm. Check the tyre pressure by pressing a thumb into the sidewall - it should feel firm, not soft. Spin the front wheel and listen for grinding from the brake caliper. Squeeze the front and rear brake levers; they should feel firm and not pull all the way to the handlebar. Test the horn, both indicators, the headlight, and the rear light. If any bulb is out, ask the rental desk to replace it before you set off.

Check the mirrors are clean and positioned so you can see behind without craning your neck. A missing or cracked mirror is a safety issue, especially on Santorini's blind bends. Look at the chain or belt tension if the scooter has one - it should have about an inch of vertical play. Finally, start the engine and let it idle for a minute. Listen for rattles or a rough note. If the engine coughs or stalls, ask for a different machine.

Plan your route around the island's terrain

Santorini is small but steep. The main road from Fira to Oia is busy and narrow in places, with coaches stopping suddenly at viewpoints. The eastern side, around Perissa and Kamari, is flatter and easier for a first ride. If you are not confident on steep climbs and sharp turns, start with the coastal roads and work your way up to the caldera edge. The hill from Fira to Pyrgos is a good intermediate test - it has a steady gradient and wide enough lanes for a scooter.

The island has a single main ring road, but many side roads are unpaved or end at a cliff. Use a map app that shows elevation changes, and avoid routes marked as dirt tracks unless you have an off-road capable scooter or an ATV. Remember that the famous sunset spot at Oia draws huge crowds in the late afternoon - the road can become a slow crawl of cars and pedestrians. Plan to arrive early or park a short walk away.

One thing many first-timers overlook is the wind. Santorini can get strong gusts, especially on exposed ridges near the caldera. A lightweight scooter can be pushed sideways in a sudden crosswind. Keep both hands on the bars, lower your speed, and lean into the wind if you feel it pushing you. If the wind feels too strong, pull over in a safe spot and wait ten minutes - it often drops as quickly as it rises.

Wear the right gear

Greek law requires both rider and passenger to wear a helmet. The rental company will provide one, but it may be old or the wrong size. Check that the helmet fits snugly - no rocking back and forth - and that the chin strap fastens securely. A loose helmet is worse than no helmet because it can twist on your head in a fall. If you have room in your luggage, bring your own. A full-face helmet offers more protection than a half-shell, especially if you hit gravel or stone.

Beyond the helmet, think about skin protection. A short ride in summer heat can tempt you to wear shorts and a t-shirt, but a slide on asphalt at 40 km/h will remove a lot of skin. A denim jacket, long trousers, and closed shoes with ankle coverage are far safer. Gloves help you keep a grip on the handles if your hands get sweaty. Sunglasses or a tinted visor cut the glare from the whitewashed buildings and the sea.

Fuel up and know your range

Petrol stations are not everywhere on the island. The main ones are in Fira, Firostefani, and near the port of Athinios. The eastern villages like Perissa have a station or two, but they may close for a few hours at lunchtime or close early in the off-season. A typical 50 cc scooter will do about 80 to 100 km on a full tank. The island's ring road is roughly 60 km around, so you can almost do a full loop on one tank, but if you plan to climb to Pyrgos or explore the southern tip, you may need to refill mid-route.

Always start the day with a full tank, and fill up when you see a station, even if the gauge shows half. The last thing you want is to push a scooter up a hill in the heat. Petrol is sold by the litre and is usually unleaded 95. Do not use a fuel can or siphon from another vehicle - this is illegal and dangerous. If you run dry, call the rental company; they will often bring a small can of fuel or send a recovery vehicle.

Understand the parking situation

Parking in Santorini is chaotic but manageable. In Fira and Oia, you will find designated parking areas, often with an attendant who charges a small fee. Do not park on yellow lines, in bus bays, or in front of a driveway. The local traffic police ticket aggressively, and a fine can be steep. A scooter is small enough to tuck into a gap that a car cannot use, but make sure you are not blocking a pedestrian crossing or a fire hydrant. Always lock the steering and remove the key. A disc lock or a chain through the wheel adds security, especially in busy tourist areas.

If you park on a slope, leave the scooter in first gear or turn the handlebars so the front wheel points to the kerb. This stops it rolling if the parking brake slips. Take your helmet and any bags with you - theft from unattended scooters happens, though it is not widespread.

Stay within your comfort zone

Riding a scooter on holiday should be fun, not stressful. If you have never ridden before, take a few minutes in a quiet car park to practice the controls: throttle response, braking distance, and turning radius. Do a short loop near the rental shop before heading out onto the main road. If you feel nervous, ask the rental staff for a quick orientation ride - they will often lead you on a five-minute route to build your confidence.

Remember that riding a moped in Greece is different from riding one on a quiet country lane. The traffic can be unpredictable, the road surface varies from smooth tarmac to loose gravel, and the scenery can distract you. Keep your eyes moving - scan the road ahead for potholes, oil patches, and pedestrians stepping out from behind parked cars. And if the day turns hot, take a break in a shaded café. A tired rider makes mistakes.

One final note: if you are riding with a passenger, agree on hand signals before you move off. The passenger should lean with you through corners and keep their feet on the footrests. A

sudden shift of weight can upset the balance of a small scooter. Keep the ride smooth, and you will both enjoy the island's views without any drama.