Is It Safe to Drive a Buggy or Quad in Santorini?

Santorini's dramatic caldera views and winding roads make a buggy or quad an attractive way to explore the island. But safety on those narrow, steep routes is a real concern for most visitors. The short answer is that driving a buggy or quad in Santorini can be safe if you prepare properly, respect local traffic conditions, and choose a vehicle that suits your experience level. The island's roads demand attention, not fear.

Understanding the roads you will drive on

Many visitors imagine Santorini as a single coastal road with postcard views. The reality is more varied. The island has a main road that runs from Fira to Oia, plus secondary routes that connect villages like Kamari and Akrotiri. These roads range from well-paved stretches to narrow, uneven lanes with sharp bends. Some sections lack a hard shoulder, and in summer the surface can be hot enough to affect tyre grip.

Steep gradients are common. Roads that drop toward the coast or climb to a viewpoint often have hairpin turns. A quad or buggy has a higher centre of gravity than a car, so taking those bends at a moderate speed matters. Loose gravel on the road edge can catch an unwary driver. Staying in your lane and slowing down before the curve, not during it, is the basic technique that keeps you stable.

What kind of vehicle are you driving?

Buggies and quads (ATVs) handle differently. A buggy is enclosed or semi-enclosed, with a steering wheel and pedals. It feels more like a small car but is lighter and less stable at speed. A quad is a four-wheeled motorcycle that you straddle, steering with handlebars. Both can be fun, but each has limits.

Quads are nimble and easy to park, but they offer no protection from the sun or dust. On a hot day, a long ride can be tiring. Buggies give some shade and a frame around you, which can feel safer, though they are wider and need more room on tight roads. Neither vehicle is built for highway speeds. They are designed for local touring, not for racing between towns.

Licence and legal requirements

Greek law sets clear rules for renting these vehicles. For a quad up to 350cc, a standard car driving licence (category B) is usually sufficient, provided you held it before a certain date. For larger quads or buggies, you may need a motorcycle licence (category A). The rules changed in recent years, so the rental company will check your licence and explain what you can drive. Always carry your physical licence; a photo on your phone may not be accepted.

Helmets are legally required for quad riders and recommended for buggy occupants. The rental company should provide a helmet. If it does not fit well, ask for another size. A loose helmet is little help in a fall. Also check that the vehicle has a valid registration plate and insurance. Reputable operators will show you the documents before you set off.

Weather and time of day

The Santorini sun is intense. On a quad, you are fully exposed. Heatstroke and dehydration are real risks if you ride for hours without a break. Take water, wear sunscreen, and cover up with light clothing. A buggy offers some shelter, but the cabin can still get hot. Plan your riding for the morning or late afternoon when the sun is lower.

Wind is another factor. Strong gusts on exposed coastal roads can push a light buggy or quad sideways. If the wind picks up, slow down and keep both hands on the controls. Dust from the volcanic soil can reduce visibility, especially on unpaved sections near Akrotiri. In such conditions, pull over and wait for it to clear.

Driving after dark adds risk. Many roads lack street lighting, and the island's winding layout makes it hard to see oncoming traffic. If you must ride at dusk, switch on the headlights early and reduce your speed. Most rental companies recommend returning the vehicle before sunset.

Traffic and local driving habits

Santorini's roads are shared by cars, buses, mopeds, pedestrians, and the occasional donkey cart. In peak season, traffic jams are common on the main road between Fira and Oia. Patience is essential. Overtaking on a blind corner is dangerous anywhere, but on a narrow island road it can be fatal. Stay behind slower vehicles until you have a clear, straight stretch.

Local drivers know the roads well and may drive faster than you are comfortable with. Do not feel pressured to match their pace. Drive at your own speed and pull over at a safe spot to let faster traffic pass. Using your horn on sharp curves is a common local practice to signal your approach. It may feel odd, but it is a sensible habit on blind bends.

Pedestrians sometimes walk on the road edge, especially in villages. Keep a lookout for people stepping out between parked cars. Children and animals can appear suddenly. A quad or buggy stops faster than a car, but its light weight means braking hard on loose gravel can cause a skid. Brake gently and early.

Preparation before you ride

Before you set off, do a quick check. Look at the tyre pressure and condition. Spin the handlebars or steering wheel to feel for any looseness. Test the brakes at walking speed. Make sure the mirrors are adjusted so you can see behind you without twisting. Ask the rental staff for a short orientation ride if you have never driven the model before.

Plan your route. Santorini is not large, but some roads are more challenging than others. The road to the lighthouse at Akrotiri is narrow and winding. The drive from Fira to Oia is scenic but busy. If you are a novice, stick to the less trafficked southern routes first. Build your confidence before tackling the northern end.

Carry a phone and a power bank. Mobile signal is generally good, but some valleys have weak coverage. Let someone know your planned route and expected return time. A simple text to a friend or family member can be a useful backup.

What about a motorcycle or scooter?

If you are an experienced rider, a motorcycle or scooter can be a good alternative to a quad or buggy. They are easier to park and more manoeuvrable in traffic. However, they require a motorcycle licence for larger engines. The same road conditions apply, but a two-wheeler demands even more balance and caution on loose surfaces.

If you are considering a motorbike rental in Santorini, check that the company provides a helmet and that the bike is in good mechanical condition. A test ride around the block will tell you if the clutch, brakes, and steering feel right. Do not accept a vehicle that feels off.

Remember that a motorbike rental in Santorini is a different experience from driving a buggy or quad. On a bike you are more exposed to the elements, but you also feel more connected to the landscape. It is a trade-off between freedom and protection. Choose what suits your comfort level.

When to say no

Not every visitor should drive a buggy or quad. If you have no experience with any motorised two- or three-wheeled vehicle, the learning curve on Santorini's roads is steep. A short test on flat ground does not prepare you for a steep descent with a hairpin turn. In that case, consider a guided tour where you follow a leader who knows the route, or hire a driver for the day.

Similarly, if you are prone to motion sickness, the constant winding and braking on a quad or buggy can trigger nausea. The open air helps, but the motion is still there. A car with a steady driver may be a better choice.

Alcohol and driving never mix. On holiday it is tempting to have a drink with lunch, but even one beer can affect your reaction time on a winding road. Stay sober for the entire ride.

The bottom line

Driving a buggy or quad in Santorini is safe when you treat the vehicle with respect, know the road conditions, and stay within your skill level. The island rewards careful drivers with unforgettable views and a sense of freedom that a bus tour cannot match. Check your licence, wear the helmet, drive at a pace that feels right, and you will likely have a great day.

If you are unsure, ask the rental staff for advice. They see drivers of all abilities and can recommend a route or a vehicle type that fits. The goal is not to conquer the road, but to enjoy it safely and return the vehicle in one piece.