Q: Recently we visited Germany, Switzerland and Austria. We were told by the car rental company that an international driver's license was required, so we went to AAA and spent $25 per license which is good for only one year. Once in Germany, the car rental agent laughed when we showed our international driver's license. All he wanted to see was our state driver's license. Sounds like a rip-off to me.

Robert Rothenbuhler
Ijamsville, MD

A: If you're the kind of person who gets to the airport three hours early and listens to the entire safety presentation on every flight you board, then you'll feel much better with an international driver's license in hand while traveling in Western Europe. For the rest of us, it's probably not necessary.

"A U.S. driver's license should be respected by the local authorities in Western Europe," said a spokesman for Europe by Car, a company that translates international driver's licenses into different languages. "However, there are no guarantees against a police officer in a bad mood, or one who doesn't read English."

The U.S. State Department advises overseas travelers to check with the embassy or consulate of the countries you will visit to learn whether an international driver's license is necessary. Greece and Japan, for example, do not recognize U.S. driver's licenses, but accept the international license.

Other countries, such as Spain and Italy, require that a U.S. driver's license be translated into it's language, which is what the international license accomplishes.

A spokesman for AAA, which is authorized by the federal government to issue international driver's license, said it recommends carrying an international license as "added protection" while traveling overseas, even if you don't plan to drive. But no one could understand why you were charged $25 for each license—the going rate is $10 per license, plus $7.50 if you have AAA take the pictures.