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Driving Overseas: Best Practices

Summary

With the rising costs of air travel and an increasing desire for independent, self-guided travel, many people consider self-driving while overseas. In many countries, U.S. drivers will experience a stark contrast to the customs, courtesies, and practices experienced on U.S. roads. In many parts of the world, the level of drivers' education varies; therefore, people can simply buy a license or drive unlicensed. Corrupt officials and petty criminals also capitalize on roadways around the world by using minor, intentional accidents, irregular law enforcement, or manipulation of a foreigner's inexperience and short stay to solicit bribes or to commit crimes.

Taking precautions and researching driving and security conditions before departure will allow OSAC constituents to evaluate the challenges and opportunities associated with self-driving and determine if it is an appropriate means of transportation.

General Requirements to Rent Cars

Documentation

The minimum driving age for non-commercial vehicles in most countries is 18, although this can be as low as 14 in certain places. In most countries, an International Driver's License, which must be obtained prior to arrival, and a valid U.S. driver's license – though not a provisional one -- are typically sufficient for a short-term visitor. For long-term visitors or residents, one may be required to obtain a national drivers' license. This is not the case, however, in Saudi Arabia, where authorities will not recognize foreign licenses held by women and will not issue licenses to women.

While it is advised that one obtain sufficient vehicle and travel insurance, in some countries, it is a requirement.

It is a good practice to carry photocopies of the passport (and visa if applicable), leaving originals in a safe place; however, some countries will not accept photocopies. Authorities may ask for a variety of paperwork; it is a good idea to have everything organized and handy to turn over for inspection.

Vehicle

Many car rental agencies only offer manual-transmission vehicles, so drivers must know how use a stick shift. Reservations for vehicles with automatic transmissions must be made in advance and may cost more. Not all vehicles are equipped with side or rear-view mirrors. Not every rental agency provides emergency kits, to include reflective jackets, fire extinguisher, and warning triangles, although they may be required. If driving in severe winter weather, snow chains may be required. Seat belts are generally provided and compulsory in all seats, and there are often additional requirements for the use of child constraints and seats. Specify if there are desired features when arranging a vehicle.

In order to use most European highway systems, a driver must either pay sporadic tolls or purchase a "vignette" sticker, which must be visible on the windshield. These stickers may be available for purchase or may be included in rental fees. If a vignette is not shown, police will issue a fine of approximately US \$150.

The use of headlights is generally standard, although many places have provisions against 'dazzling' (blinding) oncoming traffic or the use of halogen lights. In some countries, such as most of northern and eastern Europe, daytime running lights are required. Meanwhile, in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, headlights may not be used at all—even after dark—because of persistent rumors

that headlights decrease the lifespan of car batteries.

Emergency Assistance

Many countries do not have roadside assistance services; it is advised to have a general knowledge of automotive repair and to carry spare parts. Some countries have membership-based assistance programs. Others offer courtesy services. Roadside assistance programs may be suspended due to budgetary constraints or domestic security concerns. Know if they exist, what services are offered, and how to reach them. Due to possible language barriers and availability of roadside assistance, receiving help may be difficult.

Unusual Laws and Practices for Drivers

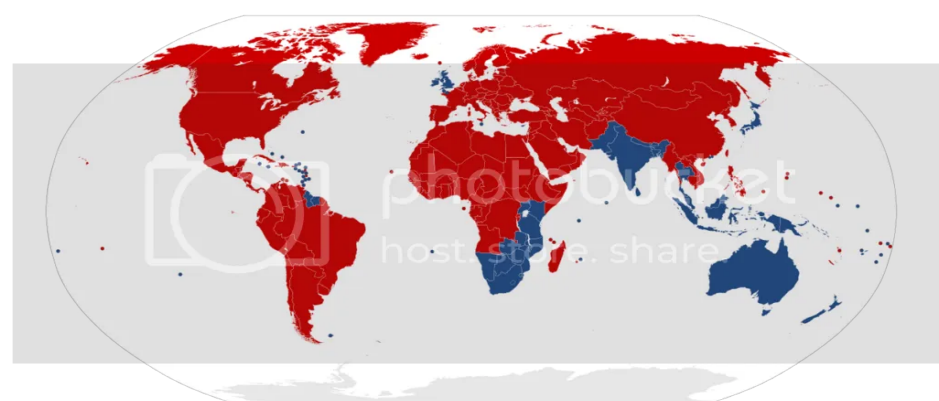
Generally speaking, poor driver competency increases the possibility of traffic accidents. Drivers' education is not a common practice overseas. Constituents should not expect the same courtesies as they would in the U.S. It is not uncommon for drivers not to stop or yield when required or to make right turns from the left lane and vice-versa. Around the world, drivers do not consistently use turn signals, opting instead for rudimentary hand/arm signals or nothing at all. Turning on a red light, unless accompanied by a green arrow, is generally not allowed in South America, Europe, or most of Asia. However, the green arrow does not give you the right-of-way.

Lane Use and Courtesies

A wide variety of vehicles (personal vehicles in various states of repair, bicycles, scooters, animal-driven carts, slower-moving utility vehicles, a variety of mass transit, and cargo trucks) share the roads around the world. Motorcycles may dart in and out of traffic with little or no warning, taxis may stop in the middle of the road to negotiate with potential passengers, and buses often travel in the oncoming lane to avoid traffic jams. In some areas, many cars may be older and poorly maintained. In many countries, small vehicles (mopeds, scooters, motorcycles) and pedestrians have the right-of-way. Conversely, larger vehicles (buses, long-haul cargo trucks) often employ a might-makes-right method of driving, essentially ignoring all other motorists and pedestrians.

In general on multi-lane highways, slower vehicles drive in the outer lane(s), and the far inside lane is used exclusively for passing or overtaking slower vehicles. It is not unusual for a speeding vehicle to tailgate and flash high-beam lights, in what might seem like aggressive behavior, as an indication for the slower vehicle to move over, even if other lanes are unoccupied. This is because in some countries, it is illegal to pass on an outer lane. Further, it is common for vehicles coming from the other direction to pass slower vehicles or for vehicles to drive in the middle of the road, even around blind turns.

Within the British Commonwealth and many former colony or protectorate countries (see attached map), many foreign drivers may not be used to driving on the left side of the road. This can be particularly hazardous when entering traffic circles and when turning at intersections with medians. In some countries, traffic moves on the right side of the road but right-side drive vehicles are used, creating traffic and spatial awareness risks.



Drivers may go (illegally) against the traffic flow, create traffic lanes, or drive on sidewalks in highly congested cities. Conversely, pedestrians may use roadways when sidewalks are lacking.

During the annual Songkran (New Year) holiday in April, the already high accident rate in Thailand is exacerbated by people throwing water at passing vehicles as part of the traditional celebration. Other holidays may similarly affect driving patterns and ease of transit.

Signage and Markings

Switzerland has four official languages, so travelers should be prepared for the signage to switch languages through the country. In other countries, marked signage and addresses are uncommon. And, in non-Latin languages (Greek, Semitic, Turkish, some African, and all Asian and Cyrillic languages), signage may be difficult to decipher and is unlikely to have complimentary Latin script. Road signs, if present, can be confusing. For example, while a traditional stop sign is a red octagon, the word may be printed in white on the street in India, a red triangle in Japan, a white triangle outlined in red in Tonga, or a white/black rectangle in Russia (see attached images). Further, in Germany,

a double white line painted on the street denotes no passing, while in France it is a single white line. Many rental agencies will have information for foreign drivers regarding local signage; you should be familiar with common signs before getting on the road.



Infrastructure Hazards

In many low-lying areas, officials may remove manhole covers to speed the drainage of standing water. Travelers are advised to watch for poles with plastic garbage bags tied to them as these are often the only warnings to motorists that a manhole cover has been removed. In some places, tree branches, rock piles, or other nondescript items are placed in the road 100 meters or so before a stalled vehicle as a warning.

In many rural or mountainous areas, drivers can also expect a lack of safety features, including crash barriers and guard rails, and little/no vehicle or road lighting. And, in rural locales, free ranging animals are often herded or grazed along roadsides. These animals can be skittish and dart into traffic when alarmed or surprised.

Law Enforcement Practices

In many countries, traffic rules are inconsistently enforced, so speed limits, lane markings, and road signs are frequently ignored.

Alcohol

In many places, drunk-driving enforcement checkpoints operate randomly and frequently with varied times and locations. Travelers should be prepared to submit to random breath-analysis testing under most circumstances. Generally, legal limits are less than U.S. standards, sometimes with zero tolerance. Penalties can include fines, lengthy prison terms under harsh conditions, and a revocation of the license. Generally speaking, the risk of drunk driving is higher on observed weekends and local holidays. And, long-haul commercial drivers may resort to drinking alcohol and taking stimulants to maximize their work day.

Accidents

In many places, a vehicular accident that does not result in serious injury, fatality, or significant damage is often settled without police involvement. However, some countries require vehicles to remain precisely in place for an investigation, and moving a vehicle may constitute an admission of guilt. In others, the more wealthy (or presumed wealthy) individual, regardless of fault, is expected to pay damages. Police may take into custody the driver(s) and/or passengers involved in an accident resulting in serious injury/death, even if the driver has insurance and appears not to have been at fault. Drivers may be detained for several days until culpability is determined – in an accident involving a fatality, a driver may be imprisoned for months -- and appropriate reparations are paid. Drivers should be conscious that accidents, even minor ones, can draw angry, potentially violent, crowds very quickly; this is especially the case if a pedestrian or a prized animal is involved.

Ticketing

Driving while using a cellular phone without hands-free technology is prohibited in most countries, but even hands-free cellular use is prohibited in some. The use of GPS mapping services that highlight law enforcement speed traps are illegal in many countries, and penalties can include fines to imprisonment. Every country has maximum speed limits for highway, city, residential, and rural driving.

Speeding is often enforced by a system of automatic cameras that send tickets by mail (or are automatically charged to rentals) and/or officer enforcement. In other places, cameras exist as deterrents but are not actually used for penalties. Stationary police may ticket for traffic violations, and fines – legitimate or otherwise -- can be substantial. Transit police may conduct traffic-related enforcement stops on foot at static locations sometimes marked by traffic cones in which officer(s) will signal to a driver to pull over. Valid traffic fines will be accompanied by paperwork, similar to a traffic ticket in the U.S. Legitimate fines, often in cash, can be paid on the spot but should always be accompanied by a receipt and official paperwork.

Corruption

Drivers may encounter official corruption, often linked to minor driving infractions. In some cases, legitimate police policy is to confiscate a driver's license until a fine is paid, which requires a driver to pay the fine at a bank, post office, or other official location, and bring proof of payment to a police station to recover the license; however, police officers at these traffic stops are reported to solicit bribes to "take care" of the violation on the spot in lieu of proceeding with the formal, complex process of paying a ticket and recovering the confiscated license.

Checkpoints

Legitimate and illegitimate security checkpoints are common around the world and can be difficult to discern. Legitimate ones are in place for security reasons, and foreign visitors are rarely questioned. During the holiday season or during a period of heightened security, additional checkpoints may be established highways, at city limits, and near government buildings. Most vehicles are allowed to proceed without inspection, but drivers should be prepared to produce vehicle registration documents, personal identification, car rental contracts, and/or drivers' licenses on request. Regardless of location, all drivers should stop and proceed only when waved through.

Criminals may also use roadblocks to rob cars and buses. Clandestine, impromptu roadblocks can appear on major highways, but the risk is greater on rural roads after dark. Several businesses have reported harassment at illegal checkpoints along rural highways near the U.S.-Mexico border. Some reports of highway robberies include accusations that police or soldiers, or assailants dressed as police or soldiers, have been involved.

Crimes that Target Rental Cars

Petty Theft

Vehicle break-ins and thefts from vehicles, either occupied or empty, occur frequently around the world. Thieves often look for valuables left in plain sight and target higher-end vehicles (sedans, SUVs) with expensive upgrades. Theft from vehicles is often highest in areas frequented by tourists—especially in parking areas for attractions where the vehicle's occupants will be away for an extended period of time.

Caution is required when driving through economically depressed areas. Thieves will approach a vehicle stopped in traffic, smash a window, reach in to grab a valuable item, and flee. Smash-and-grabs often focus on lone female drivers, distracted drivers, or cars with open windows. Drivers have been approached by thieves who distract drivers at traffic lights while their accomplice attempts to steal items from the passenger side. Smash-and-grab thefts are sometimes associated with violence.

Armed Robberies

Armed robberies are not uncommon in many urban areas. Carjacking and highway robbery are serious problems in Mexico and have a high tendency to turn fatal for the victim. The use of firearms is very common, and victims should avoid long stretches of highways around the US-Mexico border. Criminals (hidden in the grass or in ditches) may rush a vehicle stopped in traffic and attempt to open the vehicle doors. If all doors are locked and the driver fails to take immediate action, the group may attempt to break a window to access the vehicle and gain control violently. Occurrences of these incidents increase at night and also occur frequently in heavy traffic from which it is difficult to escape.

A particularly troubling trend in more congested areas is the use of motorcycles for armed robbery. Emboldened armed robbers have attacked vehicles on main roads in broad daylight. Typically, two men on a motorcycle accost the driver of a car and demand the driver's cell phone or other valuables. In some cases, armed robberies have turned violent. A few have included sexual assaults of victims. The assailants are able to flee the scene quickly.

Visitors should also be aware of an increase in criminals using remote key fobs to unlock vehicle doors in parking lots.

Advice/Guidance

In many urban locations, using the local public transit system may be easier and faster than complying with local self-driving laws and customs and fees and avoiding criminality. Further, many large, cities discourage urban driving by issuing a congestion charge or employing rotating access based on license plate numbers. For guidance on specific transit safety and security, please review the annual Crime and Safety Report for the intended destination. The following highlight general best practices for self-driving:

- Do not patronize rental companies that do not have paperwork translated into English.
- Confirm the type of fuel required for the vehicle. Remember that gasoline is generally listed at cost in local currency per liter (not USD per gallon), and many cars may run on diesel fuel, although increasing numbers may be electric or use alternative fuel sources.
- Even when use is not legally mandated, the use of seat belts whenever possible is advised.
- If the use of a cell phone is necessary, pull over to a safe location for the duration of the call. Know the laws on cell phone usage. Motorists should generally carry a cellular phone and first aid kit in case of an emergency.
- Plan routes, and notify family/friends of your itinerary. Know the signage and street markings of your destination. Avoid becoming stranded in remote regions or accidentally entering unsafe areas. In some regions, it is highly recommended to caravan with at least two cars outside of major cities. In particularly remote areas, 4X4 vehicles with winches are recommended. Vehicles should be in top condition and have spare tires and water, food, and emergency supplies.
- Investigate whether credit cards can be used at gas stations and have local currency on hand in case of emergency.
- If you are being followed/harassed by another driver, try to find the nearest police station, hotel, or other public facility from which to call the police. Never lead the person to your home or stop and get out of your vehicle. It is recommended that anyone involved in an accident resulting in the formation of a mob proceed directly to a safe place (police station) to resolve the situation. Remaining at the scene of an accident can be a risk to one's safety.
- When possible, park in a protected, illuminated area like inside a residential compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of your destination. When parking in a shopping lot, park as close as possible to the store entrance and away from dumpsters, bushes, or large vehicles. Always check the interior and exterior of your vehicle prior to getting in.
- Always drive with headlights on. In some countries, this is mandated. Regardless of the law, it is a means not only for basic visibility but for making other drivers aware of your presence.
- Avoid driving at night, especially in poorly illuminated areas. In many locations, U.S. Embassy personnel are prohibited from driving outside the major cities after dark (generally after 6pm).
- Keep car doors locked and windows up. Especially while idling, leave adequate room (generally at least half a car length of space) to maneuver out of a threatening situation and to avoid rear-end collisions. Be prepared to take evasive action at any time.
- The use of a car alarm is strongly recommended to deter vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents. Do not leave anything of value in plain view in parked vehicles.
- In the event of a flat tire or other breakdown, keep doors/trunk locked and the windows rolled up to prevent theft of items by “Good Samaritan helpers” while you are outside the vehicle.
- Never drink alcohol or consume mind altering medications/drugs before or while driving. Alcohol consumption is a common factor in accidents. Give long-haul cargo trucks a wide berth.







For Further Information

For additional information on global health issues, please contact OSAC’s Health and Disease Analyst. For information on geopolitical security, please contact OSAC’s Research & Analyst Unit.

Helpful resources:

- <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/safety/road.html>
- <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country.html>
- <http://upgrd.com/roadmoretraveled/a-guide-to-driving-overseas.html>

Attachments

-  [Left-Side Driving_Map.png](#) 
-  [Self-Driving_Final.pdf](#) 
-  [Stop Signs From Around the World.jpg](#) 

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