

by Jennifer G. Williams

Living or travelling in Europe can be exciting, yet challenging—especially when you get on the road. In unfamiliar surroundings, with different laws and roadway customs, it's important to come prepared.

Until you're comfortable with European driving, it may be a good idea to take advantage of Europe's premiere public transit options—especially in larger metropolitan areas. Trains to various countries can also take you on weekend excursions without the driving hassle.



Near Bad Hersfeld: A7 autobahn and Hanover to Würzburg railway line with InterCityExpress train, photo by Jochen Keute © 2001-2008 DZT All rights reserved German National Tourist Board

## Licensed to Drive

Although many countries do not recognize U.S. driver's licenses, most countries accept an International Driving Permit (IDP). IDPs are honored in more than 150 countries outside the United States. An IDP functions as an official translation of a U.S. driver's license into 10 foreign languages. These licenses are not intended to replace valid U.S. state licenses and should only be used as a supplement to a valid U.S. license. IDPs are not valid in an individual's country of residence—meaning, if you live in Germany, you'll need to follow their rules and regulations for licensing, as well. Up to six months before you arrive overseas, you can obtain an IDP from an automobile association authorized by the U.S. Department of State to issue IDPs. The Department designated the American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile

Touring Alliance (through the National Auto Club) as the only authorized distributors of IDPs.

To apply for an IDP, you must be at least age 18, and you will need to present two passport-size photographs and your valid U.S. license. The cost of an IDP from these U.S. State Department-authorized organizations is less than \$20.00.

The AAA and the AATA/National Automobile Club are the only associations authorized by the U.S. Department of State to issue IDPs. Don't be fooled by offers from other agents to sell you an "International Driver's License."

Visit [www.travel.state.gov/travel/tips/safety/safety\\_1179.html](http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/tips/safety/safety_1179.html), [www.aaa.com/vacation/idpc.html](http://www.aaa.com/vacation/idpc.html), or [www.thenac.com/international\\_driving\\_permit.pdf](http://www.thenac.com/international_driving_permit.pdf) for more information.

## Get Insured

In general, your U.S. auto insurance does not cover you abroad; however, check with your insurance company—companies that have a large military clientele generally have overseas insurance options. But even if your policy is valid, it may not meet your new host country's minimum requirement for coverage.

Be sure to have the right amount of coverage before you get behind the wheel. In fact, if you're planning to ship a car or buy a car in Europe, you won't be able to pick up your vehicle unless you can show proof of adequate insurance.

Coverage for a car you own may be purchased from either a local European bank or insurance agency. Two types of plans are available:

- “All-risk” insurance – indicated by a green card – protects against any risk and is required if you plan to cross borders within Europe.
- Limited protection insurance is also available, but it is valid only for travel within a single European country.

## Rules of the Road

Knowing the rules of the road for the countries you live in or visit is the best thing you can do to drive safely in your new home. So before you travel, familiarize yourself with the driving laws for each of the countries you’ll be visiting.

Some common rules of the road include:

**Cruise in the right lane, pass on the left.** This is reversed in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Cyprus and Malta, where traffic always moves on the left of the median line.

### The Right Way for a Right-of-Way.

Faster-moving vehicles have the right of way. If you’re in the left lane and a car approaches from behind with flashing headlights, move to the right and let them pass. On a two-lane highway, pull to the shoulder and let them pass. One exception to this rule is that streetcars and buses pulling into traffic from marked bus stops have the right-of-way.

Throughout Europe, motorists typically give right-of-way to bicycles, scooters and motorcycles. Bikes and scooters are far more numerous than on American streets, so European drivers generally keep an eye out for them. At red lights or rail crossings, two-wheeled vehicles are expected to move to the front of the line.

**Big Ben! Parliament!** When driving in Europe, you will inevitably encounter roundabouts or traffic circles. These circular intersections, which are becoming more popular in some parts of the U.S., basically allow traffic to continue moving in one circular direction. To enter a roundabout or traffic circle:

- Slow as you approach the circle (stop if required by traffic signals or signs).
- Enter when you see a gap in traffic or when indicated by traffic signals.
- When entering, yield to traffic already in the circle.
- If you miss your exit, just circle the roundabout until it comes again (think Chevy Chase in *European Vacation*). If you’re unfamiliar with the area, you may want to make at least one full circle before planning your exit.

**Carry emergency gear.** Carrying emergency gear is required by law in many European countries. This may include a first-aid kit, fire extinguisher, fluorescent vests (to be worn in the case of a breakdown), and emergency triangles (to be set up by the car in the event you must pull over on a highway).

## New Driving Laws in Germany

*Effective January 1, 2009, new changes to traffic laws in Germany also apply to U.S. Soldiers, Army civilians and dependents. Changes include a zero tolerance law on alcohol for drivers under the age of 21, significantly higher fines—many times double the previous fine—for exceeding speed limits or for cruising in the left passing lane on the autobahn when the right lane is free of traffic.*

*The new, higher maximum fines for traffic offences aims at improving road safety in Germany. The fines primarily target the main causes of road accidents, including inappropriate speed, dangerous overtaking, right-of-way violations, ignoring red lights and failure to keep a safe distance to the vehicle in front. Speeders and tailgaters, as well as especially reckless drivers who deliberately endanger other road users will have to accept considerably higher fines. For a complete listing of the new fines, visit the German government’s website at [www.bmvbs.de/en/dokumente/1872.970156/Artikel/dokument.htm](http://www.bmvbs.de/en/dokumente/1872.970156/Artikel/dokument.htm)*

For more specific rules and regulations for your new host country, or for ones you plan to visit, check out that country’s tourism office (many of which can be found at [www.towd.com](http://www.towd.com)), or that country’s foreign embassy website (which can be found at [www.embassy.org/embassies/index.html](http://www.embassy.org/embassies/index.html)).

## Driving “Don’ts”

“While driving in Europe, don’t:

**Drink and drive:** In many countries the minimum blood alcohol level allowed by law is much lower than in the United States.

**Drive without a seatbelt:** There can be stiff penalties for driving or riding without a seatbelt. Most European countries also require child seats.

**Make a phone call while driving:** Use of cell phones without a hands-free device while driving in many European countries is prohibited. Fines and loss of driving privileges may result. Check with individual countries or municipalities about the usage of hands-free devices.

## Metric Mess

But officer, I thought I was going 120...

In Europe, you’ll be measuring distances by the metric system. To convert kilometers to miles, multiply the number of kilometers by six, then divide by 10 (or, just drop the zero).

Example: 120 km = 120 x 6 = 720 / 10 = 72 miles

Metric conversions also apply at the gas pump. Remember that in Europe, fuel is sold by the liter, not the gallon, so what looks reasonable could actually be quite pricey. Multiply the per-liter rate by four to get an idea of the per-gallon rate (one gallon = 3.8 liters, so multiplying by four will give you a close approximation). ●