
Driving in France - a guide

Posted by wickham - 2007/12/14 14:58

A guide to driving in France

France has strict road laws, even if French driving habits suggest otherwise. This is a guide to help you steer clear of trouble.

France is cracking down on its bad drivers, among the most deadly in Europe.

Drunk driving and speeding are blamed as the principle causes, and in 2003 the authorities launched an offensive against bad driving with extra policing of traffic and the instalment of fixed speed cameras throughout the country.

Despite this, the car still plays an essential role in French life, partly because of the country's geographical size. Many social activities, especially outside towns, necessitate the use of a vehicle and, among European countries, France has one of the highest number of cars per capita.

The country's road infrastructure is generally excellent, with well-kept toll motorways accessing every region.

The most important thing to understand about driving in France is that motorists in general have scant regard for rules, and one must constantly allow for the unexpected.

Things to know

French road regulations are broadly similar to those in the rest of Europe, but with a few notable exceptions. These include the infamous *priorité à droite*, which gives priority to motorists joining a forward direction from the right - except if this is restricted by a Stop sign, red traffic light or other indication.

It is very important to be constantly aware of the *priorité à droite*, which is sometimes applicable in seemingly illogical situations.

It is not uncommon for traffic on minor roads to have priority when joining large main streets from the right, at whatever angle and however hidden. It is also usual that this rule of priority to the right is arbiter of who gives way when two minor country roads meet.

Beware that French motorists often apply their 'right' with no regard to the consequences, and at great speed.

The standard speed limit in built-up areas is 50 kph (30mph), although this can be less (exceptions are most often 30 kph) and this will be indicated. If you are on a B-road and enter an area designated by a sign with place name bordered in red, you are required to reduce your speed to at most 50 kph even if the speed limit is not signalled.

In wet weather, the maximum motorway speed is reduced from 130 kph (80 mph) to 110 kph.

The drink-driving limit in France is 0.5 grammes of alcohol per litre of blood.

Passengers in a car equipped with rear seat safety belts must wear them. If your car does not have hazard warning lights you must carry a roadside triangle.

Did you know? It is an offence in France to carry a device detecting police speed radars, and doing so is punished with a fine and automatic confiscation of the equipment.

If you are driving a foreign registered vehicle, it must have a sticker showing the country origin, even if this is indicated on the registration plate.

Speed limits

Built-up areas: 50 kph unless otherwise indicated.

B-roads (routes nationales): 90 kph unless otherwise indicated. When raining, the indicated speed limit is reduced by 10 kph.

Motorways (autoroutes): 130 kph unless otherwise indicated. When raining, the indicated speed limit is reduced by 20 kph

You can, as a foreign resident in France, drive with a licence issued by another European Union state for an unlimited period. Driving licences issued by a non-EU state are valid only for the first 12 months of your stay, and must be surrendered after that in exchange for a French licence or, depending on the country (or US state) of issue, you may be required to re-sit a driving test.

French driving licences now include a 12-point penalty system, whereby driving offences are punished, on top of any other sanctions, by a reduction in points, an accumulation of which can lead to the invalidity of the licence.

Regulations concerning French-registered vehicles now include a mandatory inspection of roadworthiness on vehicles of five years or older. The contrôle technique is carried out only in licensed centres and is valid for two years. There is no longer any vehicle tax in France for privately-owned cars.

You are at all times required to carry the vehicle registration document and your personal ID. The French police and gendarmerie are entitled to stop you for verification of your car and yourself at will, and such spot checks are frequent and can include random breath tests.

Driving tips

Despite the many road regulations, it is easy to see French drivers regularly flouting quite basic laws, including driving in the wrong direction up one-way streets. It is best to understand this and react accordingly rather than to assume that your own respect of the law is all it will take to avoid an accident.

Few cars stop for pedestrians - who also often behave without regard to safety.
Always beware of cars jumping red lights, especially at night and/or on deserted junctions.

Always check the speed and behaviour of the car behind you while slowing, for often they may not be expecting you to do so. Similarly, pedestrians often aggressively 'defend' their rights by suddenly crossing a street without calculating your ability to stop.

Parking

City street parking is widespread and almost always controlled by pay-meters.
Many French cities offer ample underground car park space. City street parking is widespread and almost always controlled by pay-meters, which are increasingly (and in Paris, totally) operated by a specific credit card, available at most Tabacs (tobacconists who also sell postal and fiscal stamps, indicated by a distinctive red shop sign).

French motorists, especially in Paris, frequently nudge - or worse - the bumpers of surrounding cars when parking, and squeezing into a space is a challenge few flinch at.

Town and city residents are often able to park on meters within their neighbourhood at vastly reduced rates. Details are available at your local town hall, called la Marie.

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by wickham - 2007/12/14 14:58

The article states that the alcohol limit is 0.5 grammes per litre of blood. 0.5 grammes is 500 !! milligrammes. As far as I was aware, the limit is 50 milligrammes per litre of blood, although I have recently seen it given as 25 milligrammes.

Ralph Quarton

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by Debra - 2008/01/22 01:29

This is excellant Wickham,thank you!!

Deb:)

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by gengulphus - 2008/02/01 14:42

French road regulations are broadly similar to those in the rest of Europe, but with a few notable exceptions. These include the infamous priorité à droite, which gives priority to motorists joining a forward direction from the right - except if this is restricted by a Stop sign, red traffic light or other indication.

But France's infamous priorité à droite is not an exception to the general driving regulations in Europe. On the contrary it is the 'default rule' for establishing priority throughout virtually the whole continent, including: France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Roumania etc. etc.

The priority does not merely allow the motorist on the right to join the 'forward direction' - it gives him priority to enter the junction for any licit manoeuvre.

Admittedly it is rare for a French driver to use his indicators to give any hint as to his likely future movements, but if he is entering from the right and indicating 'left' (rather than merely 'joining the flow') has the priority to execute this manoeuvre.

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by peter - 2008/02/01 17:16

Can anyone advise me if there is something akin to either the AA or RAC in France?

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by Teejay - 2008/02/01 18:32

Europ Assistance?

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by Teejay - 2008/02/01 18:38

I am having difficulty tracking you Peter. First the Skateboarder, then the dog, now the 'invisibility' cloak.

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by Teejay - 2008/02/01 18:48

....also have a look at www.automobileclub.org

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Re:Driving in France - a guide

Posted by getcluke - 2008/02/03 20:38

Not aware of any French organisation but included in our 'Axa' car insurance is breakdown cover and when we did, a

depannage camion was sent out fairly promptly and the car taken to a garage for repairs.

Incidentally the cost of the insurance with this inclusion was still about 250 euros cheaper than we had been paying.

George

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