



TOUR de EUROPE

SEE EUROPE LIKE A LOCAL

DRIVING IN EUROPE & OTHER GENERAL HINTS

DRIVING:

GETTING AROUND BY GPS – Getting around in Europe is quite easy. The GPS systems we use are pre-programmed for the intended route on each day and will guide you to the front door of the hotel with unerring accuracy. It doesn't mean you cannot be vigilante. The maps in the GPS are updated regularly, but may not reflect recent changes, such as the opening of a new freeway, the changing of a street to one-way or pedestrian mall (all problems we've encountered). The fact that the overnight hotel is programmed as the daily destination means that you can have a detour of any distance and the GPS will get you back on track when you've finished your detour.

FUEL – The cost of fuel varied quite a bit. Highest was UK where most fuel was 85p a litre (\$2.15 AUS) for standard unleaded. On the continent it hovered around 0.80€ (\$1.60 AUS) per litre of unleaded. Diesel runs about 10 cents or pence cheaper than unleaded and a lot of cars in Europe are diesel powered. Our experience of a diesel powered Citroën C5 Wagon was very good, with good power and very good economy. You can expect a range of about 900 kms with the average 60 litre tank in most diesel powered cars in Europe.

ROADS – Most roads in Europe are very good. All Autoroutes in France and the Autostradas in Italy are also toll roads, with all booths accepting credit cards (there was some inconsistency with type of card eg. the majority took AMEX but one or two didn't because of different operating companies). Some motorways in Croatia are also toll roads. Switzerland, Slovenia, Austria and Hungary use a system of annual tax stickers (you can purchase in Austria for shorter periods). These are compulsory to use the motorways and can be purchased at the borders or at service stations. The fines for not displaying the stickers can be as high as €750.

The roads chosen for our tour are selected to be interesting and scenic for the most part. These will generally be the "B" roads into the countryside as they offer the most interest. Sometimes though we cannot avoid the freeways, either to get some distance up or the fact there is no other way.

Signposting is generally very good with some signs in English, but all having a road number (such as A15 etc) on them. "A" roads (or E for European) roads are the main highways and freeways. Lesser roads can have different designations in different countries.

The standard of driving was very good and adherence to lane discipline was excellent. France was the most comfortable to drive in because there was very little differential between the slowest and fastest vehicles on the Autoroutes. Speed limits are generally 130 kph on most freeways in Europe with radar enforcement advertised on road signs. The only time we've seen a speed trap was in Greece (one or two scattered around), Croatia (all over the place) & Romania (each village has a speed trap) however, and locals tell us that Police in Europe are greatly more interested in getting drinking drivers off the road. The Police Chief in Grenoble, Fr. told us that over 0.08% Blood Alcohol Content can get you 6 months in jail! (check the table for the legal limit in all countries). Norway will even gaol you for 12 months for anything above 0.02%. If you have an accident, you can expect to be breathalysed as a matter of course.

Very few drivers go much over the speed limit except in Italy, where a car closing from behind at more than 50

- 80 kph over the limit means you keep a good eye on the rear view mirror! (and 90% of them were driving Audi's). The first sign you see is some flashing lights far off in the distance behind you and if you don't move over straight away, the next sound you hear is the sound of a car horn and locking brakes. Most lanes on free-ways have minimum speeds with trucks prohibited in the left lane (fast lane). Most trucks are limited to 80 or 90 kmh in Europe. The famed German Autobahn's are not all deregulated. Some of the older ones (and narrower) have speed limits imposed. You'll also generally find a lot of roadworks going on all over Europe and when there's a pile up you can be stuck for hours.

Give way rules are very similar to Australia. One to remember is that ascending vehicles have the right of way on the narrower alpine passes

TRAFFIC – Some places such as London and Paris are very congested, but the rest of Europe is relatively free of traffic (motorways excepted). The main exception to the road rules is the roundabout at the Arc de Triomphe, which appears exempt from any road rules (and insurance companies have an agreement to cover their own damages). Cars are Left Hand Drive in all Europe and the traffic travels on the right. If I have to make a comparison, driving in the European countryside would be similar to driving in the countryside (as distinct to the outback) in Australia. Roads such as the Newell highway or the Bruce or Pacific highways would be a good indication of what it's like in Europe outside the cities. All the cities that the Tour de Europe goes to except the major capitals are generally free of the rush hour congestion.

LICENSES – Most countries will accept your 'photo' style driver's license, but there are always a few that want International Drivers Permits. Latest updates are available on the RACV website.

TRAFFIC FINES - A quite common thing in Europe is for 'On the Spot Fines' to mean exactly that – you pay the policeman there and then! Some patrol cars even carry portable ATM's. If you don't have the cash, they will take you to an ATM! Be sure to get an official receipt.

BORDER CROSSINGS – The only border crossings you'll strike are going into and out of Switzerland, Hungary and Croatia. You'll need to show your passport, car rego papers and the green Euro Insurance card. The rego papers and Insurance card will be given to you when you pick up the car.

CAR ACCIDENTS— Hopefully this won't happen to you but if it does you'd be advised to get a police report of the damage. Some countries like Hungary & Croatia ask for a police report on cars that are visibly damaged before you cross into their country. If you don't have it you may have long delays leaving the country.

CAR SECURITY – The same rules apply there as they do here: don't leave valuable equipment in the car. Be wary also of people 'helping' you load your suitcases in the car unless they are an official porter from your hotel and don't leave the doors or bootlid open while loading unless you are in the hotel forecourt.

DAYTIME RUNNING LIGHTS—A tricky one as there is no consistent law throughout Europe. Best just to follow what the locals are doing.

MOBILE PHONES— Using hand held mobile phones while driving is illegal in all the countries we travel through.

GENERAL— Take the same precautions that you would take here. Obviously, striking wandering animals is much less of a problem over there than it is in this country. Some drivers in countries tend to be aggressive, mainly Hungary & Croatia, but generally, out in the countryside its pretty laid back. Slow moving farm traffic is one thing to watch out for on the secondary roads.

You also need to be thinking when driving as its easy to drive on the wrong side after doing something familiar,

such as exiting a service station or car park.

| Country | Free-way Limit | Other Roads Limit | Blood Alcohol Limit | Seat Belts | Daylight Head-lights | Toll or Sticker? | Comments |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| France | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | Toll | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Germany | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | | | SOME autobahns unlimited speed limit |
| Italy | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather & outside built up areas | Toll | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Austria | 130 kph | 100 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | Sticker | |
| Hungary | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.00% | ✓ | Outside built up areas | Sticker or e-sticker | |
| Croatia | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather & winter | Toll | |
| Slovenia | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | Sticker | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Switzerland | 120 kph | 80 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Poland | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.02% | ✓ | ✓ (in winter) | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Spain | 120 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Portugal | 120 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | | |
| Belgium | 120 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | | |
| Netherlands | 120 kph | 80 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Denmark | 130 kph | 80 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Czech Republic | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.00% | ✓ | ✓ | Sticker | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Sweden | 110 kph | 70 kph | 0.02% | ✓ | ✓ | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Finland | 120 kph | 80 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Norway | 100 kph | 80 kph | 0.02% | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Lithuania | 110 kph | 90 kph | 0.04% | ✓ | | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Latvia | 110 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Estonia | 110 kph | 90 kph | 0.00% | ✓ | ✓ | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |
| Greece | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | | |
| Albania | | 90 kph | | ✓ | | | No freeways in Albania |
| Turkey | 120 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | In bad weather | | |
| Bulgaria | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | Sticker | |
| Romania | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.00% | ✓ | In bad weather | | |
| Serbia | 120 kph | 100 Kph | 0.05% | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Slovakia | 130 kph | 90 kph | 0.00% | ✓ | ✓ (in winter) | | Reduce speed limit by 20 kph in rain |

GENERAL HINTS

Mobile Phones: The exorbitant cost of global roaming on your Australian mobile phone could mean a phone bill of thousands of dollars when you get back. This is especially true for the new smart phones such as the iPhone and Android. There are a number of ways to keep it under check. You could pick up a pre-paid SIM card when you arrive in Europe. This loses you your own mobile number though, which may be important for business. Vodaphone, Orange and T-Mobile seem to be fairly ubiquitous around Europe.

There are also a number of what's called a Travel SIM available. Maxroam is one and TravelSIM is another. TravelSIM is available at most Post Offices and some travel agents. Though you do get a new number while you're away, at least you know what the number is before you go and can let people know what it is or program a diversion from your existing number. Data roaming is another issue. You can reduce your data costs on iPhones and such by an APP called Onavo. Its available for iPhone and Android and works by compressing the data you send to make each transmission up to 85% smaller. You use up less of your data allowance using this method and thus your bill at the end. Its very worthwhile if you are a heavy user of Google on your mobile or are prone to sending snapshots all over the world from where you are.

The internet calling programme Skype is also available as a APP for Android and Iphone and is considerably cheaper than using your normal provider. This is especially so if you set it up to call somebody else who has Skype installed on a computer or smartphone.

Cash & Credit Cards: While credit cards are generally accepted around the world, there are some differences in Europe. Firstly, your cards need to have the Maestro or Cirrus logo on them to be able to use them overseas (most cards do have this). Secondly be aware that AMEX and Diners are not so well accepted in Europe as Visa and Mastercard. Thirdly, you will get screwed on the fees and conversion rates if you withdraw cash from a card. This also applies to a lesser extent with purchases: you need to check with your bank on this. There are a couple of options if this concerns you. The new travel cards act like a cash card and you can pre-load them with up to \$10k. You get no fees when you use it for cash or purchases, but you will get the usual conversion rate in the banks favour. The second option is the 28 Degrees travel card from GE Finance. It's a full Visa card, but has no fees or currency conversion fees but the bank does get you 1% or so on the conversion rate..

As far as cash is concerned, most of the countries we go to use the Euro as their currency. The exceptions are Switzerland (Swiss Franc), Hungary (Florint) and Croatia (Kuna). In these countries there are plenty of opportunities to change Euro's into the local currency. In the Eastern countries, the use of credit cards is not as common as say, France, Italy or Austria, but this is more of an issue in the countryside rather than in the cities.

As far as money exchanges are concerned, the worst place to exchange money is at the airport. If you need to arrange money before you go, go to a TravelEx outlet or organise it through your local bank branch. Sometimes its better to exchange in the country you're going to e.g you get 25 Thai Baht to the dollar exchanging money here in Australia, but you get 30 Thai Baht if you exchange your Aussie Dollars in Bangkok! Says something doesn't it!

Travellers cheques just don't cut it anymore: they're hard to exchange and a pain to get replaced if you loose them.

Travel Insurance: Don't leave home without it! Not only is it a good idea but in most countries you will not get treated at a doctors or hospital without insurance or doh-re-mi. Medical costs can be very high and if you need medi-vac to better facilities or back home it will cost heaps.

Safe Driving!

HARRY CADLE