

Your introduction to driving in Europe



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"Be careful at traffic lights. For a start, you probably won't see them in a UK car without becoming a contortionist. What's more, the change from green to red can often be a lot quicker than you're used to in the UK. If you have a front seat passenger, get them to be a second pair of eyes at any tricky junctions."

Peter Baker, Motoring TV Producer

We live in a world of rapid change. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the roads. Wherever in Europe your journey may take you, you'll find new motorways, new signs, new tolls and constantly changing regulations conspiring to confuse you, however experienced you may be.

AT GEM Motoring Assist, we want to reduce that confusion. Clearly we can't cover everything you need to know in the few short pages of this leaflet. But we can point you in the right direction, thus ensuring your European journey - whether in summer or winter, for business or pleasure - is as safe and enjoyable as possible.

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Sources of information, pre-journey checklist

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Summaries of information for individual countries

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Dealing with an accident, breakdown or crime can be traumatic at the best of times. Being away from home only makes matters worse, especially if you don't speak the local language.

Before you go . . .

There's no doubt that careful planning will help make your European journey an enjoyable experience. We've compiled a checklist you can follow to ensure you have everything arranged before you leave.



For the vehicle

Service:

It makes sense to get your car serviced before you travel. As a minimum, ensure the tyres have plenty of tread left and that water and oil levels are checked and topped up if required. Remember also to make regular checks during your journey, perhaps each time you re-fuel.

Vehicle Registration Document

Police in many countries can demand that you prove you have the right to be driving your car. That means you need to show the registration document, or a suitable letter of authorization if the registration document is not in your name. Remember you should never leave the registration document in the car.

Nationality plate

Your vehicle must display a nationality plate of an approved pattern, design and size. The GB Euro-Plate has been a legal alternative since 2001 but it's not valid outside the EU.

MOT

If your car is more than three years old, make sure you take its current MOT test certificate with you.

Insurance

If you are planning a trip to Europe, you should find that your insurance policy provides you with the minimum amount of cover you need. But do contact your insurer before you go, to confirm exactly what level of cover you have.

Mechanical adjustments

Check the adjustments required for your headlights before you go. Beam deflectors are generally sold at the ports, on ferries and in the Eurotunnel terminal at Folkstone, but be warned - the instructions can be a little confusing! The alternative is to ask a local garage to do the job for you before you go. If you choose this, then make sure you shop around as prices for undertaking this very simple task vary enormously.

“Don't rely on being able to fill up out of hours at an unstaffed fuel station.
The credit card readers seem to dislike UK PIN numbers.”

Dr P.A. Wakely, French expert



For you and your fellow travellers

Passports

Check everyone's passport to make sure they are all valid. Don't wait for your passport to expire. Unused time, rounded up to whole months (minimum one month, maximum nine months), will usually be added to your new passport. New passports usually take two weeks to arrive. The Passport Office can do a seven-day and even a same-day service, but you'll have to pay a lot more.



Driving licence

The new style photocard driving licence is valid in all European Union countries. However, you must ensure you carry both parts: the credit card-size photocard and the paper licence. The previously used pink EU format UK licence is also valid, though it may not be recognized in some areas. So if you haven't already done so, now is the time to update your old licence.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is vital as it covers you against medical emergencies, accidents, thefts and cancellations and repatriation. Ask for details before buying any travel insurance policy. Find out what it covers you for, and to what value. More important, check what's not covered.

EHIC

The E111 medical treatment form is no longer valid. Instead, you need an EHIC card for everyone travelling. These are free and cover you for any medical treatment you may need during a trip to another EU country or Switzerland. However, do check at the time of requiring assistance that your EHIC will be accepted. Apply online (www.dh.gov.uk), by telephone (0845 606 2030) or complete an application form, available from a Post Office. Allow up to 14 days for the cards to arrive.

Money matters

Shop around to find the best deals on getting foreign currency - and you should be able to avoid paying hefty commission rates. Order in plenty of time, and you can have currency or travellers' cheques delivered to your door at no extra cost. If you buy on line, you will generally find commission-free deals. However, check the exchange rate you're being offered is fair. If you use cash machines abroad, expect your bank or card company to make charges - taking out £100 will typically cost an extra £4.25 to £4.50. Take some travellers' cheques if you're heading to more remote parts where you may not find many ATMs!

Equipment Check list

This check-list represents GEM's suggestions for what you should take with you in the car. Different countries have different rules about what's compulsory and these rules change from time to time. So it's important to check carefully before you set out. Your insurer should prove helpful in letting you know which items are required for which countries.

- Fire extinguisher
- First aid kit
- High-visibility jacket - one for each occupant
- Two warning triangles
- Replacement bulbs and fuses
- Spare spectacles (if worn) for each driver
- Snow chains for winter journeys into the mountains



Country by country

It would be impossible to cover all the motoring law and vehicle requirements imposed by every country, as each has its own road traffic laws. Check the Foreign Office website (www.fc.gov.uk), which offers specific travel advice and road safety information where appropriate for every country. Here is a brief summary of useful - and in some cases - unusual driving information for your European journey:



Austria

A UK driving licence without a photograph will not be accepted as proof of identity. You must not park a caravan within 500m of a lake.



Belgium

You will have to pay to use most public toilets - including those at motorway service stations. You are not permitted to use cruise control on motorways when traffic is heavy.



Denmark

Cars towing caravans and trailers are prohibited from overtaking on motorways at certain times of day. Always check for cyclists in cycle lanes before turning right. The cyclists often have priority.

Finland

If you hit an elk or deer, you must report the collision to the police. Speeding fines are worked out according to your income.

France

Never use only sidelights for driving. If you need lights, then make sure you use dipped headlights. If you're caught driving well above the speed limit, you might find yourself stranded on the spot. Police have the power to confiscate your driving licence and impound your vehicle.



"In France, Gendarmes and police officers are particularly strict at Stop signs and have been known to lie in wait to catch unsuspecting drivers. So even if a junction is clear all round, do ensure your wheels stop turning before you pull out."

Roger Crisp, Travel Writer

Germany

Check your fuel gauge regularly as it's an offence to run out of fuel on a German motorway. It's also an offence to make rude signs to other road users. Don't expect all German motorways to be free of speed limits. There is a recommended maximum of 130km/h, though many stretches of motorway have specific posted limits.

Greece

Greece has Europe's highest accident rate in terms of the number of crashes per vehicle. Pay particular attention at traffic light junctions, as red lights are frequently ignored. Carrying a petrol can in a vehicle is forbidden.

Ireland

Beware of rural three-lane roads, where the middle overtaking lane is used by traffic travelling in both directions. On wider rural roads it's the accepted practice for slower vehicles to pull over to let faster traffic through. Children under the age of 12 may not ride in the front seat unless it is fitted with a special child's restraint.



Italy

Police can impound your vehicle if you cannot present the relevant ownership documents when requested. You will need a red and white warning sign if you plan to use any rear-mounted luggage rack such as a bike rack.



The Netherlands

You must give way to trams and to cyclists on cycle paths. Do not use your full beam headlights by day, nor when their use inconveniences pedestrians or other drivers.



Norway

You'll find what amounts to a zero tolerance where drinking and driving is concerned. Only 0.1mg of alcohol per millilitre of blood is permitted (compared to 0.8 in the UK). On hilly roads, vehicles travelling downhill have priority; vehicles going up the hill are required to use a passing bay if there is insufficient room for two vehicles to pass.



Portugal

When parking, make sure your vehicle is facing in the same direction as the traffic flow. If you are towing a caravan, you must have a current inventory of the caravan's contents to show a police officer if requested.



Spain

If you need glasses for driving, then the law requires you to carry a spare pair with you in the car. It's compulsory to carry two spare warning triangles, spare bulbs for your car and reflective jackets.



Sweden

Use of dipped headlights is compulsory day and night for drivers of all vehicles, including motorbikes. Be on the look-out for large animals such as elk and deer on country roads.



Switzerland

If you plan to use a Swiss motorway, ensure your car is displaying a special tax disc - known as a vignette - in the windscreen. These are available to purchase from tourist offices.

If you need glasses for driving, then the law requires you to carry a spare pair with you in the car.



Turkey

Take great caution if you're driving at dusk. Many local drivers put off using their lights until it's properly dark, so you may find oncoming traffic very hard to spot. During the time of Ramadan, many people will do without food and water between the hours of sunrise and sunset. This can seriously reduce levels of alertness, especially among people driving buses, trucks and taxis.



"I love touring eastern Europe, so I've become used to encountering a lot of horse-drawn carts with no lights. I therefore suggest that you avoid driving at night on country roads. After all, you are here to see the country and you don't see it at night - nor do you see the back of the cart before you bump into it."

David Stokes, Motoring Journalist

If things go wrong

What to do in the event of an accident or breakdown

If you have been involved in an accident, you must stop. Place a warning triangle at a suitable distance prior to the accident scene. Call the police if necessary.

The emergency telephone number in EU countries is 112. Exchange details with the other driver(s). Your insurer will have supplied forms for this. Obtain the names and addresses of any witnesses. Make a careful note of the position and circumstances of the incident. Take photographs as well, if possible. Contact your insurance company immediately with details of what happened. They will have supplied you with an emergency contact telephone number. They will also probably need notification in writing.

"Keep a disposable camera in your car's glove compartment just in case you have an accident or your car gets damaged. But be careful. Don't try to take photographs of anyone else at the scene, as you might easily make a tense situation even worse."

Andy MacKay, Motoring Journalist

If your vehicle breaks down you should pull over if possible - for your own safety and in order not to impede other traffic. Place a warning triangle at a suitable distance prior to the breakdown scene.

Call for assistance. On motorways it is important to use an emergency telephone. These are located every 2km and will connect you to an official breakdown operator. On other roads, call the emergency breakdown number provided by your insurer.



About GEM Motoring Assist

Established in 1932 as the Company of Veteran Motorist originally to combat the increasing number of road accidents, GEM Motoring Assist today remains the UK's leading driver-based road safety association with around 65,000 members. All set a good example on the road by agreeing to drive with care, courtesy and concentration.

Members enjoy our free quarterly magazine, Good Motoring; free road safety, motor legal, technical and insurance advice; experienced driver assessments; specially negotiated discounts on insurances and a host of other services.



Stay safe, stay alert

- Do make sure you schedule regular breaks into your journey.
- Fatigue is a major cause of collisions, particularly on motorways, so if you feel tired, don't be tempted to press on.
- Stop and get a proper rest.
- Don't overload your car. Not only can it put unnecessary stress on your brakes and suspension, it can also invalidate your insurance if you are involved in a collision.
- Always try to park on the right hand side of the road.
- This will help you avoid the possibility of driving away on the 'wrong side'.
- Take particular care as a pedestrian abroad; make sure you look to the left for oncoming traffic.

UK breakdown cover

With breakdown cover from GEM Motoring Assist, help is only a phone call away. Our 24 hour rescue Control Centre will quickly arrange assistance from one of our nationwide network of more than 1,200 breakdown specialists, with a combined fleet of thousands of vehicles.

Three levels of cover

Highly competitive premiums

Member covered in any vehicle*

Average 41 minute callout

*See document of Insurance for full details



"Petrol stations seem to be where we are most likely to forget we're abroad. So when you're pulling out, don't look once, look twice - in both directions. And if you've pulled into a petrol station on the left, remember you'll be crossing a lane of traffic when you pull out again."

Abby Luckhurst, Consumer Motoring Editor

If you'd like to find out more about the benefits of GEM membership, you can:
visit our website

www.motoringassist.com
right now call us on 01342 825676

GEM Motoring Assist is a trading name of the Financial Services Authority.

GEM
MOTRING ASSIST

Complete the details on this card and pop it straight in the post to us.
No stamp is required.



Please send me details of GEM membership

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Tel: _____

Email: _____

GEM Motoring Assist

At GEM Motoring Assist we're here to help you with all your motoring needs. You'll find plenty of useful information in this booklet that will help make any European road trip as safe and enjoyable as possible. But before you set off, do check out our web site or call us to find out how we can help you.



"Take extra care when you're driving on and off the ferry.

Please do as we ask, as we're all pretty good at loading and unloading the car deck in next to no time!"

Chris Fuller, P&O Ferries

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