

TIPS FOR DRIVING ON THE CONTINENT

Maltese drivers motoring on the continent face a number of challenges that not only emerge from having to drive on the other side of the road, on the right, but also from driving on roads that are very different from the ones in Malta, and occasionally in conditions that they would not normally come across. In this brief guide we are providing some important tips that inexperienced drivers are recommended that they follow carefully. Although insurance protection takes away the financial uncertainty from the risk of driving abroad, the consequences of an accident might not just be the spoiling of a holiday but more serious and far-reaching, so as always, prevention is better than cure.

1. Your car

Make sure that your car is in good running order and if it has not been recently serviced it is wise to have one done before travelling with it. You will be driving much longer distances than you would normally in Malta, so you need to check that your tyres are in the right condition. If your tyre thread depth is low, it means your tyres need replacing. Remember the tyre is the only contact patch between you and the road, so it needs to be in its best condition to keep you safe. The legal tyre thread in Europe is 1.6mm across the central three quarters of the tyre. You may be fined if your tyres do not meet this requirement.



You may need to adjust your headlamps to drive for driving on the right-hand side of the road so as not to dazzle oncoming drivers. One way of doing this is to fit headlamp beam converters

In some countries it is necessary to have a Reflective (high visibility) Jacket for each passenger, a Warning Triangle and/or a First Aid kit. It is

recommended that you also carry a fire extinguisher, replacement bulbs, a high-quality torch, and additional engine oil and water for topping up if needed.

2. Driving on the right

A mental adjustment is needed but with a bit of extra effort and concentration it is not too difficult.

- Be aware of the risk of lapsing into 'left hand-side autopilot' at roundabouts, in T-junctions and leaving a petrol station
- If you have to overtake, exercise extra caution as it is not easy in a right-hand drive car and may be safer when you reach a stretch of dual carriageway
- Remember the far right-hand lane is the slow lane, the inner left-hand lane is the fast lane
- Be careful when approaching roundabouts as you negotiate these in the anti-clockwise direction
- Ideally you should have a passenger to assist you with navigation and to keep a look out when over-taking as he/she will have better visibility than you. The passenger can also handle payments at toll roads.
- Pay particular attention when there is no traffic around as you will need to be sure of where you need to be on the road



3. General safety tips

- Sat-navs are invaluable but they may cause you to take your eyes off the road, be aware of the risk, it is always best to plan your route ahead.
- Keep loose change within reach, you will probably need it for toll roads, and it can be distracting to look around for it when needed
- Expect the unexpected – drive carefully and cautiously, taking extra care to be really observant
- Make sure you are aware of the specific traffic rules of the countries you are visiting and that you adhere to them
- Driving is tiring particularly in unfamiliar areas and for much longer periods than you are used to, so taking frequent breaks and stopping in a safe place to rest is essential
- Using your car for long periods increases wear and tear so check your tyres, windscreen, mirrors, and lights through the holiday
- Always wear your seatbelt and make sure that your passengers are wearing it too.

4. Different driving rules

Each country you visit is likely to have rules and regulations that you need to be aware of and observe, so be prepared before you leave. Here we are listing some of the requirements for the three continental countries most visited, but we recommend you do your own research as well.

Italy

- A Warning Triangle, Spare Tyre, Reflective Jackets for each occupant and winter and snow chains are required
- At junctions, drivers coming from the right always have priority unless indicated by road signs.
- On roads with two or more lanes, you must occupy the free lane furthest to the right as the left lanes are reserved for overtaking.
- Be aware of the speed limits which are normally well displayed on road signs.
The maximum speed limit on motorways is 130km/h but this drops to 110km/h in poor weather conditions. On main roads it is between 90 and 100km/h and drops to 50km/h in built-up areas.
- Dipped headlights must be used during the day outside of built-up areas and when visibility is poor (e.g. snow and rain). They must also be used in tunnels.
- Headlamp beam deflectors need to be used to adapt to driving on the right-hand side of the road
- Snow chains or winter tyres must be used between November and April in areas where there's more risk of snow or ice. Drivers are notified of the requirement to fit snow tyres or carry snow chains by road signs in affected areas



France

- A Warning Triangle, Spare Tyre, Reflective Jackets for each occupant and winter and snow chains are required. All vehicles must carry a first aid kit. In addition, your car needs to display a Crit'Air sticker when driving in low emission zones. These identify their emissions levels and potentially restrict access. Vehicles with lower emissions are given preferential parking and traffic conditions, whereas those with high emissions may be denied entry into the zone completely.
- The law states that drivers and motorcyclists must have a breathalyser kit/alcotest ready for use in their vehicle even though no penalty will be imposed if they cannot present one during a police road check
- When driving on a main road – N roads and D roads – you'll have priority over all other traffic entering from side roads. Priority roads are marked with a yellow diamond sign. When not on a priority road, drivers coming from the right always have priority unless indicated by road signs. Traffic entering roundabouts has priority but there are some where signs indicate that you do not have priority.



- On roads with two or more lanes, you must occupy the free lane furthest to the right as the left lanes are reserved for overtaking.
- Generally, as vehicles drive on the right, they should overtake on the left. However, if traffic is in lanes, motorists may overtake on the right of slower moving lanes. When overtaking a bicycle, you must leave a distance of at least 1 metre in built-up areas and 1.5 metres outside of built-up areas between your vehicle and the bicycle. Overtaking is forbidden on and approaching level crossings, at bends, on the brow of a hill, at intersections, and when visibility is limited. It is also prohibited to overtake a vehicle that's slowed to allow pedestrians to use a crossing.
- Be aware of the speed limits which are normally well displayed on road signs. The maximum speed limit on motorways is 130km/h but this drops to 110km/h in poor weather conditions. On main roads it is between 70 and 80km/h and drops to 50km/h in built-up areas.
- Dipped headlights must be used during the day outside of built-up areas and when visibility is poor (e.g. snow and rain). They must also be used in tunnels.
- Headlamp beam deflectors need to be used to adapt to driving on the right-hand side of the road
- All devices capable of detecting speed cameras and alerting drivers of their location are illegal in France. This includes radar detectors and satellite navigation systems warning of the presence of speed cameras or radars. If you're caught with one in your car, even if you're not using it, you could face a fine of up to €1,500.
- During the winter period (from 1 November to 31 March), vehicles must be equipped with winter tyres or snow chains in certain mountainous areas of France



Germany

- A Warning Triangle, Spare Tyre, Reflective Jackets for each occupant and winter and snow chains are required. All vehicles in Germany must carry a first aid kit. An environmental badge is compulsory when driving in low emission zones.
- Drivers coming from the right always have priority at crossroads and junctions, unless indicated by road signs. At roundabouts, traffic on the roundabout has priority, unless indicated otherwise.
- On roads with two or more lanes, you must occupy the free lane furthest to the right as the left lanes are reserved for overtaking.
- You must only overtake on the left side of a vehicle you want to pass. Overtaking on the right is only allowed in stationary traffic. The 'no overtaking' sign means you can't overtake a vehicle with more than two wheels. You may overtake a motorcycle, but don't overtake a car or any other four-wheeled vehicle.
- Be aware of the speed limits which are normally well displayed on road signs. Many parts of the German Autobahn have no official speed limit, meaning you can drive as fast as you feel



is safe. However, the recommended maximum speed on motorways is 130 km/h. On main roads is usually 100km/h but may vary, and it drops to 50km/h in built-up areas.

- Dipped headlights are recommended during the day. Dipped headlights must be used when visibility is poor, for example between sunset and sunrise, any time of day when you're in a tunnel, and if weather reduces visibility (e.g. heavy rain). You mustn't use full-beam headlights in built-up areas.
- Headlamp beam deflectors need to be used to adapt to driving on the right-hand side of the road
- You aren't allowed to use speed checking devices, including ones that are part of your GPS system. If your GPS navigator shows you the location of any fixed speed cameras, this function needs to be deactivated
- During the winter period (from 1 November to 31 March), vehicles must be equipped with winter tyres or snow chains in certain mountainous areas of France

Other countries

- Some European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland.) require you to buy and display a vignette – a sticker that fixes to the windshield and is visible from the outside – to drive along certain roads, like motorways and autobahns. As opposed to toll roads, a vignette allows you to drive on these roads for a certain duration of time and are normally issued for a minimum of 7 or 10 days. If you are caught driving in any of these countries without a vignette you will be fined.
- In Spain and Switzerland, if you wear prescription glasses, you need to carry a spare set; and in Spain, you are not allowed to wear flip flops when driving.
- First Aid kits are compulsory in Austria.

Remember always be prepared, be aware of your surroundings, keep your eyes on the road.