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Guide to driving in Europe

Whether you've packed up the car for an epic month-long road trip or are simply off for a family driving holiday, there are a few key laws and regulations that you need to know before taking to Europe's roads.

From necessary documentation to essential equipment, the following guide offers information and tips about driving in Europe. Don't forget that rules and laws are subject to change and may differ from season to season so always double check before you leave.



The law – what you need to know about driving in Europe

A good place to start is the [Foreign Office travel advice pages](#)¹, where you can find country-specific travel and safety advice, along with information about driving customs for each country.

Some of the main rules you should be aware of:

Drive on the right

With the exception of Ireland, Malta and Cyprus, once you've crossed the Channel you are driving on the right-hand side of the road. Be extra vigilant and take particular care on roundabouts and when pulling out from parking places. The Green Flag website offers [some useful tips to help you drive on the right](#)².

Display where you're from

Older number plates do not include your country of origin information. If you have a car that is more than seven years old, be sure to clearly display a GB sticker on the back of the vehicle. Some countries levy an on-the-spot fine for not doing so.



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Know the signs

Consult a recent guide on road signs for the areas you're planning to visit and make sure that you can recognise and understand signs that vary from those in the UK. Also, keep in mind that speed limits in Europe are often displayed in kilometres rather than miles.

Make sure you're legal

While the minimum driving age in the UK and Ireland is 17, in most European countries the legal driving age is 18. If you're a new driver, be sure to check the driving age for the countries you are visiting.



Pack compulsory emergency equipment

In countries like Portugal, Italy and Spain, you are required to carry a reflective jacket in your car in case you break down. In many European countries it is also compulsory to carry an emergency warning triangle.

Be aware of alcohol limits

Most European countries have a stricter alcohol limit than the UK, so be sure to familiarise yourself with the laws of the countries you plan to travel to. The Czech Republic, for example, does not permit drivers to have any alcohol at all in their system.

Adjust your headlights

It is compulsory in many European countries to adjust your headline beam pattern to a dipped beam for driving on the right-hand side. This will help you avoid dazzling oncoming drivers. You may need to have this professionally done before you leave home, so don't leave it until the last minute.

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What documentation should I take with me?

- **UK driving licence** - You will need a full valid UK driving licence to drive in Europe. A provisional licence won't do. If you have a photo driving licence, then be sure to also take your paper counterpart with you.
- **International Driving Permit** - In addition to your licence, some countries may require that you carry an International Driving Permit (IDP), which you can apply for over the counter at many post offices. You can only get an IDP three months in advance of when you need it and it is valid for a year.



- **Passport** - You will, of course, need your passport. Make sure it is valid and not due to expire – for some countries it will need to be valid for up to six months after you travel.
- **Vehicle registration document** – This needs to be the original, not a copy. If you are going abroad in a borrowed or company car, you will also need a letter of authorisation from the owner. If you are travelling in a hired car, you will need a Vehicle on Hire certificate (VE103b).
- **Car insurance documentation** – Before you head off you should always check your car insurance to make sure you're covered for driving abroad. While anybody with valid

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[UK car insurance](#) will have [minimum cover across the EU](#)³, this is very basic insurance which may leave you exposed to unexpected costs. You should contact your insurer to let them know valid dates of travel and discuss your requirements with them.

- **Breakdown cover documentation** - Check to see if your breakdown cover extends to Europe, where repair and recovery costs can be considerable. Check if there is a time limit to your policy and make sure that you're covered for the time you'll be away. Also double check that you're covered for the countries you are visiting. A happy driver is a prepared driver. To help ensure you're always prepared, we've included some suggestions for items that you might want to keep in your car all year round.

Essentials travel checklist

- Pack sensibly - A driving holiday is great in theory because you have space to take a lot of your creature comforts with you. However, pack carefully to avoid overloading your car and impairing the driver's visibility. Make sure you pack for both comfort and safety.



- Take some change - You'll probably encounter several toll roads throughout Europe so carry some change with you.
- Know where you're going - Whether you're a traditionalist with a well-worn pile of maps, or a road warrior guided by the power of GPS, it's a good idea to carry some guidance with you. If you like to plan ahead, try out the [Green Flag Route Planner](#)⁴ before you leave home.
- Stay in contact – Make sure your mobile phone is charged and that you have spare change to make calls. However, as in the UK, it is illegal to use a handheld device while driving in Europe. In case of an emergency, 112 is the European emergency telephone number.

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Driving on the Autobahns

No guide about driving in Europe would be complete without a note on Germany's famous autobahns. Whether you're thrilled or slightly nervous at the prospect of driving on a road without a speed limit, you should be prepared.

Here are some tips from Green Flag about [driving in Germany](#)⁵:



- There is a huge difference in speeds between lanes, so exercise extreme caution when changing lanes.
- The left-hand lane on an autobahn is for going very fast, in the region of 125mph, so take extra care if you're using it to overtake a slower vehicle.
- If your vehicle is up to the task and you decide to venture into the left lane, then stay alert for people changing lanes ahead of you.
- When you come off an autobahn, it may feel odd to return to residential area speeds. Keep an eye on your speedometer to make sure you are observing the speed limit.

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Driving cultures in different countries

Different countries have different driving cultures. It can be quite surreal crossing a border and suddenly finding yourself immersed in a different style of driving.

The Foreign Office website suggests that, as a rule, you drive cautiously and train yourself to expect the unexpected.

If you're starting your journey by driving through France, this short fact sheet offers a starting point with [some common French road signs and advice about driving in a number of European countries](#)⁶.

The European Traffic Police, TISPOL, have put together an excellent set of [country driving guides](#)⁷. We've put together a list of some of the most important to get you started:



In Austria, it has been obligatory since the winter of 2007/08 to use winter tyres for passenger cars between 1st November and the 15th April.



In Belgium, special traffic signs indicate where it is illegal to use cruise control.



In Bulgaria, it is mandatory to drive with your lights on in daylight from 1 November to 1 March.



In Cyprus, anyone convicted of drink-driving can face up to two years' imprisonment.



In the Czech Republic, there are no motorway toll booths and instead a road usage sticker (vignette) must be purchased. On the spot fines are levied for failure to do so.



In Denmark, police may seize a foreign vehicle if the driver is unable to pay an on-the-spot fine.

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In Estonia, a driver may be subjected to court proceedings if s/he consumes alcohol after a road traffic accident.



In Finland, speeding and some other traffic fines are proportionate to the driver's income.



In France, as of 1 July 2012, any driver must be in possession of a valid breathalyser, either electronic or chemical.



In Germany, there is a recommended speed of 130 km/h on motorways.



In Greece, law enforcement officers are authorised to give on the spot fines, and there is a special catalogue where the offences and the amount of the fine are determined.



In Hungary, there is a zero-tolerance policy on drink driving and the police have the power to withdraw a driving licence on the spot.



In Italy, every uniformed police officer can also carry out traffic surveillance.



In Lithuania, you are not allowed to carry an opened container of alcohol inside your vehicle.



In Luxembourg, navigation systems must comply with windscreen mounting regulations.



In the Netherlands, convicted drink-drivers must follow a three day course on alcohol and traffic, which they have to pay for themselves, or otherwise undergo a test of their fitness to drive.



In Norway, a driver detected with alcohol at 0.8%BAC (still legal in the UK) may be sent to prison for up to three weeks.



In Poland, the speed limit in built-up areas increases from 50 km/h to 60 km/h between 11pm and 5am.



In Portugal, passengers must exit a vehicle using a nearside door, so as not to step into traffic.



In Romania there is a zero tolerance drink-driving policy, and penalties include loss of licence for up to 90 days and even imprisonment.

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In Spain, the motorway speed limit was recently reduced to 110 km/h as part of a raft of government fuel-saving measures.



In Sweden, your headlights must always be switched on and set to dipped beam, even during daytime.

Follow these links for the full guides, which include country driving statistics and laws, motorway speed limits and FAQs about driving in each country:

[Austria](#)

[Belgium](#)

[Bulgaria](#)

[Cyprus](#)

[Czech Republic](#)

[Denmark](#)

[Estonia](#)

[Finland](#)

[France](#)

[Germany](#)

[Greece](#)

[Hungary](#)

[Ireland](#)

[Italy](#)

[Lithuania](#)

[Luxembourg](#)

[Netherlands](#)

[Norway](#)

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[Romania](#)

[Slovakia](#)

[Slovenia](#)

[Spain](#)

[Sweden](#)

[Switzerland](#)

[United Kingdom](#)

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- 1) <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>
- 2) <http://www.greenflag.com/help/driving-in-europe/road-safety.html>
- 3) <http://www.greenflag.com/help/driving-in-europe/check-your-cover.html>
- 4) <http://www.greenflag.com/routeplanning/>
- 5) <http://www.greenflag.com/help/driving-in-europe/fast-driving.html>
- 6) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35559/driving-abroad.pdf
- 7) <http://tispol.org>

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