

Driving in Great Britain

It's not as difficult as you might think but there are some major differences & that's what this article is about. To start with we'll look at the basic legal requirements for driving such as age limits, speed restrictions etc. After that we'll look at types of road you may encounter and local specialities such as roundabouts and box junctions. We'll finish up with a look at differences between driving in the Great Britain and driving in the US and Commonwealth countries and a list of English equivalent terms such as boot rather than trunk.

BASICS

The emergency services (police, fire, ambulance, coastal rescue) number is 999.

Buy a good map, one that has examples of road signs and detailed maps of town centres, don't rely on the sheet that the hire companies handout. It is possible to hire portable Satellite Navigation systems but it's still a good idea to have a map as back-up.

Fuel for your car in the UK is called either petrol (gasoline) or diesel. Don't confuse the two. The pumps are always clearly marked. Pumps dispensing petrol normally have a green hose and those dispensing diesel a black hose. Petrol comes in two variations regular 95 octane and Super 98 octane, most hire cars which use petrol take regular 95 octane. Your car will usually have a sticker in the fuel filler flap which tells you which fuel to use. Self-service is usual and the pumps are fairly straightforward to operate. Simply place the nozzle in the opening and squeeze the trigger. Petrol is highly taxed in the UK. Currently (2006) unleaded petrol is approximately £0.95 per litre [4.55 Litres=1 Imperial gallon & 3.79 Litre=1 US gallon]. If you are intending to drive a significant distance, then it may be cheaper to hire a vehicle with a diesel engine. Diesel fuel is marginally more expensive but you will get more miles per gallon. Visa and MasterCard can be used to pay for fuel at virtually every filling station in the UK.

Most quality car hire companies include membership of a national car breakdown company, e.g. Automobile Association [AA] or National Breakdown, these are very helpful if you do suffer a breakdown or accident. They aim to attend within an hour and quicker if you are a lone woman. Make sure you get details when you hire the car, including the phone number to summon assistance. If you phone the AA / RAC etc up direct have the same information ready. If you are a woman travelling on your own let the organisation know, especially at night.

The Car

In Britain we drive on the LEFT. Cars available for hire in the UK are right-hand drive models (i.e. the driver sits on the right-hand side of the car). It is very easy, especially in the first few days to forget and revert back to driving on the right. Critical times are when turning right (across the flow of traffic), when first starting to drive in the morning, after a break, or late at night. Just remember that the driver is always in the centre of the road and the passenger against the pavement (sidewalk). Cars have amber indicator lights, red brake lights, red rear fog lamps and white reversing lights. The speedometer will be calibrated in miles per hour (mph) and kilometres per hour (kph), mph being the larger and more obvious of the two sets of markings.

General Speed Limits for Cars and Motorcycles

Built up area (towns, cities) – 30 mph, often 20 mph near schools and on small residential roads

Single carriageways – 60 mph

Dual carriageways – 70 mph

Motorways - 70 mph

Traffic Signals

Traffic lights are not suspended over the junctions but are on posts on the junction.

Red = stop

Red and Amber together = get ready, but don't go anywhere

Green = go if the way is clear

Amber = stop unless you have crossed the line or it would be dangerous to stop
A Green Arrow = you may proceed in that direction regardless of other lights
You are **not** allowed to turn on a red light as in the US and many other countries.
Flashing red/amber lights (e.g. railway crossings, fire stations) = You must stop
You must also stop if signalled to by a Police Officer or Traffic Warden
Most pedestrian crossings are controlled by traffic lights - You must stop when the red light shows, if it is not controlled by lights, **pedestrians** have the right of way

Minimum Driving Age

Car drivers must be 17 (even if you legally hold a license at a younger age in your country it is still illegal to drive in the UK if not 17)

Seat Belts

All drivers and passengers **MUST** wear seat belts. The driver must ensure that all children under 14 years of age wear seat belts or sit in an approved child restraint. This should be a baby seat, child seat, booster seat or booster cushion appropriate to the child's weight and size, fitted to the manufacturer's instructions.

Crash Helmets

All riders and their passengers **MUST** wear crash helmets

Mobile Phones

It is illegal for anyone to handle a mobile phone whilst driving, the only way to use a phone and drive is to use a hands free kit. Even if you pull over to talk and have the engine still running you can be fined.

Drinking and Driving

The penalties are severe. It is illegal to drive or to be in control of a vehicle (this includes sitting in the driving seat at the side of the road with the engine switched off) if the level of alcohol in your blood exceeds 80 milligrammes per 100 ml of blood. British police use breathalysers to check how much alcohol is in your system, these require you to blow into a small pipe. If you are breathalysed by the police and found to have more than 35 microgrammes of alcohol per 100 ml of breath you will be arrested. If the police stop you and ask for a breath sample you have to give one. The penalty for non-compliance is the same as for drinking and driving.

Parking

On-street parking is usually restricted within towns and cities. Parking is forbidden where there are double yellow lines at the edge of the road. Where there is either a single yellow line or a dotted one there will be signs nearby (often on lampposts) which detail the restrictions. Some roads will have parking meters but more common is pay & display where you pay for a ticket at a machine located nearby. Check the instructions carefully as charges and methods of use vary from place to place even within the same town. The ticket will have the date, the time you purchased the ticket, and the time it expires, all noted on the ticket itself. The ticket will have a sticker on the back or sides. Peel the sticker and place it on the inside of the windscreen or driver's window so the times and date are visible to the outside of the car.

Beware of parking on open land in towns and cities many of these areas are patrolled by "clampers" who will immobilise your car and charge a hefty fee to release you. Any area subject to clamping must be identified but the more shark-like operators will make their signs as difficult to spot as possible.

Insurance

Insurance for third party liability (i.e. damage you cause to other people and/or their property) is mandatory in the UK. All hire car companies will offer appropriate types of insurance to suit your needs.

Congestion Charging

In London, there is a congestion charge in force in the city centre between 07:00 and 18:30 on weekdays. As soon as you enter the zone, your number plate will be photographed and you have until

22:00 on the day to pay the £5 charge at garages and kiosks. You can pay up to 90 days in advance at www.cclondon.com.

ROADS

In the UK most of the major road maintenance schemes are carried out in the summer months. When visiting in summer don't be surprised if you find long sections of roads, particularly motorways, with one or more lanes coned off to allow road maintenance crews to carry out repairs.

Motorways

Motorways are the British equivalent of Interstate's, National Highways or Freeways. There are restrictions on who can use motorways; cyclists, pedestrians and slow moving agricultural vehicles are all banned. Motorway entrances & exits are always in and out of the left hand lane. Exits are clearly marked and you'll have plenty of warning before your exit approaches; the first sign is 1 mile from the exit followed by a reminder at ½ or 1/3 of a mile before the exit. All motorway signs are white on a blue background.

The network is comprehensive but tends to run North-South, East west routes are often on A roads – see below. All motorway junctions are numbered and these are marked on maps. Certain parts of the motorway network have variable speed limits. Signs above the carriageway indicate when this is in force with the new speed limit displayed inside a red circle. The entrance to motorways are generally roundabouts (see below) so exit slip roads (off-ramps) usually lead to a roundabout so that you have the option of turning either left or right or even rejoining the motorway if you find you've made a mistake and have left at the wrong junction.

Britain is a small island and congestion is common, particularly during the rush hour (typically 07:30-9:00 and 16.30 to 18.00). Routes to avoid include the M25 around London, the M6 junctions 4 - 10 & 19 - 22 and the M5 south of Bristol. Most motorways are toll free, although some bridges and crossing require you to pay tolls, (e.g. the QE2 Bridge and Dartford Tunnel on the M25 at Dartford, and the Severn River Crossing between Wales and England on the M4 one way only!). There is one Toll motorway which bypasses the busy M6 around Birmingham.

British motorways have an additional inside lane known as the hard shoulder. This is for use only in emergencies. You should not stop on the hard shoulder except in the event of a breakdown or other emergency. If you must use it pull on to it and stop as far to the left as possible. Switch on hazard lights. Leave side lights on if it is dark. Leave the vehicle by the left door. All passengers should stand on the grass as far away from the hard shoulder and carriageways as possible. Keep children under strict control **DO NOT WALK ACROSS ANY CARRIAGEWAYS**. Emergency phones (which connect you to the police) are located at one mile intervals on the hard shoulder. The posts along the hard shoulder are marked with arrows to indicate the direction of the nearest call box. Calls are free but these phones are intended for use only in the event of a breakdown, accident or other emergency. If you use a Motorway phone have handy your vehicle registration number, your location, and membership information for your breakdown cover if you have it. After giving details, return to the vehicle and wait. If you sense any danger return to the vehicle using the left door and lock yourself inside. Leave the vehicle again when you feel the danger has passed. You should never remain in your vehicle on the hard shoulder; vehicles may veer off the motorway & hit your car. The risk of injury to an occupant of a parked vehicle on the hard shoulder is about 4.5 times that of driving along the motorway!

In the UK overtaking on the inside (i.e. to the left of another vehicle) is illegal. You may only overtake (i.e. pass) by pulling out to the right of another vehicle and around it. However, people do sometimes break the rules and overtake on the left-hand side so be prepared for this.

Service areas are clearly signed and are generally around 30 miles apart. They are located adjacent to the motorway and usually have their own entrance and exit slip roads although occasionally the service station will be located next to the exit roundabout. Service areas are expensive and cheaper fuel and food is found off the motorways so whenever possible fill up before joining the motorway.

Motorways are patrolled by traffic police and by unmarked police cars. The first you will know when you are stopped by an unmarked car is when the blue lights (usually mounted in the radiator grill or under the bumpers) start to flash. In addition there are Highways Agency Traffic Officers who assist the police to maintain traffic flow; their vehicles often look like police vehicles.

'A' Roads

'A' roads are the next highest quality roughly equivalent to a US Highway or state highway. They may be one or two lane. Roads with more than one lane on either side are known as dual-carriageways and will usually have a barrier of some sort to separate the carriageways. Roads with only one lane in each direction will usually have a broken white line down the middle to indicate the position of the centre of the road. The length of the white dashes is longer on the approach to hazards such as bends. A double solid white line means that overtaking is not permitted by traffic on either side of the road. A double white line comprising a solid line and a broken line indicates that overtaking is permitted by traffic on the broken line side only. Solid white lines across the carriageway (i.e. your side of the road) at a junction (usually accompanied by a red and white stop sign) mean that you must stop before proceeding across the junction. Bends in the road are often indicated by black and white chevrons - the more chevrons the sharper the curve.

'B' Roads

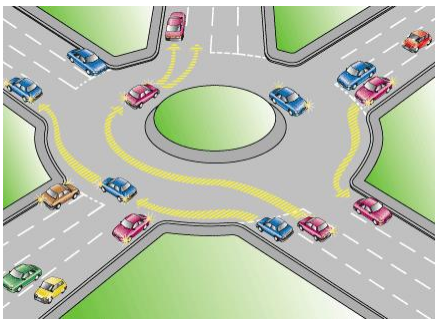
'B' roads are narrower single lane roads. Driving on these is much slower than on motorways or 'A' roads. However in compensation you'll find that "B-roads" can lead you into quaint villages and interesting towns you might otherwise miss.

Unnumbered Roads

Roads with no letter or number will be of lower quality still. In the countryside these roads are unlikely to have any markings or lighting. In some more remote areas these may be single track roads with passing places. If you are driving on a single track road pay attention to where the wide spots are - these are the passing places. Some places are marked with handy signs that say "Passing Place." Do NOT park in these spaces. When you meet an oncoming vehicle, one of you may have to reverse into the nearest passing place. Who reverses is usually dictated whoever is closest to a passing place and whether you are on a hill.

Roundabouts

Roundabouts are essentially intersections, but are designed to keep the flow of traffic moving at a constant pace. On approaching a roundabout you should slow down and be prepared to stop, but don't automatically stop – the driver behind won't be expecting that. When entering a roundabout do



not forget to look for bicycles and motorbikes - they are easily overlooked.

You go round a roundabout in a clockwise direction and signal left as you pass the exit before the one you want to take. You must give way to traffic coming from the right if the roundabout is not controlled by traffic lights.

Know where you are heading for, this enables you to find which exit you require so that you leave the roundabout on the correct road.

As you approach look at the signs and count which exit you want, i.e. if your required road is the third exit then when on the roundabout you have to pass 2 exits before you leave the

roundabout on the third. Use the left hand lane if turning left or going straight on. On a three lane roundabout you can use the middle lane for going straight on. Use the right hand lane if turning right. If in doubt about which exit you want and can't check before joining then my advice is to indicate and take the right hand lane and go right around the roundabout once so you can see where your exit is, on the second trip round move over to the appropriate lane to leave correctly. Never attempt to leave directly from the right-hand lane and do not go all the way around to the last exit in the left-hand lane.

Box Junctions

Another junction which is common in Britain but rarer elsewhere in the world is the box junction. The surface of the junction is marked with a grid of criss-crossing diagonal lines and vehicles may not enter

the marked area. Drivers may enter the box and wait when they want to turn right, and are only stopped from doing so by oncoming traffic, or by other vehicles waiting to turn right. Box junctions are found on some traffic light controlled junctions and also outside fire stations and other emergency vehicle depots.

DIFFERENCES TO WATCH OUT FOR WHEN VISITING BRITAIN

You can not pass a vehicle on either side of it. You **MUST** only overtake by passing to the right of the vehicle in front.

You must never turn on a red light

Traffic lights are not suspended over the junctions but on posts at the corners.

Rental vehicles tend to be smaller than in the US. Generally assume that the cars within each group are going to be of a similar size to those in the next group down in the US.

If you need an automatic you must request one – standard UK hire cars are manual (stick shift)

Speed limit signs are posted in measures of tens, not fives as they are in the US

The road route signs are mostly not marked as "North/South" or "East/West," they're mainly marked with a town or city that is in the direction you're travelling.

Sign backgrounds are coloured depending on their function; Motorway signs have blue backgrounds. Non-Motorway primary routes have green backgrounds, local route signs have white backgrounds, tourist information boards have brown backgrounds and temporary signs have yellow backgrounds

Road names are not suspended over the junctions, they are found on signs on the corners of the junctions, sometimes on the walls of properties at the junction.

Drive-thru; apart from fast food outlets drive-thru outlets are very rare.

NB This guide is designed to help you drive in the UK; it is not intended to be a comprehensive statement of the law as it applies to motorists. For current details of the laws and responsibilities of drivers in Britain and all matters relating to driving in the UK visit <http://www.highwaycode.gov.uk/>.

US English / British English motoring related terms

US English	British English
911	999
Antenna	Aerial
Beltway, loop	Ring road, circular road
Blacktop	Tarmac
Blinkers, turn signals	Indicators
Cell phone, cellular phone	Mobile phone
Deductible (insurance)	Excess
Detour	Diversion, Deviation
Dirt road	Track, unpaved road
Fender	Bumper
Gas	Petrol
Grade crossing	Level crossing
Hood	Bonnet
Intersection	Cross roads
Lamp	Bulb
License plate	Number plate
Mailbox	Pillar box
Median	Central reservation
Muffler (car)	Silencer
On-ramp, off-ramp	Sliproad
Overpass	Flyover
Parking brake	handbrake
Parking garage/ramp	multi-storey car park
Parking lot	Car park
Parking lot, garage	Car park
Pass (another car)	Overtake
Pavement	Tarmac
Pedestrian crossing, crosswalk	Zebra crossing, pelican crossing
Pullout, pulloff	Lay by
Reflectors (in the middle of a road)	Cat's eyes
Sidewalk	Pavement
Station Wagon	Estate
Tire	Tyre
Tractor-trailer	Articulated lorry or "artic"
Traffic circle	Roundabout
Traffic light, stop light	Traffic light
Transmission	Gearbox
Truck stop	Transport café
Trunk	Boot
Windshield	Windscreen
Yield	Give way