

Baby, you can drive my car

Driving in Germany is not for the faint-hearted. Fast and furious seem to be the country's only road rules. In her regular Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a reader's letter on how to coax a reluctant driver to get behind the wheel of a car in Germany

Scott wrote:

Sure, we had heard about driving in Germany, but now that we are here it certainly is much more disconcerting. I tell my wife, Barbara, to just go for it, but lately I find she is handing me the keys whenever we go out by car. So what to do...?

Dear Scott,

Before some of the readers put on a "knowing smile" lets get this straight: this is not about male or female, but rather about different cultural driving styles.

You don't believe me?

Whenever my German husband and I visit my home country, the Netherlands, he hands me the keys and says: "I cannot drive here, they are such maniacs!" For your information, the speed limit in the Netherlands is a 120 kmh.

With the holiday season and many people on the road, this is the perfect time to take a closer look at some of the myths and legends about driving in Germany.

True or False? The Autobahn has no speed limit.

No speed limit, unless signposted differently, and you will be surprised how many stretches have received speed limits over the last few years. Or just wait for the next Stau (traffic jam). A word of warning: after "hibernating" during winter, the motorcycles are omnipresent on the road now. Other than the easy-rider type, be aware of the biker on their extreme machines out to enjoy the speed kick.

True or False? You can overtake on the right-hand side.

This "no-no" does occur when an exasperated fast driver gets stuck behind a slower car who refuses to move over and let the faster car pass on the left.

It is allowed to give a quick flash of the lights, to signal the slow duck that you want to pass.

However, you are not allowed to blind the other cars and drive up too close and put everyone at risk.

Easy does it: adopt the habit of constantly checking your rear vision mirror — do not let your ego get in the way of safety, move over and be content that you have just helped to avoid a severe traffic violation.

Your compensation is that you become an expert in recognising the type of car by its headlights and grills.

True or False? You can turn right on red.

No way! However, at certain “traffic light regulated crossings” you will see drivers that do, although there is no extra light that flashes.

Look again and you will see a small cardboard type of sign with a green arrow on a black background. This means you can.

These signs you will encounter more often in the eastern Bundeslaender (states) where this was common practice.

True or False? German cars have no brakes.

Watch out, whenever there is a speed limit they will apply the brakes rather than let the car slow down gradually.

True or False? German drivers have a genetic mutation the “Bleifuß” (a foot made of lead).

Should the budget allow for it, the car is equipped with a powerful engine in terms of horsepower and cylinder capacity. The acceleration is therefore a lot faster.

So be on the lookout, after the abrupt braking the acceleration can be just as prompt. Some observers have referred to this driving style as “binary”.

True or False? German drivers are aggressive.

Assertive yes, majority impatient, and rights of way are taken rather than wait for priority to be given.

The city of Flensburg houses the central registry for traffic rowdies. Here the point system is administrated and if you have too many black marks against your name they will take your driving licence away. Traffic offences made in neighbouring European countries are now passed on to the German authorities for follow up.

Mind your manners: rude hand signs are considered as a personal insult that can result in a court case.

How to get used to German driving

We need to give it some time to adjust, so why not take a two-three hour session with a driving school?

Should you have envisage problems with the size of the roads and parking lots, get a smaller European size car. Do not leave at the last minute, allow for ‘Stau’ time or for simply getting lost, so you will be a lot more relaxed when you drive.

If all else fails, just boost Barbara’s self confidence, sing soto voce this well known Beatles title: “Baby you can drive my car”.

To finish off with a German proverb: Uebung macht der Meister (practice makes perfect).

I look forward to your questions.

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is WWW.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.