

Podcast 88 – Driving on the Left Side

Learn English while learning about daily life in Australia,
with Rob McCormack

Podcast Number 88 – Driving on the Left Side

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/slowenglish/podcast88.mp3>

Hi,

In Australia, we drive on the left hand side of the road. That means that our cars have the steering wheel and the controls on the right hand side of the car. When I was growing up, I thought this was the way every country's roads and cars were organized. Then, as a child in the 1960's, I can remember seeing my first left hand drive car. That's when I learned that not all countries were the same with respect to which side of the road you drive on. Much later, in my thirties, my wife and I went on our first holiday to Europe and we hired a car to get around. That's when I experienced the difference first hand. I must say it was a bit of a shock.



In Australia, don't forget to drive on the left.
Photograph by Joshua Aldrich [Public domain],
via Wikimedia Commons.

Actually, about two thirds of the world's population live in countries where the cars drive on the right hand side of the road. So Australia's approach is in the minority. Those countries which were colonized by Britain drive mostly on the left hand side of the road. This includes Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, just to name a few. In total, there are 76 countries or territories which drive, like Australia, on the left hand side of the road. However, more than 160 countries or territories drive on the right hand side of the road. This includes America and almost all of Europe. In Europe, there are only 4 countries that drive on the left hand side of the road, and they are all islands. They are Britain, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus.

It's interesting that, after you have been using the roads in Australia for a while, certain behaviours become automatic. For example, in Australia, when a pedestrian crosses the road, they look first to their right. That's because the traffic nearest to them is coming from the right. Looking first to the right becomes a habit. It's what you were taught in

school and you don't even think about it. But when you are crossing the road in, for example, Germany, looking to the right first is incorrect and, for the pedestrian, actually quite dangerous. There you have to look to the left first. That's where the closest traffic is coming from and that is where the danger is for a pedestrian. It can take some getting used to. You have to think hard about it. When I am on holiday in Germany, I feel a little unsure when crossing the road. My habit tells me to look to the right, but I know I have to look to the left. I end up looking many times in both directions and then finally crossing the road with more caution than I normally would do in Australia.

Likewise for a driver. An experienced driver learns certain habits and can do certain things without thinking about them. For example, imagine you are turning left at a T-junction where there are no traffic lights. In Australia this is the easiest and least dangerous turn. All you do is look for oncoming traffic from your right, then turn left when there is a gap in the traffic. Turning right is the more dangerous turn in Australia. Then you must look for gaps in the traffic coming from both directions. In Europe however, it is the left turn which is the more dangerous. It's a little scary for us visitors from Australia. You are always under pressure and feeling stress when you are trying to see a gap in fast moving traffic coming from two directions. That is when your habits from your Australian driving experience can put you into a dangerous situation. I can remember one situation where I turning left in Germany at a T-junction with no traffic lights. It was a very busy road with many large trucks and the gaps between the traffic weren't very frequent. I almost turned into the oncoming traffic in the wrong lane. Luckily, I stopped myself at the last second, took a deep breath and then waited patiently for a bigger gap in the traffic. After that, I tried to stay on the main roads with traffic lights wherever possible while we were driving in Germany.

Roundabouts are also different. In Australia, you go clockwise. In Europe and America, you go anticlockwise. I can remember when my wife and I first visited Germany in the early 1980s. We picked up our hire car at Frankfurt airport and had planned to drive across Germany into Austria to visit my wife's relatives. I will never forget the stress of driving for the first time on the other side of the road in a strange car. Almost immediately we had to drive through large roundabouts to get onto the autobahns. I had to constantly talk to myself to make sure I was driving in the correct lane. The slow lane on a freeway in Australia is on the left, but in Germany that is the fast lane. You must stay out of that lane unless you are driving fast. I soon learned that a rapidly approaching car in my rear vision mirror, with lights flashing, meant I was in the wrong lane.

Of course there are many ways in which driving in Australia is the same as in all other countries. The car's pedals are the same – the right pedal is the accelerator, the middle pedal is the brake and left pedal is the clutch (if the car has a manual gearbox). The rules of the road seem to be largely the same, from my experience of driving in Europe.

<http://www.australia.com/en/planning/road-safety.html>

Now, when I am on holiday in Europe, I always travel by train. Especially in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, I find the trains to be excellent and a stress-free way to travel. However, in Australia, I think cars are still the best way to travel long distances and the best way to see Australia.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this

podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

Podcast 88 Quiz - Did you understand the podcast?

You can take the quiz as many times as you like.

Start quiz

Vocabulary

accelerator = you push this with your foot to make the car go faster

anticlockwise = going around a circle in the opposite direction to a clock

approach = a way of doing things

autobahn = the German word for freeway

automatic = when something happens without thinking

behaviours = the way you do things

caution = when you are careful, looking for danger

certain = particular

clockwise = going around a circle in the same direction as a clock

clutch = you push this with your foot to change gears in a manual car

colonized = when people come from another land to live in a country and they control it

constantly = when you do something over and over again

controls = the levers and pedals which control a car

crosses = to go from one side of the road to the other side of

the road

dangerous = when you can get hurt or die from something

direction = a line leading to a place

excellent = very, very good

experienced = when you have done or seen something before

experienced first hand = when you have done something before yourself

frequent = when something happens very often

gap = a space, when two things are not close together

getting used to = to become familiar with something, when you know it well

habit = something which you do every day

hired = when you pay money and can use a car for a short time
– for example 2 weeks

imagine = to think of something in your head which you have not experienced

incorrect = not the right way to do something

lane = part of a highway where you drive

least = the smallest

minority = less than half

nearest = closest to you

oncoming = when something is coming towards you

organized = the way things are set up

patiently = to wait without getting angry

pedals = things you push with your feet

pedestrian = a person walking on the footpath next to a road

rapidly approaching = very quickly coming towards you

rear vision mirror = the small mirror in a car which shows you what is behind you

relatives = all the people in your family

roundabout = a type of road junction that is a circle, usually with 4 roads

scary = when something makes you afraid

shock = when you are not expecting something

situation = how things are

steering wheel = the round wheel you turn to make a car go around a corner

stress = when you have pressure, you feel stress

T-junction = when two roads meet at 90 degrees, like the letter T.

taught = when a teacher teaches a student (in the past)

territories = a region under the control of a higher government

thirties = between 30 and 39

traffic = cars and trucks on the road

traffic lights = when a road junction is controlled by lights
– red, amber and green

trucks = large vehicles which carry things

two thirds = two parts out of three (66%)

under pressure = when you are afraid that you can't do something that is important

while = a period of time

with respect to = when you explain what it is you are talking about