

## DRIVING IN PARIS TODAY

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I spent a year in Paris as a student in the 60s, and then I swore to myself I would never, but never, get behind the wheel in this city. Drivers were wild and crazy: they would scream and swear at each other, make obscene gestures, shake their fists, and jump out of their cars at red lights to confront other drivers, sometimes wielding wooden clubs or even iron bars. The air was filled with a cacophony of blaring horns, even though there was a law against unnecessary noise. The really ‘in’ thing to do was to cut off another car at high speed on the highway, and speed off. The wronged driver, however, could follow the first car for miles with the sole purpose of doing the same thing in revenge. Under no circumstances would a driver yield the right of way to another car. Driving in Paris then was just plain dangerous, and sometimes even deadly. I recall one incident when two drivers stopped to confront each other over a parking space (which was then a real rarity), got into a violent shouting match, and one driver completely lost his temper and slapped the other man, who had a heart attack and died on the spot.

Pedestrians had to toe the line, because they knew that if they stepped out of line, a driver could swerve out of his way and almost clip them.

Traffic jams were frequent and monumental, and tempers flared.

Well, times have changed. Today, drivers, even taxi drivers are generally calm and polite. Drivers will usually yield, even if the other car does not have the right of way. Drivers will change lanes with a minimum of turn signal time, but no one seems to mind. I have asked taxi drivers about it, and they usually answer something like, “It doesn’t cost me anything to let the other car in, and there is no harm done.”

The main negative comment I have heard from visitors to France is that drivers tend to follow closely on the highway.

Predictably, pedestrians now take dangerous liberties, and cross every which way, not only at crosswalks against red

lights, but anywhere, knowing that drivers are required to stop for them. And still, most drivers remain calm about the situation.

The ones who seem to rattle drivers are motorcycles and bicycles, which are very numerous in Paris. Motorcycles are by far the worse of the two, as they zip in and out of traffic, changing lanes very aggressively, usually without signaling.

There is a system designed to help traffic move more efficiently, and relieve traffic jams. On most large avenues and wide streets, the far right lane is reserved for municipal transit buses, taxis, emergency vehicles, and bicycles; motorcycles are not allowed, though quite a few drivers figure it is easier to tempt fate and risk the price of a citation (130 euros, or about \$160). While it does relieve traffic, the drawback is that if a car wants to make a right turn, it has to cross the bus lane.

A couple of other things that help avoid traffic jams are the fact that Les Halles, the central wholesale meat, fruit, and vegetable market once located near the center of Paris, has been moved outside the city; and large trucks are not allowed within the city limits in the daytime.

I had made the decision not to buy a car when I moved back to Paris, knowing that many apartment houses, including the one I live in, have no garages (the concierge’s husband keeps his car in a space, called a ‘box,’ outside of the city, which costs him 80 euros a month; he uses it once a year, to drive to Portugal and back. The public transportation system in Paris is excellent when it is not on strike, and it is much preferable for me to take the metro or a bus, which costs 1.60 euro (about \$2) than trek to a distant garage, then look for a parking space on the street, and reverse the procedure at the end of the day. But I would not hesitate to drive here today if I had to, even though I still do not know the city very well. A GPS will guide me perfectly, and if I make a mistake, I know the other drivers will be kind to me. OK, kinder.

One location that has always fascinated me is the Etoile, a traffic circle fed by seven avenues including the famed Champs-Élysées. I had heard a rumor that because of the high risk, collision insurance was not applicable there, but after doing some research, I can tell you it is an urban legend.