

Motoring in Spain

With Paraiso Homes

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It has to be said that generally speaking the standard of driving in Spain by the Spanish leaves a lot to be desired. For many and in particular some of the younger generation, owning a car is more than just a form of transportation, it is a status symbol and a means of expression. Machoism often prevails and sometimes to the extreme. A few years ago the notion that driving in the wrong direction on a particular stretch of the motorway was regarded as some kind of crazy challenge! Fortunately this trend seems to have disappeared over recent years, however crossing continuous white lines, and overtaking on blind bends still has some appeal to a minority. Having said all this, the fact that the roads are used by many different nationalities means that the Spanish are not alone at the bottom of the driving standards league.

It is not the intention of this article to describe the highway-code in any detail however; it's worth remembering that unless there is a sign giving traffic on one road priority over traffic on another then the rule is to give way to traffic approaching from the right. If you have spent your life driving in the UK it's worth remembering when driving a left hand drive vehicle to maintain your driving position in the centre of the road and not in the kerb particularly when driving on quiet or deserted roads.

Zebra crossings are treated with some scorn by the average Spanish motorist, pedestrians may well have the right to cross the road but it may mean side stepping the traffic as he or she does so. Surprisingly they are often a good second choice when it comes to finding a parking space in a busy town, but beware of the tow truck!

Over recent years many junctions previously controlled by traffic lights have been replaced by roundabouts. At least this seems to be the case in and around many of the coastal towns of the Costa Blanca. Whilst their introduction may have eased traffic congestion it has to be said that they are the host of many accidents. Lane discipline - who gives way to who, all seems to be rather vague in the minds of most Spanish motorists who it seems tend to adopt the - every man for himself - attitude. If you have just arrived from the UK the notion of driving around the roundabout *the wrong way* takes a little getting used to, therefore take especially good care when negotiating these potential hazards.

It has been compulsory to wear seat belts in new vehicles since the law was changed in 1994 and failure to wear them can result in an on the spot fine. Despite this you will often see people blatantly flaunting the law, possibly another expression or defiance or machoism?. Insurance companies tend to be particularly unsympathetic when accidents occur and the injured occupants of the vehicles involved are found not to be wearing seat belts. The rule is, if seat belts are fitted in the vehicle then they must be worn at all times and this rule applies equally to rear seat passengers.

Parking

Parking in most towns in particular in the summer months when the tourist season is in full swing is in a word, a nightmare. Things are improving and more and more underground and multi storey car parks are being built. Never the less parking in town is still difficult, the nearer the centre the more difficult and more expensive it becomes. Parking in areas where clearly marked No Parking signs are displayed, or time limits are exceeded can and often lead to the car being towed away by the traffic police. The Grua (Crane) is the motorist's most despised obsession. Returning to find your car has disappeared and spotting a bright yellow triangular sticker next to the place where you left it will invariably spell bad news. Be prepared for a long walk to the police station to join a long queue of similar victims. Prepare yourself for a serious case of open wallet surgery and an expensive taxi ride to the police vehicle pound, to be followed by another long wait before eventually retrieving your vehicle.

Sounding your horn unnecessarily is also an offence punishable again by an on the spot fine. However a blind eye is traditionally applied to this law in the case of a Spanish wedding. It is the norm for all those involved in the ceremony to drive nose to tail through the center of town with their horns blazing continuously.

Finally a word about traffic lights, in Spain the sequence is red, green, amber and then back to red, almost the same as the UK but not exactly. The majority of drivers in Spain are unaware that Amber means Stop, unless of course you have actually crossed the line before it changes.

Motorcycles Mopeds

If you hold a UK license and you are **not** a resident of Spain you are allowed to drive a motorcycle or moped up to the cubic capacity shown on your license. If later you become a resident then the relevant details will be transferred to your new Spanish license. For example if your license qualifies you to drive up to vehicles of 250cc then the same limit will be applied to your Spanish license. All motorcycles and mopeds, whether Spanish or UK registered, should have a current road tax. It is true to say that many foreigners living in Spain pay lip service to maintaining their UK tax, but you can be fined if you are stopped and fail to produce valid documents.

Until quite recently motorcycles and mopeds were registered in the local town hall, but this has been changed and now they have to be registered with the regional traffic office. In order to re register the vehicle you will need the white card showing the vehicle details and a current road tax receipt, an application form from Trafico together with a copy of your Residencia or fiscal number (NIE)

A new license plate number will be issued, after which the owner should then arrange for a new number plate to be made and fixed to the vehicle .

Vehicle Insurance

All vehicles using the roads in Spain must by law, be fully insured for third party damage including medical cover to enable anyone injured in an accident to be taken to the nearest hospital. Also although not strictly compulsory the majority of motor insurance policies issued in Spain include a breakdown recovery service.

It has to be said that there are literally thousands of vehicles on the roads without any insurance at all and if you are unfortunate as the innocent party to have a serious accident involving an uninsured vehicle it can prove to be very costly indeed.

Expatriates tend to obtain rather better premiums than the average Spanish driver since they are considered a much better risk and the claims ratios a low. If you buy a car from a local motor trader its worth shopping around the expatriate insurers before accepting the one offered by the dealer.

No Claims discount up to 60 percent is accepted by many companies providing you can provide a certificate of proof from your previous insurers.

Insurance is extremely hard to obtain for any motorcycle/moped, and virtually impossible for a UK registered one. Probably the best option is to purchase your insurance in the UK. Motor insurance on the other hand is available from many companies.

Probably the best option for both Spanish Registered and UK registered vehicles is to contact Knight Insurance Brokers who have English speaking staff and specialize in expatriate insurance. They have offices up and down the coast and can be contacted on a central telephone number 902 28 28 20.

Driving Licenses.

Strictly speaking if you are resident of Spain and drive a Spanish registered vehicle then you should have a Spanish driving license. This is another job for your Gestoria or Search & Survey, unless you have the patience to organize it yourself. It involves producing proof of having qualified as a driver, plus the usually filling in of forms. It is also necessary to undergo a medical examination which involves eye test and a co-ordination/reflex test.

Occasionally problems occur when non-residents driving Spanish registered cars and using UK driving license are stopped by the police. This can cause some alarm and indeed it has been known that people have been fined, however according to sources in the regional traffic police HQ this should not happen. Any valid EEC driving license is legal and acceptable in Spain.

The bottom line is if you own a Spanish registered car you are resident here you should have applied for your residence permit and then presented your license for inspection and stamping or exchanged it for a Spanish license. If you are not a resident and drive a Spanish vehicle you may have to prove your status. To do this you need to obtain a Certificate of Non-Residence to carry with your UK driving license.

Vehicle Registration – foreign cars

Many people want to stay in Spain permanently and still use their UK registered vehicles. Unfortunately this is strictly speaking, against the law. You should either, import the vehicle and change to Spanish number plates or it may be assumed that as a non-resident you intend returning to the UK in order to maintain the tax and mot requirements. You do not have to be a resident to import a vehicle, but if you do become resident, it is then a legal requirement to do so within six months of obtaining the vehicle.

Importing a car into Spain involves the usual bureaucracy, form filling, etc. However, it is at least now possible to do so whereas until recently the authorities were so difficult in processing applications that it became obvious that the importation of vehicles into Spain was not exactly encouraged. Now the Spanish authorities have succumbed to threats from the EU and the process can be completed within a few months. However it involves a payment equivalent to 12% of the vehicle's market value.

Everyone intending taking up official residence in Spain is entitled to bring a car with them irrespective of whether or not they come from another EU country, without having to pay IVA (VAT) or Spanish car registration tax. This process however is subject to the following conditions:

1. You must have owned the vehicle for six months at least prior to your arrival.
2. You must have paid VAT in the country where the car was purchased.
3. You must be in possession of a certificate of non-residency from the country you are leaving.

The certificate of non-residency can be rather difficult to obtain if you are leaving the UK simply because its concept does not exist. However, these certificates may be obtained from the Commissaries in the principle towns of the region, (In the Costa Blanca - Denia, Benidorm or Alicante) or by contacting the Spanish embassy before departing and declare your intention to leave the country. You may also be able to obtain a certificate at the consulate office when you arrive in Spain.