

Driving in France

Road types

Roads range from the narrow single-lane roads in the countryside to major highways. Most towns and cities were built before the general availability of the automobile and thus city centers tend to be unwieldy for cars. Keep this in mind when renting: large cars can be very unwieldy. It often makes sense to just park and then use public transportation.

Most of the *autoroute* (motorway/freeway) links are **toll roads**. Some have a toll station giving you access to a section; others have entrance and exit toll stations. Don't lose your entrance ticket or you will be charged for the longest distance plus additional fees. All toll stations accept major credit cards but you can use the automatic booth only if your card is equipped with a chip.

Paying tolls is quite easy - just insert a credit card (or give it to the cashier along with your ticket) and go (Note that Maestro and Visa Electron cards are not accepted.) You can pay with coins as well. Sometimes you get a ticket to calculate the toll. You may have to slide the ticket and then the credit card into the same slot or into two different slots, depending of the machine; it is always clearly specified.

When driving out of towns, look for *toutes directions* ("all destinations") or *autres directions* ("all other destinations", i.e. all places other than the ones on an adjacent sign), which will point you to the main route. Roads are classified into:

- Axxx: Autoroute (Motorway/freeway) (red number sign)
- Nxxx: national road (red number sign)
- Dxxx: departmental road (yellow number sign)

There also are municipal (white number sign) and forestry roads (green number sign). Note that "Routes Départementales" are strictly that: each Département has its own D1, D2, etc., and D-road numbers change at Département boundaries.

Main roads are signposted with the names of towns or cities in the direction you're going and only secondarily with the road number. Directions in green are for major destinations through major highways, are in blue, for directions through Autoroutes. *Péage* means "toll".

If you have time, use the smaller roads. The speed is decent and you don't pay tolls. But you have the opportunity to drive through small towns and villages, stop and grab a bite in the restaurants or buy local wine. Though it's recommended to use GPS or have a good map, the navigation could be sometimes tricky. There are a lot of roundabouts/ traffic circles instead of traffic lights, which could confuse your sense of direction.

Detailed maps (1/200000 scale approximately) are highly advisable unless you stick only to main cities and main highways. Michelin and IGN provide good maps.





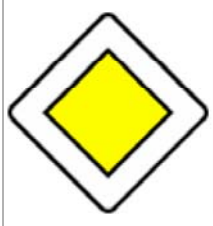










Traffic rules

France drives on the right.

Unless clearly posted on the road you are using, you are supposed to yield (give way) to any vehicle coming from your right from another public thoroughfare. However, roads generally work along a system of "priorities": main thoroughfares will be flagged as "priority" and all crossroads will yield.

Priorité à droite - the old French system was to give priority to all traffic coming from the right. This still applies at unmarked crossroads in the country, in small villages, etc. However for major routes this has now changed. Yellow lozenge signs indicate that you have priority on major roads; a yellow lozenge with a bar shows you do not have priority. Watch out; for drivers from other countries this is one of the most confusing aspects of French driving.

Signposts used in France are patterned according to EU recommendations and use mostly pictograms (not text). The following signs are essential for finding your way on a map and avoiding tickets.

							
Blue sign with white lettering and arrow indicates direction to major road if the word "péage" appears	Green sign with Nx indicates national highway. White sign with Dx or Cx indicates local roads.	Entering a city. Reduce speed to less than 50 km/h, unless otherwise indicated.	Brown sign Tourist information	Trunk (priority) road. "Priorité à droite" does not apply.	End of trunk road (after this sign you have to give way to traffic from the right, unless directed otherwise)	Yield (give way) to vehicle on the other road	Stop before entering or crossing the other road
							

Red round sign means : forbidden (no entry)	Red round sign means : forbidden Speed limit (in Km/Hr)	Newest addition : Speed checking ahead - either automatic cameras or handheld devices	Red round sign means : forbidden No parking	Red triangle sign means : danger Cattle crossing	Blue round sign means : must You must turn right	Blue square sign means : information Parking lot with meters
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Traffic lights

- Traffic lights go directly from red to green, there is **NO** red-and-amber phase to warn you they are about to change. If you are slow in reacting, you may get a gentle horn reminder from the car behind. The lights are high and cannot be seen if you are the first car in the queue, but there is a small repeater light at head height on the post for this purpose.
- Lights have an amber phase when switching from green to red. You may pass an amber light only if you aren't able to stop safely. However, take care in big cities in rush hours if the traffic seems nervous, as many drivers will attempt to pass amber light and may assume you will do.
- In case of traffic jam, you are not allowed to pass a *green* light if you are not sure to be able to clear the intersection before the light switch back to red.
- You are **NOT** allowed to turn right on a red light, unless there is an amber right-arrow flashing, and after yielding to any vehicle on the other road.
- If the lights are off or amber flashing, you must follow the sign that may be present on the light pole. If there isn't, the *priorité à droite* apply : yield to any vehicle coming from your right. Take extra-care and reduce speed in such cases, as disabled lights are quite uncommon and may leads to confusing situation.

Renting cars

Most cars in France have stick shifts (manual gearbox), which you may find difficult or even impossible to operate if you have only driven automatic transmissions. If you rent a car and you want an automatic, be sure to explicitly request so in advance.

Many personal cars run on diesel; make sure you know whether your car is Diesel or gasoline (petrol). Diesel fuel in gas stations is known as *gasoil*, *gazole* or *diesel*; gasoline (petrol) is known as *Super 95* or *Super 98* (all cars accepting 95 accept 98; almost all cars only require 95). Gasoline tends to be more expensive on motorways, and less expensive in supermarkets (Casino, Auchan, Intermarché, Carrefour, etc.)

Better to rent a car that uses Diesel fuel, which tends to be more economic than gasoline.

Traffic offences

Law enforcement forces (depending on the area, *Police Nationale* or *Gendarmerie*) sometimes read your ticket at the toll station to see how long you took since joining the autoroute: (as of 2005) they are not allowed to use that info to give you a speeding ticket. On the other hand, be aware that there is a new automatic photo-radar system that is being implemented throughout France. For the moment, this system is most commonly found along major highways, and near major cities, but it expands quickly. Large brown rectangular signs warn when you are entering an automatic photo-radar area.

A few tips about photo-radar area:

- If you find that the average speed of other (French) cars is surprisingly lower than five minute before, then you must have entered such an area.
- Law enforcement forces may install mobile photo-radar system. You'll be warned but the sign is much smaller than for permanent area.
- Your speed may also be controlled virtually anywhere, without warning. In such a case, you'll be directly intercepted and fined if you committed a speeding offense. Very often, these controls are less strict than photo-radar: for example, if the speed limit is 110 km/h, you will be intercepted only if you exceed, say, 120 km/h. Note that this is just a common tolerance and NOT a general rule. Do not rely too much on it!

When not otherwise specified, the speed limit is 130 km/h on freeways motorways (specified to 110 km/h in urban areas), 110 on divided highways (always specified), 90 km/h otherwise and 50 km/h in city areas. In wet conditions, these limits are reduced to, respectively, 110 km/h, 100 km/h, 80 km/h and 50 km/h. In case of snowy/icy conditions, or under heavy fog, the speed is limited to 50 km/h on all roads.

Typical fines for speeding are:

- <20 km/h above limit: 68€ (90€ in city area), 1 demerit point ;
- 20 to 50km/h above limit: 90€ to 250€, 2 to 4 demerit points ;
- >50km/h above limit: 1500€, minimum 6 demerit points.

Drunk driving is a very serious offense. The tolerated limit is 0.50 g/l (0.05% BAC) in blood, being above this limit is thus illegal and can entitle you a fine up to 750€ and 6 demerit points. If you are found above 0.80 g/l (0.08% BAC), or if you refuse to pass the test, the fine may reach 4500€ followed by an immediate withdrawal of your driving license; jail sentences and confiscation of the vehicle are also possible.

All passengers are required to wear their seat belt and children under 10 must use the back seat (fine 135€ per persons not wearing a seat belt, 1 demerit point if the offender is the driver.)

Being caught with a radar detector, even in your luggage is a serious offense and will result in the device being confiscated and a fine of **at least €2000**

Talking on a hand held mobile phone while driving in France is forbidden.

Final Tips

The following are some simple final points that should be taken into consideration when driving in France:

- You must be at least 18 years of age, and possess a valid driving license from your home country
- It is very important that you stop at STOP signs, failing to do so can result in a spot fine
- The tank should always be kept at least half full as finding a petrol station can be difficult, especially out in the country
- Driving in major cities such as Paris, Marseille and Lyon is not generally recommended, as they can be difficult to navigate around and parking is near impossible. You'd better park in the suburb areas and use public transportation to get in the city center. Many motorists do not pay the required fee when parking, and this has resulted in a dramatic rise in clamping. Parking in restricted areas will often result in your car being towed.

For more info see: www.wikipedia.org

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