

LISTEN UP! DRIVING EDITION

A roundup of practical information



February saw a 7.5% rise in road mortality in France – an increase mostly put down to hazardous winter conditions but driving offences still accounted for 9 out of 10 deaths. Some rules of the road have changed while others are now being more strictly enforced. Here's what you need to know.

Pedestrians have priority

Pedestrians now have right of way over cars when crossing the road – even outside zebra crossings. Drivers must give way when a pedestrian gives a clear intention that he wishes to cross. A clear intention is defined as the pedestrian taking a step forward at the curbside or making a hand gesture to imply that he wishes to cross. The new rule does not apply when nearer than 50 metres from a zebra crossing as the pedestrian is expected to use the crossing if there is one within that distance. Pedestrians are nevertheless obliged to respect traffic lights at zebra crossings – no question of just stepping onto the crossing when the light is red or walking diagonally rather than on the zebra crossing itself.

Failure to give right of way to a pedestrian carries a fine of up to €135 and 4 points off your licence.

Cyclists old and young

Just like cars, bicycles must obey red lights. Unlike cars, they can now turn right on a red light at intersections that are signposted for that.

Children under 8 can now ride their bicycles on the pavement on the condition that they pedal no faster than the surrounding pedestrian traffic and are not a hindrance to walkers and others. Parents are legally responsible for their children's actions.

Scooter and moto licences

Of fatal accidents in France, 28% involve scooters or motorcycles. A decade ago the figure was only 9%.

Holders of a French driver's licence (*permis B*) can no longer drive a scooter or motorbike up to 125cc – the new limit is 50cc. Any 2- or 3-wheeled motorised

vehicle over 50cc now requires either a light motorcycle licence or a full motorcycle licence (for over 125cc). Driving schools offer a 7-hour refresher course for people wishing to drive these.

However, drivers who can prove that they have already driven a 125cc for at least 5 years (insurance documents are accepted as proof) will be able to update their licence without having to take courses. If this is your case ask your insurer for a *relevé d'information* which shows your insurance history.

Engine modification restrictions

Any motor vehicle, car, scooter or motorbike which has a modified engine or exhaust in order to make it go faster is now forbidden. Vehicles found to be modified in this way (*débridé*) will be confiscated. From next year, scooters and motorcycles of all types will require a *contrôle technique* certificate, which will be refused if there has been engine tampering.

Speed cameras

The proximity of an automated camera radar trap is no longer automatically posted in France. Instead, zones where such traps are common will usually be signposted as much as 2 kilometres in advance rather than the 400 metres previously. That leaves plenty of time to forget, so don't.

Over a thousand new speed cameras will be installed in France before 2012 adding to the 2800 already in place. More than 20 of these new cameras will be in Alpes-Maritimes including several in dense urban locations such as the Nice train station flyover.

Time-lapse radar traps

Time-lapse traps (*radars tronçons*), which measure average speed between two distant points, are being installed on major traffic arteries throughout France. This means that drivers can no longer slow down where they know there's a speed camera only to accelerate afterwards. Licence plate recognition technology will be put to full use here. In the Bordeaux region they are testing a system that can recognise lorries and coaches which have different speed limitations from passenger cars.

Tailgating

Tailgating cameras are also being used on some French autoroutes and are expected to be operating this year in our region. An algorithm which compares the driving speed to the distance from the car in front is used to determine whether the driver is tailgating. A similar system is already in service on

Swiss motorways. Tailgating is one of the main causes of death on motorways.

Traffic light cameras

Thirteen new red light cameras are operating in Alpes-Maritimes to record traffic light violations. These cameras don't differentiate between yellow and red so green is the only colour they approve of. Prefect Francis Lamy has announced that before next ski season there could be 15 new red light cameras on the roads leading to local ski resorts.

Also, before the end of this year, 100 new cameras will be installed throughout the country to catch motorists who don't respect level crossings.

Paperless ticketing

Electronic ticketing will be the norm by next year. If an offence is committed it can either be registered by an automatic device such as a traffic light or speed camera or entered into a computer by a policeman or gendarme who witnesses the event. Already 24,000 such computer terminals are in service in police vehicles. Pay your traffic fines by bankcard online (even in English): www.amendes.gouv.fr

Recovering lost points

A proposition that would have allowed drivers to recover 12 lost penalty points over one year without further infractions instead of three was defeated in parliament. The government nevertheless accepts the notion that one point per year can be recovered until three years with no offences have passed, at which time all lost points will be restored unless a court order commands otherwise. To know how many points are left on your licence: www.interieur.gouv.fr – Service "Télépoints".

A reminder to expat residents

You can indeed drive in France on a licence from another EU country. However any traffic violation involving the docking of points will be logged and result in having to swap your foreign licence for a French one so that the points can be deducted.

And non-EU permanent residents must have a French (or an EU) licence after 6 months. If this is not the case, insurers could consider their policy null and void as they do not have a valid licence in France.

Regular medical exams?

From 2013 drivers will have to renew their licence every 15 years, as in many other countries. By then, a European law will set out whether or not a medical examination will be necessary. All new licences will be biometric and contain a computer chip that will record offences and some driver history. Old licences, by the way, will slowly be switched over although you can ask to exchange in advance. By 2033 it'll be bye-bye pink paper. ■