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Driving Exams or Driving Expenses?

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Do you think that learning to drive in Spain is being made more difficult to reduce the amount of accidents, or do the driving schools have other motives? Could it possibly be to fatten the pockets of the DGT? We're going to have a light-hearted look at three countries' methods of learning to drive.

I passed my driving test in 1982 in London. I'd previously passed my motorbike test. Thank God I passed them all well before they decided to introduce the theory test. However, we did also have to study the Highway Code and answer any questions that we were asked correctly. They could ask anything at all in the book so it wasn't that easy!

I recently decided to take a few recovery driving lessons here in Spain. Not because I have to, but because here you drive on the wrong side of the road! No, seriously, I just found it a bit strange, as my reflexive tendencies for changing gear and using the handbrake are with my left hand, and my natural position for the car is on the left side of the road!

Learning to Drive in Spain

When I was in the centre booking the lessons, they gave me a pamphlet with all the fees for learner drivers. Good thing I don't have to pay them. There were registration fees, fees for theory lessons, fees for tests, etc., which amounted to thousands of euros. Then I heard from a colleague at work that the multi-choice theory questions have trick answers to catch you out, and hopefully make you pay more money for further tests, as about only three faults are allowed. There are also fees for psychological tests whenever you have to renew your licence, which in Britain you don't do unless you commit a driving violation or have passed your 70th birthday.

With all these extra safety precautions, you would think that driving in Spain would be one of the safest in Europe, yet there are still thousands of fatal accidents on Spain's roads. Have a look at this link from the DGT: http://www.dgt.es/dgt_informa/investigaciones/accidentes_mortales_24h_2005.pdf

Learning to drive in Britain

Britain changed its driving tests fairly recently. Though there the theory test came into force only in 1996, Britain is second on the European list for safe driving. You don't believe me? Have a look at this: http://www.consumer.es/web/es/motor/educacion_y_seguridad_vial/2007/04/30/162179.php In Britain, moreover, there is now a test where learners watch a video of potential road hazards and have to decide how to react.

To drive a car in Britain, you have to apply for a provisional licence. This allows you to drive only if supervised by a fully qualified driver. So you can take driving lessons with another person, maybe a member of the family, etc., although in my opinion it's much better to pay for lessons in a driving school than to endure the stress of being taught to drive by your spouse, parent, sibling, etc.

In Britain you have to be over 17 to drive a car, but according to the Department of Transport, 20% of all accidents and 25% of road fatalities are caused by drivers in this age group.

Now don't misunderstand me! In Britain too it costs money to learn to drive in a driving school, and most people need at least twenty lessons to pass their driving test. But there, in general, the system is more concerned with day-to-day driving and not so much with paperwork! You might like to have a look at the driving test procedure in Britain.: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Motoring/DriverLicensing/WhatCanYouDriveAndYourObligations/DG_4022547

Well, that's Britain and Spain, but if you want to see a really lax attitude, let's look at the USA.

Learning to Drive in the USA

Apparently, in the USA you can drive at 16. You just get a licence and drive. Another American colleague tells me that you do need to have a fully qualified driver with you as well. The test system in Oregon consists of a driving test: <http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/DMV/driverid/testknow.shtml> in which your examiner watches you and marks down the successes and faults on a sheet.

You need to get seventy-five points out of a hundred to pass, and if you fail, you just drive around and learn your traffic signals and road sense for another seven to twenty-eight days, depending on how many times you've failed. If you fail five times in a row, you wait twelve months to take it again.

But considering the size of the USA, the statistics are not that high. Take a look at this: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Road_safety and you will see what I mean. Unfortunately, it doesn't include Spain.

So, are all these theory lessons and umpteen driving lessons necessary? Or is it just the governments wanting to earn as much money as they can from the poor motorist? Before you answer, you might also want to consider parking and speeding fines, but I think perhaps we'll leave that for another Weekly Letter.