

DRIVING IN FRANCE

Statistically, France is the western European country where cars are smallest. Not that the French are more frugal, but out of necessity. In cities a tiny car has a better chance to squeeze between two others, fit into a French style parking space in an underground public parking lot or into the elevator going down to the parking garage of many downtown hotels. In small towns and narrow village streets, a small car is best as well. Not to mention gas costs. When renting a car, it is wise to take the smallest and to refuse upgrades.

MAPS

We recommend the Michelin website <http://www.francehomestyle.com> if you want to figure out distances and travel time before you leave. Michelin maps are by far the most reliable and readable. Take with you a general map of France to get a sense of where you are in the country. There are also maps showing half of France, North and South. They are sufficient if you stay on the Motorways (*Autoroutes*).

For detailed directions, Michelin regional maps show everything worth looking for, even small chateaux and hamlets. More than one map may be needed to cover all the interesting places within an area.

Another option is to purchase a Road Atlas, the “*Michelin Atlas Routier et Touristique*”. Its 240 pages comprise all the detailed regional maps, a place name index, a map of the Paris area and close to a hundred other city maps. You can order it on-line, or find it in large bookstores and travel bookstores. In France, all gas stations sell them.

TYPES OF ROADS

They are *Autoroutes*, *Routes Nationales* and *Routes Départementales*. The abbreviations are A + a number (for example A49); RN + a number (for example N85); and D + a number (for example D109). E + a number besides A indicates a European motorway reaching into a neighboring country. (For example A10-E5). On signs, they are blue, green or white.

Motorways –impossible to call them freeways since they are toll roads—are indicated by blue road signs. Highways or *Routes Nationales* are indicated by green signs and secondary roads by white signs. Be aware that when following road signs, roads are not marked west or east, north or south. Signs bear the names of the next towns and villages you are headed for. On the Michelin maps, the widest red-colored routes indicate motorways; the narrower red routes are *Routes Nationales*, and the yellow routes indicate secondary roads. When the map shows a yellow or red road lined with green, it means it follows a scenic area. Some motorways such as A6, A7 and A8 connecting Paris to Lyon, or Aix en Provence to Nice and Italy, are as scenic as secondary roads.

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When you arrive at a tollbooth, lanes with an orange sign are reserved for commuters who have an electronic card on board and pay toll by the month. These commuters save time since they don't have to stop.

All other lanes will take any Credit Card or cash. The French word for toll is *Péage*. The cost of traveling on motorways and paying toll is 15 cents a mile, money well spent for long trips when you need to save time.

REST STOPS

Most stops along French motorways come with restaurants, cafeterias, shops, and sometimes hotel rooms, besides, of course, gas and restrooms. Other rest areas are just that, *aires de repos*: no gas, no shop, just restrooms, usually picnic tables and sometimes trails and children's games to give everybody a chance to move and stretch.

SPEED LIMITS

On highways, (*Routes Nationales* or *RN*) the speed limit is 90 km per hour (56.25 miles per hour) unless otherwise indicated. On motorways, (*Autoroutes*) the speed limit is between 110 (69 miles) and 130 kms (81 miles) per hour, depending on weather conditions. In urban areas, the speed limit is 50 km per hour (31 miles per hour) or less. Enforcing those limits on any type of road are traffic police and radars checking drivers' speeds. They have made French drivers more cautious.

Is the COST of GAS that bad?

In 2007 the cost of gas varies from 1.3 to 1.45 Euros per liter. Four liters are roughly equivalent to one gallon, exactly 1.057 gallons. (1 Litre = 0.264 US gallon; 1 gallon = 3.7854 liters). To compare with US prices, multiply by four the cost of one liter. One gallon of regular gas in France is about 5.6 Euros = 7.80 US dollars. Over the last 30 years, the cost of gas in France has been consistently an approximate double of the US price. Buying gas in a town is less expensive than on motorways. Least expensive are supermarket prices (*Carrefour, Leclerc, Attac* and more). But don't spend time looking for one, as city driving is usually slow with heavy traffic.

On the other hand, distances between towns and cities are much shorter in France than in the US. And the smaller cars, most of them with stick shift, are more fuel efficient. The word for fuel is *carburant*.

Visitors of all ages do not take long to get used to their European rental car – the best way to see a lot--and the excellent network of French roads. They soon relax and start having fun at the wheel.

Alors, soyez prudents, et bonne route !

