

Why Americans Drive on the wrong side

By Rick Astley

While it may seem strange to most North Americans, the Brits are not that peculiar in driving on the left, about a quarter of the world drives on that side of the road too, and the countries that do are mostly old British colonies. Japan also drives on the left, largely because its transportation system was set up by the British.

Until the late 1700's, before the birth of the automobile, there were few rules across the world for passing, but what there were favored traveling on the left. The reasons are wholly connected with the fact that the majority of the population was then, as now, right handed.

If in those lawless times you were approaching a stranger on the road it made sense, even on foot, to pass him by moving to the left so that your protective sword, dagger or lance arm was between yourself and him. Moreover, pedestrians were not amused when a horseman's whip hand was too close to them in the narrow streets of cities, so it was in them that the first pass-to-the-left rules were first applied.



A sign near one of the English Channel ports

Revolutionary France wanted to change everything and it was left handed Napoleon who switched the system so that approaching people passed him on his left so that he could keep his sword arm between himself and any potential assassin. From then on, any part of the world which was at some time part of the British Empire passed one another by moving to the to the left and any part colonized by the French, to the right. France and other right passing countries such as The Netherlands were very influential in new America. The drive-on-the-right policy specifically being adopted by the USA as an obvious measure to cast off all remaining links with its British colonial past and to be more like its War of Independence ally France.

Today, the European Community would like Britain to fall into line with the rest of Europe, but this is no longer possible. It would cost billions of pounds to change everything round.

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