

# Driving – Which side of the road?

## Introduction

The choice of side to drive depended on the time of introduction of transportation and on social and political influence. Usually, left-hand driving was the initial standard.

## Did the United States ever drive on the left?

Yes. In the early years of English colonization of North America, English driving customs were followed and the colonies drove on the left (using horses and carriages). The colonies gradually changed to right-hand driving after independence from England. The colonies in the north continued to drive on the left until about 1910.

## Which side of the road did they drive on in ancient times?

Ancient Rome probably drove on the left. We don't know about other ancient civilizations. In late 1998, the remains of a Roman quarry was discovered at Swindon, England. It is one of the largest and best-preserved Roman quarries known. Ruts in the road leading to this quarry are much deeper on one side of the road than on the other. We can therefore deduce that the Romans (at least at this location) drove on the left. There is also evidence from a Roman coin - a "Denarius" from between 50 BC and 50 AD, which shows two horsemen riding past each other, right shoulder to right shoulder.

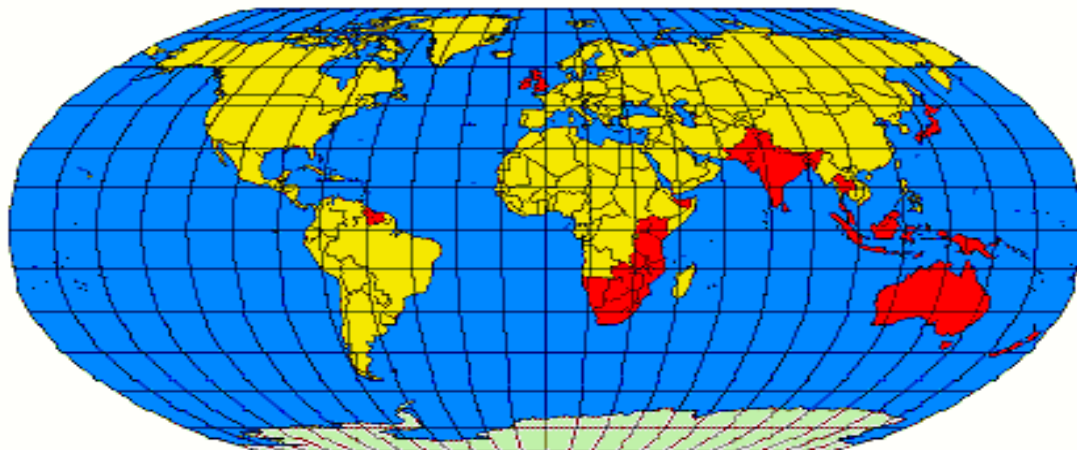
## Population and road distribution

Despite the implicit assumption that everyone except England and some of her colonies drive on the right side of the road, in fact, 5.4 billion people drive on the right side, and 2.7 billion drive on the left side. So, in terms of population, a third of the world drives on the left side. However, almost three-quarters of the world's roads/highways are found in countries where traffic drives on the right side.

## Are the cars different?

Nowadays the position of the pedals is standard (thank goodness!). The other controls are not standard. For example, the signal lever is sometimes on the right side of the steering wheel, and sometimes on the left side.

## Where do we drive on the left or the right?



**Left**   **Right**

## List of Countries (Red – drive on left)

R Afghanistan	<b>L Cook Islands</b>	<b>L India</b>	R Morocco	<b>L Singapore</b>
R Albania	R Costa Rica	<b>L Indonesia</b>	<b>L Mozambique</b>	R Slovakia
R Algeria	R Croatia	R Iran	R Myanmar	R Slovenia
R American Samoa	R Cuba	R Iraq	<b>L Namibia</b>	<b>L Solomon Islands</b>
R Andorra	<b>L Cyprus</b>	<b>L Ireland</b>	<b>L Nauru</b>	R Somalia
R Angola	R Czech Republic	R Israel	<b>L Nepal</b>	<b>L Somaliland</b>
<b>L Anguilla</b>	R Denmark	<b>L Isle of Man</b>	R Netherlands	<b>L South Africa</b>
<b>L Antigua &amp; Barbuda</b>	R Diego Garcia	R Italy	R Neth. Antilles	R Spain
R Argentina	R Djibouti	R Ivory Coast	R New Caledonia	<b>L Sri Lanka</b>
R Armenia	<b>L Dominica</b>	<b>L Jamaica</b>	<b>L New Zealand</b>	R Sudan
R Aruba	R Dominican Rep.	<b>L Japan</b>	R Nicaragua	<b>L Suriname</b>
<b>L Australia</b>	<b>L East Timor</b>	<b>L Jersey</b>	R Niger	R Svalbard
R Austria	R Ecuador	R Jordan	R Nigeria	<b>L Swaziland</b>
R Azerbaijan	R Egypt	R Kazakhstan	<b>L Niue</b>	R Sweden
<b>L Bahamas</b>	R El Salvador	<b>L Kenya</b>	<b>L Norfolk Island</b>	R Switzerland
R Bahrain	R Equatorial	<b>L Kiribati</b>	R N. Mariana Islands	R Syria
<b>L Bangladesh</b>	Guinea	R Korea (North)	R Norway	R Taiwan
<b>L Barbados</b>	R Eritrea	R Korea (South)	R Oman	R Tajikistan
R Belarus	R Estonia	R Kuwait	L Pakistan	<b>L Tanzania</b>
R Belgium	R Ethiopia	R Kyrgyzstan	R Palau	<b>L Thailand</b>
R Belize	<b>L Falkland Islands</b>	R Laos	R Panama	R Togo
R Benin	R Faroe Islands	R Latvia	<b>L Papua New Guinea</b>	<b>L Tokelau</b>
<b>L Bermuda</b>	<b>L Fiji</b>	R Lebanon	R Paraguay	<b>L Tonga</b>
<b>L Bhutan</b>	R Finland	<b>L Lesotho</b>	R Peru	<b>L Trinidad/Tobago</b>
R Bolivia	R France	R Liberia	R Philippines	R Tunisia
R Bosnia/Herzegovina	R French Guiana	R Libya	<b>L Pitcairn Islands</b>	R Turkey
<b>L Botswana</b>	R French Polynesia	R Liechtenstein	R Poland	R Turkmenistan
R Brazil	R Gabon	R Lithuania	R Portugal	<b>L Turks/Caicos Is.</b>
R British Indian Ocean	R Gambia, The	R Luxembourg	R Puerto Rico	<b>L Tuvalu</b>
R Diego Garcia	R Gaza Strip	<b>L Macau</b>	R Qatar	<b>L Uganda</b>
<b>L Brunei</b>	R Georgia	R Macedonia	R Reunion	R Ukraine
R Bulgaria	R Germany	R Madagascar	R Romania	R Utd Arab Emirates
R Burkina Faso	R Ghana	<b>L Malawi</b>	R Russia	<b>L United Kingdom</b>
R Burundi	R Gibraltar	<b>L Malaysia</b>	R Rwanda	R United States
R Cambodia	R Greece	<b>L Maldives</b>	R Saint Barthélemy	R Uruguay
R Cameroon	R Greenland	R Mali	<b>L Saint Helena</b>	R Uzbekistan
R Canada	<b>L Grenada</b>	<b>L Malta</b>	<b>L Saint Kitts/Nevis</b>	R Vanuatu
R Cape Verde	R Guadeloupe	R Marshall Islands	<b>L Saint Lucia</b>	R Venezuela
<b>L Cayman Islands</b>	R Guam	R Martinique	R Saint Martin	R Vietnam
R Central African	R Guatemala	R Mauritania	R St Pierre & Miquelon	<b>L Virgin Islands</b>
Republic	<b>L Guernsey</b>	<b>L Mauritius</b>	<b>L St Vincent</b>	R Wake Island
R Chad	R Guinea	R Mayotte	<b>L The Grenadines</b>	R Wallis & Futuna Is.
R Chile	R Guinea-Bissau	R Mexico	R Samoa	R West Bank
R China	<b>L Guyana</b>	R Micronesia	R San Marino	R Western Sahara
<b>L Christmas Island</b>	R Haiti	R Midway Islands	R São Tome/Principe	R Yemen
<b>L Cocos Islands</b>	R Honduras	R Moldova	R Saudi Arabia	R Yugoslavia
R Colombia	<b>L Hong Kong</b>	R Monaco	R Senegal	R Zaire
R Comoros	R Hungary	R Mongolia	<b>L Seychelles</b>	<b>L Zambia</b>
R Congo	R Iceland	<b>L Montserrat</b>	R Sierra Leone	<b>L Zimbabwe</b>

## **Changing Sides**

During the age of colonization and empires, colonial powers normally imposed their driving customs on their colonies. Many countries which drive on the left today do so because of the British Empire, with the notable exceptions of the USA and Canada. Napoleon's conquests in Europe forced most of the continent to drive on the right in conformance with French practice. Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Channel Islands changed sides from left to right to conform to German practice during World War II. The Falkland Islands drove on the right during the period of Argentinian occupation in the 1980s. Many countries have switched sides for various reasons.

### **Example: Sweden, 1967**

Sweden's neighbours, Norway, Denmark and Finland, have always driven on the right. So, by the middle of the twentieth century, the Swedish government felt increasing pressure to change sides to conform with the rest of Europe. Anders Hanquist wrote "The problem with left-hand driving in Sweden was, of course, that all our neighbours already drove on the right side. There are a lot of small roads, without border guards, leading into Norway so you had to remember in which country you were. Another curiosity was that most of the cars running in Sweden were built for right-hand driving. That means that the steering wheel was on the left side of the car. Buses, however, had the driver on the right side". A referendum about introducing right-hand driving was held in 1955, with the vote being 82.9% against and only 15.5% in favour of the change. However, in 1963 the Swedish parliament passed a law on the conversion to right-hand driving. The change took place on 3rd of September 1967 at 5am. Hanquist said "The traffic conversion in Sweden was very well prepared. A booklet with more than 30 pages was distributed to every house in the country. A special state authority was set up to administer the conversion. All traffic was prohibited four hours before, and one hour after, the conversion. In some cities there was no traffic for 24 hours. The military helped to change all the traffic signs." Many roads were completely closed for two days while changes were made to road signs. Then a very low speed limit was applied which was raised in a number of steps. The whole process took about a month. All trains and the Stockholm subway however, still drive on the left. On the day of the change, only 157 minor accidents were reported, of which only 32 involved personal injuries. On the next day, there were 125 reported traffic accidents. After this the number of daily accidents fell to below pre-change levels.