

DRIVING IN THE DR

Beep language

The driving game is played differently everywhere you go, be it California freeways, New York City, or Paris. And in the Dominican Republic, especially the large and oldest Caribbean capital of Santo Domingo. there is no exception.

Hand signals for right and left turns and for stopping are exactly the same in the DR as in the United States. So, a person can drive here with no genuine problems as far as hand signals go.

Nevertheless, there are a lot of signals unique to this country. These would be helpful to know if you are going to drive here. And they are not in the books.

One rare signal is actually made by the person in the passenger seat. The passenger extends his or her arm out the passenger-side window and, keeping it straight out, palm forward, waves it up and down. **This waving means...** "We want to turn right," or "We want to move into the right-hand lane. Let us move over." A good passenger will look back at traffic behind to see if they will heed his signal and then communicates his or her observations to the driver.

Hand signals in general are rather ambiguous in this country as right-hand turn gesture are seldom used. And according to Dominican men, Women often get confused with the left turn signal.

The driver's arm out the window may mean he is going to stop or pull off to the right, if he is moving; or it may mean he is going to go, as with a cab driver who has just stopped to take on a passenger. It may also mean he is turning or pulling to the left—even though the arm is in the same posture as when the signal means "stop." That is, the arm usually has only one position: straight out at window level, palm forward. So, in a nutshell, in addition to observing hand gestures, you must also pay attention to what the other drivers are contending with at the time.

The Horn

Someone once said that to drive in the DR you need a horn more than brakes. Was he right! Dominicans use the horn from dawn to dusk. And there are innumerable varieties of beeping.

One little short beep could mean, 1) "I'm here: do you see me?" This beep at a stop light, is usually very insulting to foreigners. 2) Or it could mean... "The light is green, stupid. I saw it before you did. Now get moving!" (At least, that is how many foreigners interpret it). Keep in mind that although its annoying, **Dominicans just want motion**, but they rarely mean any offense.

Two **short** beeps, for instance at an intersection means, "I'm coming through." This is an announcement of intentions... which by the way is subject to last-minute change. Whereas...

Two **long** beeps mean, "Out of the way" or "Watch out! I'm coming through, and if you get in the way, we WILL have an accident." This could be part of the "machismo" phenomena. Maybe not. But for sure, **Dominicans play a lot of "chicken"** on the road and as **a rule of thumb, the driver with the most nerves of steel gets to go first.** Keep in mind, many Dominicans do not have adequate insurance, so if visiting, it may be difficult, but very advisable to let them win.

This game of chicken is not only true at intersections, **but in passing too.** "He who hesitates is lost." The thing to remember here is that **hesitation** on your part is read immediately as a "GO" by the other driver. So you cannot hesitate and then "GO" yourself.

One long honk of the horn means, "Danger, stupid; can't you see!" Breathe easy if you hear this one, because 80 percent of the time the danger has just passed, like the thunder after the stroke of lightening that did not kill you. In many cases, this is the Dominican driver's only revenge, his only vent for anger, when you have just cut in on him, thus putting both of you in danger.

What matters more to a Dominican than even near death, is that you were more "macho" than he. And you won the

game. His only recourse is to honk —and perhaps a few select words yelled out of the window in Spanish if he can catch up to you.

Lights

Lights blinking at you during the day mean two things. The first is the typical “You have got your lights on by accident.”

The second, however, is a social phenomenon. Dominicans have developed a form of self-defense against the radar speed control units. So daytime-blinking lights is a neighborly way of warning on-coming drivers that they are approaching a radar trap, or a parked police vehicle.

Don't get me wrong authority is respected and it is widely recognized these speed traps have had a sobering effect on speeders and have reduced accidents substainsally. So pass the word along, and be sure to pay back this service to others.

At night, these same blinking lights (**or low-beam, high-beam alternation**) have a different meaning. Usually used at intersections, they are blinked by a driver who considers that he has the right of way and is going through. On the other hand, if the driver behind you blinks his lights, it means, “I'm going to pass in a hurry.” This might be an emergency situation, so pay attention to incessant blinking lights and give them the benefit of the doubt.

After dark, and even sometimes during the day, the headlights are used to signal drivers' messages. Pay attention, also, to one **long light flash**. It means, “I'm coming through, no matter who has the right of way.” At night this may be an oncoming car switching from low to high beam. Remember, because many of the roads are in rough shape or very narrow, he may be on your side of the street because he is unable to get back into his lane in time

Sirens and improvised sirens

Speaking of emergencies... As soon as you have driven a few days in Santo Domingo, you will notice a surprising phenomenon. Dominicans do not pull to the right for sirens because ambulances are often used as hearses, especially

in the countryside; and because frequently people in possession of sirens abuse the fact by using them unwarrantedly. Furthermore, several cars will take advantage of a speeding ambulance to get behind and make it to their destination faster. So for these and other reasons, Dominicans do not respect the siren.

That does not mean you should not. Dominican law is exactly the same as the United States law with respect to sirens. People should pull to the right, and they should yield the right of way to the vehicle with the siren. Just look around before you pull to the right. Since no one else will be pulling over, you could cause an accident for being a good citizen!

Ambulances are still scarce here. The majority of emergency cases (sudden illnesses, accidents, etc.) are taken to the hospital in private cars, taxis or believe it or not, pick up trucks. The drivers of these cars honk their horns incessantly. And the person in the passenger's seat may wave his arms frantically out the windows directing cars to yield the right of way as his car whips in and out of the traffic. These improvised sirens definitely are respected—at least to a greater degree than the conventional ones.

Drive a truck

There is at least one more sign drivers in Santo Domingo should be aware of. It is neither horn nor lights nor hand signal. It is the position of the car itself. Many drivers (wrongly, according to the law) consider it more prudent, especially in heavy traffic, to pull off to the right before making a left-hand turn. Thus, a car stopped momentarily on the right may suddenly swing across all lanes of traffic to make a left turn.

So, for safety's sake, before passing any stopped car on its left, honk one or two little beeps to let him know first. A modification of this posture is the driver who swings into the right-hand lane just before executing a left turn—as if he were driving a truck, not a bad suggestion for a foreigner who cannot remember all these signals. Just drive a truck. And let the others read your signals instead of the other way around.

Unfortunately for most of us with our small cars, we just have to learn to play the game —and the quicker the better.

Watch out when you go back to the States, though. It is another game there, you know. As one American visitor exclaimed after riding ten minutes with an American friend resident of Santo Domingo, “Why driving like that, you wouldn’t last ten minutes in the States before the police picked you up!” (Kathleen Mitchell)

Tackling public transport

For those who have the RD\$50+ to pay for a private taxi, there is no city better served. A call to one of the many companies listed in the Yellow Pages will get a car to you 24 hours a day usually in less than five minutes. You can order your car with air-conditioning or even be picky and request a driver who speaks English.

But for those who need to be constantly on the go and cannot afford a private taxi, there is the public transport system. To the uninitiated, Santo Domingo’s system of public transit can be intimidating—cars that look like they should be in scrap yards, minibuses with shouting conductors, or large overflowing buses all vying for the commuter’s fare.

But although the appearance—and sometimes the reality—can be chaotic, and the rides far from luxurious, getting around by public transit in Santo Domingo is usually fairly quick and easy. And at three pesos a ride for the bus and five to ten pesos for the “multi-fare paying taxi”, it is far less expensive than a tax you could call by phone. Here’s a primer for tackling public transit.

Catching a ride

To get a ride on the city’s public transportation system, just stand on the side of any relatively major street and let your fingers do the walking. Stick your hand out and sort of wave in the direction you want to go. For example, to go straight, flick your finger parallel to the street. Observe more experienced riders for style tips.

Many vehicles just travel the one road, then turn around and go back. Others will turn onto other main streets. For

example, some cars head west on Av. Independencia, then turn north on Av. Máximo Gómez. To catch one of those, point your thumb back over your shoulder. Drivers and conductors will help you by doing their own pointing. Often you will need to take a couple of separate rides to get where you want to go, and as long as you know where that is, it isn't too difficult. Stick to main roads if you're uncertain, and ask the driver to tell you when you reach your crossroad.

Carro talk

Limited knowledge of Spanish is no impediment to riding public transit. There are only a few words you need to know:

Say Derecho? if you want to go straight ahead. If you want to know if the vehicle goes as far as a specific street, ask Hasta la Kennedy? (or whatever street). The only answer you need to know is a nod or a shake of the head.

There are several ways to say you want to get out of the vehicle. In the buses or minibuses or even in cars, if the radio's blaring you might have to scream. Don't be shy, or you may end up somewhere you'd rather not be. General "stop" expressions include Déjame! (Let me out!) and Dónde pueda! (Wherever you can!).

To stop at the next corner, say En la esquina! At bigger intersections, you might want to say Antes de cruzar! or Después de cruzar! (Before or after you cross the intersection.) Hysterical screaming would probably work equally as well as any of these suggestions.

Your car, sir

There are several kinds of vehicles plying the public transport trade. The carros públicos are regular cars, some as much as 20 years old. They are usually in varying states of decomposition: cracked or missing windows, no door handles, holes in the floor, smoke coming from various and unexpected places.

Expect to sit, depending on the size of the car, with two or three other people in the front seat (including the driver), and three or four (or five) in the back.

Pollitos are yellow Nissan minivan taxis and are relatively new, with most having been imported in 2000 to improve the public transport system. Come 2002, expect the Garzas or white Nissan minivan taxis to go into service. These are being imported by the Hipolito Mejia administration, also to improve public transport.

Guagua usually refers to minivans or minibuses. The vans are often in worse shape than the cars, although the minibuses can actually be quite recent models. The same principle of seating applies: if it doesn't look like another person can sit there, they probably will anyway.

Guaguas normally have a cobrador, the guy who hangs out the door yelling his destination at people on the side of the street. He also takes your fare, and tells you where to sit for optimum sardine-like capacity. Sometimes he tells jokes, too, and he almost always flirts with the women.

The big OMSA buses run on main avenues like Independencia, Nuñez de Cáceres, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and 27 de Febrero. The Gustavo Mejia Ricart bus commutes through the Naco area. At rush hours, it's three people to each seat, and as many as can stand in the aisle. If you're lucky, you stand or sit near the front or back door, to avoid having to squeeze past dozens of people to get out.

That's the advantage of the carros públicos, in spite of their sorry condition. You never have to climb over more than four people when you want to get out. Another advantage to the carros publicos is that they will stop where ever you need them to. The OMSA buses have fixed stops.

The normal fare on the buses is three pesos for each very long route. The carros publicos will charge RD\$5 for a short route. Sometimes the cars will charge you double if it's a long journey. Check to see what the other passengers are paying. Try to have small change with you. You can book a carro publico to your destination. He will charge about RD\$40 for the ride.

The important thing when riding public transit is not to lose your sense of humor. Dominicans generally find it all pretty funny, too.

Motoconchos

You want to avoid taking one of these whenever you can. These warriors of the road compete with the cars by taking fare-payers straight to their destination. The accident rate of these vehicles, though, is by far higher than that of any other kind of vehicle. Indeed, one of every two accidents in the Dominican Republic involves motorcycle bike riders. Motoconchos, though, will take you where you need to go and are usually used for short rides. They charge RD\$10 per ride. They are more popular in the towns than in the capital city and add significantly to the noise pollution of these towns.

Tips on driving in Santo Domingo

2002 is a turn-point year for driving in the Dominican Republic. The main highway leading east from Santo Domingo, the Autovia del Este will be completed in the first half of the year, making trips safer and faster. Likewise the new bridge over the Ozama River and Las Americas Expressway entrance will be completed by Spring. This gives the DR several excellent highways to go west (6 de Noviembre Expressway), the Duarte Highway, going north, and the new Autovia del Este going east.

Driving in Santo Domingo is not much more different than driving in any large city. If you need to get around in the city for a short term, you will be better off taking taxis. If you will be here for a while, or will be heading out of the city, getting behind the wheel is a fun way to see much more. The important thing to remember is to drive on the defensive. Dominican drivers can be aggressive as they inch their way through bottle necks and frequent traffic jams.

Regardless of the new expressways where cars zooming by at more than 120 kilometers/hour seems the usual, the following tips on driving continue to be valid for driving in

the D.R.:

- The Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Public Works are implementing a system of road signs. In case of doubt of where you are, ask. Take to the roads with map in hand (you can purchase one at Texaco gas stations) and ask every few kilometers or every new town. Dominicans on the street will be happy to guide you.
- Avoid traveling on Dominican highways at night. Period. Your path may be obstructed by animals, pedestrians or vehicles without reflectors or lights.
- If you leave the city early in the morning, keep in mind that those traveling into town have probably not slept. Put your headlights on (low beam) and be alert for any abnormalities, such as zig-zagging.
- Experts have proven that a vehicle traveling from 80-130 kms. will arrive only six minutes earlier than one maintaining a continuous speed of 80 kms per hour. Most accidents occur when picking up speed "to make up for lost time."
- When caught in a political caravan or traffic jam, get out your favorite music or turn on the radio — and relax.
- Exercise special care when driving in the rain. Visibility may be reduced to a dangerous 35 meters on highway and highways bordering the water become extra dangerous. Stick to 60 kilometers per hour when driving at night on a rainy day along the slippery Autopista Las Americas which leads East from Santo Domingo. Avoid driving into any puddle of water where your visibility will be affected. Better still, leave tomorrow instead.

- The new thoroughfares with their double lanes in both directions have solved the problem of blinding lights. Nevertheless, if you are traveling on one of the secondary roads keep in mind that many drivers believe that high beams are necessary, especially when other drivers are blinding them in return. Do not interpret this as rudeness. Just try not to crash until you regain your sight.
- The most dangerous vehicles are trucks loaded with farm produce, mini-buses, and patanas. The latter are trucks loaded with containers or large cisterns. The unwritten law of the road is that they have the right of way. Many who didn't believe that didn't live to prove they were right.
- Accidents frequently occur on hills, where there are two lanes going up and just one coming down. Impatient drivers descending may "borrow" a lane from those ascending —leading to a sudden crash.
- To facilitate the flow of traffic, the traffic authorities and the municipality have agreed on one way streets. This could mean you are a block away from where you are headed but have to go around the block to get there. Have patience. The good news is that most of the one way streets, at least in Santo Domingo, have signs that indicate this. Regardless, always check the direction of parked cars or better still, watch the flow of traffic.
- A green light may mean "Stop" if there is a police officer beneath it helping to "speed" things up. Before speeding across a street, double check to see if there is a green-shirted (AMET) officer substituting for the traffic light, regardless of whether this is working or not. Body posture is often more important than hand gestures in interpreting

the officer's intentions. If his body is sideways to you, you can generally go, while a full frontal stance usually means that you should stop.

- If a stop light is not working, do not interpret this as if you have right of way. It is possible that it is not working on your side, but on the other side the drivers have a green light. Proceed with extreme caution.