



SAFE DRIVING IN AMERICA

Driving in America can be very different to driving in the UK. Here are some simple rules of the road to help you get started...

Public transport systems are not the same as they are in the UK. They are very limited and almost everyone drives. It is virtually impossible to get anywhere without a car, and taxis can be very expensive. If you are to get the maximum out of your holiday, it is in your interests to have a hire car particularly if you are coming for any length of time.

There can be a great distance between the places that you may want to visit whilst you are here. Unlike Europe, most of the roads in Florida are straight and wide, so traffic flows very well most of the time. This means that the distances matter less as travelling on these road systems is easy and relatively fast.

The following is a general guide only and if further information is required please research on the official sites. You will find links for these at the end of this article.

Seat Belts

Seat belts are compulsory in Florida and you can get pulled over by the Police for a traffic violation if you ignore this rule.

Driving Licences

Your UK driving licence will be fine for short stays and up to six months. You can obtain an International Driving Licence, but as the main purpose of these is to alleviate foreign language problems it shouldn't be necessary to have one in Florida.

If your UK licence does not have a photograph, it is advisable to have your passport with



you as back-up ID. Hiring cars is possible with a British driving licence and a current credit card.

Hire cars

Airlines offer special Fly/drive deals, which will avoid problems of having to queue to get a car once you reach the airport and is likely to be more cost effective. If you have to hire locally, the different companies vary widely in the type of car on offer and the price. We have our own link on the website to one of the most competitively priced company's so if you have not already made arrangements, please try them out. By using our link you also get an additional 5% savings on your rental too!

GPS Systems

If possible also hire a GPS system. This cuts out an enormous amount of stress and frayed tempers as you miss your turnings and end up in a mini-nightmare. You can type in your destination address, the route is computed for you and you are given plenty of warnings of when you are approaching your turnoff. If you should miss a turn, the route will be re-calculated for you. It's worth a little extra so that you aren't lost for any length of time in the, sometimes, scorching heat with your children testing your endurance levels and stony glares from your partner raising the temperature even higher.

Disabled Drivers

The one good thing about Florida is that every store has a disabled parking area. However, if these are taken, do not necessarily dismiss the ordinary spaces because the spaces are usually big enough to accommodate the large trucks and SUV's that are driven over here and as a result, these are quite often almost as roomy as the disabled bays.

Your disabled parking badge will be recognized over here so don't forget to bring it.



Most of the car rental firms offer hand controls for the cars, so if you are the main driver request it when booking. You can opt to have the controls on the right side of the steering wheel, but be aware that they may be different to the controls you are used to in the UK. There are various models of hand control, but the basic one tends to be that the accelerator is worked by pushing the hand control down and the brake is activated by pushing the control forward. Please check the details of the particular hand controls on your car with the rental firm before you attempt to drive off.

Speed limits

Each road has speed limit signs on the verges at regular intervals. Remember though, each interstate can be hundreds of miles long so the speed limit can change often varying usually between 30 in urban districts and 70 mph..

Special rules apply in School Zones and signs at the side of the road will advise where the zones start and end. When lights are flashing 20 mph is the normal speed limit.

School Buses

School buses transport the local children to and from school and are usually bright yellow. If the lights on the back of the bus are flashing then you must STOP. You cannot pass a school bus when the children are disembarking.

Overtaking

Care must be taken when overtaking as cars can be closer than they seem. Three & more lane highways are common, and overtaking can be done in any of the lanes. The 'slow' lane is normally on the far right. However this lane can change into an exit only – which then means you must move into the next lane if this is not your junction.

As with any country there will be some 'boy racers' on the road, and it is necessary to be



extremely vigilant when changing lanes as no amount of checking in the mirror can be a safe sign that nothing has come up quickly behind you.

Driving on the Right

This doesn't take too long to get used to. Just drive with caution until you get used to the system.

Turning left is the same rules as Britain for turning right. If there is no filter light, move to the centre of the road and, if there are no cars approaching from the opposite direction you can then safely make the turning.

If crossing an Interstate, there is usually a central reserve (outlined in yellow). Make sure there are no cars coming from your left, move into the central reserve and check the traffic approaching from the right. If nothing is coming, turn left. NEVER stop across a highway lane – cars come up very fast and this is really dangerous.

There are no roundabouts normally, but should you come across one, (usually at the entrances to sub-divisions (housing estates)) remember you will be going anti-clockwise.

Turning right on traffic lights

Unless there is a sign saying otherwise, you can turn right at red traffic lights if the road is clear and there are no pedestrian's crossing.

U-Turns

If you need to turn around this is permissible unless there is a No U-turn sign. There are breaks in the central reserve on most of the highways clearly showing the areas where this is possible by the use of white arrows painted on the roads. Obviously, only enter these areas



if the arrows are pointing your way. U-Turns at traffic filter lights is also a common practice.

Four-way Junctions

Four-way junctions tend to work on a very polite system of first come, first go rotational basis. You must **always** stop at a stop sign, (you can be ticketed for coming to a 'rolling' stop) check what cars are waiting at the other road junctions, when it's safe to proceed, only then move forward.

Turnpikes

These are toll roads. Around the Orlando area there are several of these road systems where at regular intervals you have to pay a toll. This usually ranges between 50cents and \$1.50 for cars.

There are three ways of paying:

1. If you have the exact change you can go through the express lane, which will be clearly signposted, and you throw your coins into a container, which then triggers the green light.
2. If you need change, you head for the lane that is manned where you can get change or a receipt.
3. You can buy a Sun Pass Ticket at most supermarkets, which you put on your windscreen, and this then allows you to go through the designated lane without stopping. The ticket is checked on your way through electronically and the system will charge your account. For short stay holidays this may not be a viable option.

Interstates & Highways

Interstates and Highways are the major road systems in Florida. Varied speed restrictions



will apply but will be signposted on the verges. They are similar systems to the UK Motorways, where exits are made by the use of slip roads. However, they can quickly turn into built-up areas so caution needs to be taken to follow the rules and speed limits of that particular section of road.

Interstates can be very long and very straight. There is a very real danger that you could become sleepy particularly on a long journey. Take regular stops and if you really feel like a nap, find a populated service area and take a longer rest.

Keeping Safe

All countries have their horror stories of the crime levels, specific incidents of crimes against tourists or major accidents. The truth is that the majority of us enjoy holidays without any major incident and it is usually a small percentage that has the misfortune to have any type of problem. However, simple safety tips would be:

- Drive carefully – make sure you have an understanding of the road systems and basic rules before you arrive.
- Do not stop on Interstates except in an emergency. Speeding traffic will be your main problem, but you may be unlucky enough to be the target of an opportunist.
- If someone tries to flag you down – don't stop if you feel uncomfortable. This goes against most of our instincts when we think someone needs help, but you would be better advised to go to a built up, well lit area and stop to make a phone call if you feel they really need help.
- Do not keep all your valuables and money on you. If possible, keep them in a safe place where you are staying, or at least spread them about the car, to minimise risk.
- Do not drink and drive – it is illegal. In addition, it is also unlawful to have any open alcohol bottle or can in the car.



Emergency Numbers

In case of an emergency, you can get Police, Fire or Ambulance by dialling 911.

Driving with Children

Young children should wear seat belts and ideally be in the back of the car. Journeys can be long, particularly if you hit a traffic jam, so a bag of puzzle books, colouring books (not wax crayons though as they're likely to melt), or anything portable that will keep the children amused would be a handy thing to keep in the car.

If you have sweets, boiled sweets or hard candy will survive better than chocolate.

Keep a box of wet wipes in the car to freshen up during the journey.

Florida can get very hot, and although air conditioning systems in cars are very effective, it would be a good idea to carry water with you where possible, as dehydration can be a real problem. Most of the major supermarkets will carry insulating bags to keep the drinks cool. One trick is to put some bottles of water in the freezer the night before (remembering to leave a gap for expansion). They will stay cold for a lot longer so there will be ice-cold drinks in the car throughout the day.

And finally....

We hope that you have found the above information helpful. If you need further help, please click on the links to get to the official sites. Basically, as long as you are careful and vigilant whilst you get used to the road system and the other drivers, you should have a safe and trouble-free holiday.



Further Reading:

- [Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety](#)
- [American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials \(AASHTO\)](#)
- [American Automobile Association \(AAA\)](#)
- [American Automobile Association Foundation for Traffic Safety](#)
- [Federal Highway Administration](#)
- [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#)
- [National Safety Council](#)
- [Road Information Program](#)

Happy driving!