

The Low Down on Driving in Mexico

Each year millions of Americans, Canadians and Mexican citizens drive across the U.S. border into Mexico for short vacations at nearby beaches, to spend the winter under the warm Mexico sun or to visit family for the holidays. Driving in Mexico is not difficult and it's a great way to see the countryside.

This article provides many tips to aid your travel across the border, while in Mexico and when coming home.

Before Leaving the U.S.

1. **Be sure your car is tuned up**, has a fresh oil change and tires are looking good. You don't want to deal with car problems while on vacation. And, if you do not speak the language, you may have some difficulty in getting repairs.
2. **Necessary Paperwork.** Everything you will need to bring across the border is described on the [Traveler's Checklist provided by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol website](http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/travelers_checklist.xml) (http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/travelers_checklist.xml). You will need a U.S. Passport or [Passport card](#) and a valid driver's license.
3. **Know customs requirements.** Bring receipts or registration paperwork ([CBP Form 4457](http://forms.cbp.gov/pdf/CBP_Form_4457.pdf) http://forms.cbp.gov/pdf/CBP_Form_4457.pdf) for any new electronics (e.g. camera, TV, desktop computer) you are bringing across the border, so you do not have to pay duties on them when returning to the U.S. (Only suggested if traveling with recently purchased goods. Not necessary for goods more than 6 months old.) [Items are allowed into Mexico duty-free can be found at:](#) http://www.aduanas.gob.mx/aduana_mexico/2008/pasajeros/139_10210.html
4. **Purchase Mexican Car Insurance online.** You must have Mexican domiciled car insurance if you plan to drive your car into Mexico. If you have an accident without Mexican liability insurance you should expect to be jailed -- possibly for some time. Uninsured motorists sit in jail until police determine responsibility and all claims arising from the accident are settled. Another advantage of purchasing online is it allows your information to be immediately available to Mexican authorities.
5. **U.S. citizens traveling in Mexico are encouraged to register with the U.S. Embassy or the nearest U.S. consulate** through the [State Department's travel registration website](https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/) (<https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>). Registration is important as it allows the State Department to assist U.S. citizens in the event of an emergency.

6. **DO NOT BRING A GUN** across the border. Mexico has extremely strict gun control laws. Carrying even a single cartridge across the border is a felony that can land you in jail for a decade or more.

7. **Get a *Mexico Vehicle Importation Permit***

<http://www.mexpro.com/mexico/beforeyougo.html>) if you are traveling outside the [Mexico Free Trade Zone](#)

http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/trade/cargo_security/cargo_control/ftz/ask_ftz.xml).

The free trade zone is defined as the an area between 20 and 30 kilometers from the border with the U.S.; the Baja Peninsula and the state of Sonora are also free trade zones. You can do this online at <http://www.banjercito.com.mx/>.

Crossing the Border

It's mostly pain free and very easy to cross the border for some shopping for the day; proof of citizenship is all you need to get back into the U.S. Yet, what is required to drive through the border into the interior of Mexico?

1. **Pass through the border traffic signals.** When you first cross the border you will pass through gates with traffic signals. If the signal is green, proceed through. If the signal is red, an alarm will sound, and a customs officer will direct you into a parking spot where they will inspect your vehicle and ask you questions about what you are carrying and where you are traveling.

2. **Vehicle Importation Permits.** If you are planning on driving outside the Mexico Free Trade zone and do not get a Vehicle Importation Permit online as described above, you will need to obtain one at the border. Look for signs that say "Vehicle Import Permits". The permit is good for 180 days. If the vehicle is financed, is a rental car, is leased, and/or a company car, a notarized letter of permission is required from the lien holder or lending institution. Mexican law also requires the posting of a bond at a Banjercito office to guarantee the export of the car from Mexico within a time period determined at the time of the application. For more detailed information go to <http://www.mexpro.com/mexico/beforeyougo.html>.

The process for the permit is as follows:

a.) Obtain a [Tourist Visa](#) (<http://www.mexperience.com/guide/essentials/FMTexample.htm>). There is a fee.

b.) Go to the copies counter and make copies of all required documents: vehicle title or registration, drivers license, tourist visa, passport, credit card. If

you have had previous import permits, bring copies showing you returned the permits.

c.) Go to the Banjercito cashier and present documents and copies. You will be charged a fee based on your vehicle blue book value. The cashier will issue your certificate and window sticker.

Driving in Mexico

1. ***Mexican drivers are generally more aggressive than American drivers.***

They also rarely use their turn signals. Be extra aware and careful when changing lanes or passing a driver. Do NOT expect them to see your signals.

2. ***Watch for Pedestrians.*** There is a lot of pedestrian, bike and motorbike traffic in Mexico. You do not want to hit a pedestrian in Mexico.

3. Do not drive on highways if you do not drive on highways in the U.S.

Highways in Mexico are crowded with trucks, buses and cars, particularly in the large cities. Most roads are narrower than those in the U.S. The older the road, the more narrow.

4. ***Do not drive on Mexican highways at night*** if you do not do so in the U.S. Mexican highways are not well lit and are crowded at night with commercial vehicles, vehicles with poor lighting and even pedestrians. Paint and signs do not always reflect well at night. Some studies estimate 90% of fatal accidents occur between dawn and dusk in Mexico.

5. ***Road surfaces.*** Mexico roads are not constructed in the same manner as those in the U.S. As well, they often do not have proper draining. Therefore, road surfaces are rougher than what you'd experience in the U.S. Drive accordingly.

6. ***Road Shoulders.*** Two lane highways with shoulders are treated as four-lane highways in Mexico. Vehicles will expect you to move onto the shoulder and allow them to pass if you are driving slower. A lot of Mexican roads do not have adequate shoulders and even have steep drop-offs where the pavement meets the side of the road.

7. ***Obstacles/Road Bumps.*** Unmarked obstacles are common on Mexican roadways. Watch out. Large road bumps are very common in Mexico are often not marked. Sometimes they will be marked with signs saying "topes" or "topetazos".

8. **Left turns out of a parking lot.** DO NOT turn left when entering a street from the middle of the block. You must first turn right, go around the block, and then turn left at an actual street intersection.

9. **Gas.** Pemex, Mexico's national oil company owns all Mexican gas stations. Gas stations are all full-service and usually only take cash in pesos, even at the borders. Gas stations are called "gasolinerias" and unleaded gas is called "magna sin". It's easy to find gas stations in urban areas, and usually in remote areas too. Gas in Mexico is sold in liters (there are almost four liters in a gallon). You will find the price at the gas pump, not on signs outside the gas station. Gas station attendants are always tipped, especially if they wash your windows and check your oil. An average tip is around 5 pesos, and 10 pesos is generous. Highway signs that indicate "gasolinerias" are green with white lettering or images.

10. **Toll Roads.** Toll roads are called "autopistas" or "cuotas". Toll roads are generally in good condition since they are too expensive for most Mexican drivers. Government-owned toll roads are usually less expensive than private toll roads. RV's pay the same price as commercial semi trucks on most toll roads. Tolls are expensive but worth the time, gas and lodging you save using a more direct route with less traffic.

11. **Traffic Signals.** Traffic signals in Mexico are the same as in the U.S. They use the green/amber/red lights to signal go, proceed with caution and stop. Traffic signals can often be burned out, very dim or change suddenly from green to amber to red.

12. **Traffic Signs.** Traffic signs are very similar to those used in the U.S., as well.

a. Stop signs are red and octagonal in shape.

i. In rural areas stop signs could be just about anything red and painted "*ALTO*".

b. Caution signs are diamond-shaped and yellow.

i. *Ceda el Paso* - means yield the right of the way.

ii. *No Rebase* - means no passing. A dotted line painted through the center of the roadway means passing is allowed in both directions and a solid line means no passing allowed in both directions. Center lines can be painted yellow or white.

iii. *Curva Peligrosa* - means dangerous curve.

iv. *Poblano Proximo* - means a town is nearby.

- v. X - you must stop before going across a railroad crossing.
- vi. *Vado* - means the road is crossing a dry wash. Do not enter if filled with water.
- vii. *Cuesta Peligrosa* - means dangerous grade.
- viii. *Un Sentido* - means one way street.
- ix. *Desviacion* - means detour.
- x. *Alto* - means stop.
- xi. *Salida* - means exit.
- xii. *Ganado* - means cattle. Cattle roam freely in Mexico, beware if you see this sign.
- xiii. *E or Estacionamiento* - means parking lot. It is often indicated with a large E surrounded by a red circle. If the red circle has a diagonal slash through it, it means no parking.

13. **Pullouts.** There are few pullouts on Mexican roadways.

14. **Passing.** Drivers in Mexico let the vehicles behind them know it is safe to pass by turning on their left turn signal. Again, *No Rebase* - means no passing. A dotted line painted through the center of the roadway means passing is allowed in both directions and a solid line means no passing allowed in both directions. Center lines can be painted yellow or white.

15. **Flashing lights.** When an approaching car flashes their headlights it is a warning that there is danger ahead.

16. **Urban areas.** Big road bumps, low speed limits and local police officers are common in many towns. Expect a lot of traffic.

Returning to the Good Ole' U.S.

1. When you leave Mexico stop at the Aduana Mexico location and **cancel your Vehicle Importation Permit**. If you do not cancel your permit, your credit card may be charged penalties and you will not be able to get a permit in the future.

2. **Pay duties on necessary items.** To see which items are allowed duty-free go to http://www.aduanas.gob.mx/aduana_mexico/2008/pasajeros/139_10230.html. For Customs Regulations go here http://www.aduanas.gob.mx/aduana_mexico/2008/pasajeros/139_10212.html

3. **Do not bring prohibited or restricted items** (http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyq/prohibited_restricted.xml) across the border.

Hopefully your trip to Mexico will be filled with good times and no problems. Follow these tips for driving to Mexico and you're sure to avoid a lot of difficulties.