Correct Procedures for driving on Multi-Lane Roads/Highways

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From: Robert A. Hodges C Eng., MSc., MBA. Chief Operating Officer of: The Emirates Driving Institute; Drive Dubai; Fujairah National Driving Institute. (Please see footnote)

The basic rules/laws for driving on multi-lane roads and highways are outlined below and are also as taught to pupils of Emirates Driving Institute (EDI) during training for the RTA driving licence road test. EDI also especially works on and develops these skills during delivery of their defensive and advanced driving courses which have been attended by many drivers in the UAE and especially by professional drivers from major national and international organisations.

Basics

Firstly – the lanes on any road are numbered from the right-hand side (the slower side) towards the left-hand lane (nearest the centre barrier/median – the overtaking side) ... so the entry lane is lane 1, then lane 2 and so on until the fastest lane on the left (lane 4 or 5 perhaps). We shall call these L1 ~ L6 below.

Second – the rules for overtaking can change when approaching a junction or turn-off where road-departure lane-disciplines may require a driver to move into another lane moving at a different speed.

Lane Discipline - Normal

The majority of drivers in the UAE appear to blatantly ignore the rules of the road concerning lane discipline and overtaking; we have World-class roads with worst-class drivers!

The basic rules are simple – you join a road at a safe speed to merge with the traffic in L1 (the first ‘driving’ lane). You should ALWAYS use the right-most lane available to you.

After joining L1, if you then wish to move at a faster speed or to move away from heavy trucks and buses in L1, then you will need to overtake by using L2, by doing your observations (mirrors and blind spots), then if it is safe to overtake, you then use your indicator to show your intention, and then move safely into L2 (which is an overtaking lane); to move again, into L3, you go through the same process and ensure that you do not obstruct other vehicles and that you match the speed of vehicles in that lane (L3).

Many (most?) drivers seem to think that L1 is just for heavy trucks and buses, and also perhaps L2, plus L1 & L2 should be used by slower/older cars. This is completely wrong!!
You should always drive in the right-most lane of the road available to you. If there is a stream of slow-moving trucks etc in L1 & L2, then it is OK to continue overtaking by staying in L3 and moving past these slow vehicles safely, but when L2 becomes clear, you should move back into that lane... and then into L1 when safe to do so.

The higher number lanes (L3/L4 and above) are not ‘exclusive’ high-speed lanes for performance cars or fast drivers; they are OVERTAKING lanes only, and you MUST move back to the lower-numbered lanes as soon as they have space for you.

The rush-hour high-speed dangerous ‘clusters’ of fast moving cars in L3 & L4 and upwards driving too close together/tailgating etc are extremely dangerous, especially when more often than not, the lanes to the right (L2 & L1) are often almost empty.

It is dangerous madness to join a road at an extremely high-speed, ignoring the traffic speed in L1 ~L3 and to race into the new road, cutting across several lanes to immediately ‘dominate’ the left-most lane; the lane which most drivers wrongly consider the ‘fast lane’.

Always join in L1 and then via observations & signals, move safely and progressively lane-by-lane across to the higher-speed overtaking lanes to get past the slower traffic. Move progressively back to the right-hand lanes as soon as you have finished your overtaking procedure.

If you see a faster-moving vehicle approaching from behind and you can move- over to the right, then do so; the basic principle of ‘move to the next available slower lane on to your right whenever approached by a faster moving vehicle from behind, irrespective of which lane and what speed you are driving’ should be understood by every driver.

If drivers use the lanes in this correct manner, then an extra benefit is that the ‘lane-loading’ is optimised, and more traffic will flow on the road due to an evened-out use of all lanes. However, the proper use of observations and signals is of paramount importance at all times!

**Overtaking**

The ONLY legal way to overtake is as outlined above; you overtake vehicles to their left; overtaking to their right is illegal under Federal Road Law, and is extremely dangerous - doing so is often the factor responsible for the very common ‘side-sweep’ accidents we have in the UAE.

It is also NEVER permissible to ‘overtake’ by cutting along the hard shoulder of the road; this safety track is there for safety and emergency services use only, and for drivers with vehicle failure.

**Lane Discipline – Approaching a junction or exit road**

The only permissible time that you can pass a car to their right (normally illegal) is when you are under the lane discipline (or ‘guidance’) of traffic signs on approach to a junction...
or an upcoming exit road, and the signs indicate that you should position in different lanes for the various options available.

For example ‘L1 & L2 for junction 13; L3 for junction 14; L4 & L5 for Abu Dhabi….’ These lanes will be indicated by directional lanes & lane arrows on the overhead ‘gantry’ signs on main routes.

If therefore you are in L1 or L2 because you are about to exit the main road at the upcoming slip road and turn-off to the right, then it is OK to move past the traffic on your left which is remaining on the main road, typically if its speed is (for example) slowing down.

**Most Common Infringements on the Highways**

1. Swerving between lanes too quickly and without observations, mirror-checks and no indicators

2. ‘Wandering’ between lanes due to in attention or (very often) being distracted by using a mobile phone or similar

3. ‘Blocking’ a lane – in other words getting into a lane (usually a middle-lane) and just staying there, usually travelling too slowly and are completely oblivious of the prevailing speed in that lane. These drivers need to know that they must always move over to the next available slower lane. By staying in the middle lanes wrongly these drivers effectively ‘encourage’ law-breaking drivers to overtake them on the wrong side.

4. Doing the ‘death-dive’! This is where drivers are going too fast, they haven’t checked their route or the roads signs, and they suddenly see their exit immediately beside them; this causes them to suddenly swerve at full-speed across all lanes with no observations and no signals, usually cutting-up drivers on the intermediate lanes and often causing dangerous side-swipes. The recent fatalities in Sharjah were as a result of just such a manoeuvre.

5. Tailgating!!!! A completely illegal and irresponsible activity which show no regard for safety either of oneself or other road users. If you can’t overtake the car in front, DO NOT overtake on the wrong (right-hand) side, just hold back and allow at least a 2 ~ 3 second gap. When the driver in front moves out of your way, then overtake safely. Do NOT close-up on then car in front, almost sitting on his bumper and flashing your lights/ sounding your horn; this is open aggression and is illegal! Many bad and fatal accidents have been caused by tailgating.

6. Failing to ‘scan’ at all times. In order to be a safer driver and to keep your brain alert (especially on long journeys), drivers should try to constantly scan their environment. This is done by looking far ahead, then look at the mid-range, then close-range, then check ALL mirrors and then go back to scan far distance and then repeat the process. Continuously!
7. A lack of concentration. When you are driving, you are doing a full-time job, and you should NOT be distracted by phone calls, texts, social media, kids, eating, drinking, and fiddling with the sound system or SATNAV, taking your eyes off the road. Keep alert; do the job at hand and get yourself and your passengers home safely!

8. Speeding!! Almost everyone (especially in Dubai) is in too much of a hurry. Speeding and rushing about seems to be a way of life!. Many drivers seem to take the speed limit signs as being a minimum speed target rather than an absolute maximum speed limit if circumstances and safety allow. Overspeeding is very often a major causal factor in serious accidents! Why not plan ahead, and leave earlier; allow more time for your journey...

9. Not wearing seatbelts and not buckling-up children and infants. To not do so at all times is madness. Wearing a seatbelt raises the chances of survival in an accident by up to 53%. Most accidents on the highways are at higher speeds and frequently involve major damage to the vehicles involved. If the driver and passengers are using seatbelts and child-restraints, they have a much improved chance of survival.

Footnote

Robert Hodges is an internationally recognised road-risk, driver training, technical & road safety expert. He has worked with and consulted to commercial organisations and regulatory authorities in more than 20x countries across all continents; he is also a learned or advisory member of several international road safety and driving regulatory bodies.

Previously with the AA group in the UK in a senior training role, and an honorary staff examiner of the Institute of Advanced Motorists, Robert has been resident in the UAE for 7x years, having previously consulted in the greater region in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Robert has been a regular contributor to radio and television programmes covering road safety and risk reduction as well as being a contributor to several European road-safety publications.