

A Briefing on 'Road Safety' & Accident Causal Factors in Dubai

3rd Update V4 © Robert Hodges 2014

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

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.

-----0-----

This briefing note responds to the commonly-asked questions from various local & regional media, and also provides some supporting information and some of the 'backstory' as to why driving is such a challenge in the UAE...

Please attribute any quotes from this briefing to the Author - 'Robert Hodges COO Emirates Driving Institute and Group Companies'

-----0-----

Reckless Drivers/ Supercars etc - What is it about Dubai (and the UAE) that attracts so many reckless drivers?

NB: Some of the true factors concerned with this question cannot be commented on by me publicly, although as a psychologist I fully understand the reasons; I think some of the various media readership/ listeners/ viewers might become offended and complain to your journal or channel's management, which would make trouble for us all. I will however attempt to provide input in a non-controversial way. Please use this information with discretion!!

Firstly, there is a great deal of wealth in the UAE, and many people clearly like to buy/drive top-end luxury and performance vehicles; this is all part of the regional psyche and adds to the popular reputation of Dubai as a destination for vacations, visits, business.

Owning expensive/ luxury/ powerful cars is not of itself an dangerous thing; it's the driver behind the wheel who in some cases is a 'dangerous thing'...

Many factors pertain; let's look at causal factors:

- There is a constantly 'shifting' population of drivers (as visas/jobs come and go), so the 'culture' of Dubai driving is lacking maturity. In some Western countries, the driving culture started forming during the late 19th century. Due to the high UAE expatriate population, the various imported cultures and social imprints,

coupled with a 2x year visa 'churn', there's not much hope of a stable or safe driving culture evolving in the UAE any time soon...

- Dubai has an overall younger driver demographic than many other countries (mainly in the West); younger people are somewhat obviously less-experienced than older people and psychologically are more liable to make a poor judgement call whilst driving.
- The UAE has a much higher proportion of new drivers across a wide age spectrum, and so the likelihood of these drivers having an accident during their first 18 months of driving is quite high.
- We have many World-class high-speed roads, and many people have cars far better than they might own if they lived/worked in other countries; in some cases these vehicles are too powerful for the relatively inexperienced drivers who only realise this fact when it's 'too late' and something has gone wrong.... And the laws of physics take over in an often disastrous way!
- For various cultural and regional reasons we have a higher number (percentage) of three dangerous driving types: '**risk-takers**', '**thrill-seekers**' and '**the unaware**'. These are covered in the next 3x points:
- The **risk takers** are seen everywhere, cutting-in at lights, driving on the sand to jump a queue, weaving across lanes, using their momentum to get ahead without slowing etc. They are also incessant tailgaters; These people actively don't care about other drivers or observing the road Laws, they just want to press-on in a selfish way; the fact that they might put you in harm's way is of no concern to them; it's 'their road', and you are in their way! These maniacs are actually very dangerous, and defensive driving techniques teach you how to deal with such situations and avoid an accident.
- The **thrill seekers** are often younger regional males whom frequently drive high-performance and/or modified vehicles in a completely reckless manner. In order to demonstrate their (imagined) superior skills often honed on computer games, they use the roads of the UAE as a private race-track. Sometimes they race each other, and sometimes they use regular drivers as a high-speed obstacle course. These people will overtake anywhere; will cut across lanes with often only a few centimetres of space to spare and will tailgate you within an inch of your life, actively putting you and your passengers at very high risk of accident an injury. As always, defensive and advanced driving techniques help you avoid coming into 'conflict' with these types.
- **The unaware** are to be found everywhere, at times almost all fellow drivers can seem to fall into this category! These people are distracted/unobservant/ social imprint-ruled. Often they will overtake then cut across you by 3x lanes to make a right turn; they might dawdle along in the overtaking lane, wandering erratically....taking that phone call; writing that text is just so important.

These people are best avoided by keeping as much space as possible between you and them, otherwise they will side-scrape you or rear-shunt you almost without realising they have done so. These people are also expert double/triple-parkers, completely unaware that while they're in the shops, they've caused local traffic havoc! As always, defensive driving techniques will help you to identify the unaware before they can ruin your driving day!

Social & Familial 'Imprint', peer pressure and 'group resonance' -

People in this region arrive with their own cultural and social 'imprint' and this affects their daily interactions both in person, on-foot, and in-car. These people are often used to living in close confines, perhaps in multi-occupancy residences and walking on very crowded sidewalks. These people may also be used to seeing gridlocked traffic in (say) Manila/ Mumbai/ Karachi/ etc. Even if these people have not been drivers before coming to the UAE that have an inbuilt 'imprint' of what is/ is not acceptable - in their terms. Therefore people whom are used to 'ducking & diving' in normal life, and whom push-in at queues in Malls, or whom don't bother to hold doors for following people are inclined to be just the same in equivalent terms on our roads; a nightmare!!

- Most people don't want to learn to drive or to know the Laws of the road....they just want a driver's licence, and they reason that they will then figure out how to drive or ask friends to show them how to do so. That is why, even after taking excellent lessons and a great training curriculum, immediately after passing their Test and gaining a licence they then immediately 'do their own thing'. Very often this is as a result of 'peer pressure' or 'group resonance'; they don't want to look 'stupid' and obey the rules - they want to drive in the way their friends do...!!!
- People in this region just cannot get used to the fact that driving is a serious pastime which requires 100% of the driver's concentration....nope....driving is just something you have to do to get to work....to drop the kids off....to make that sale....to get to that interview. So - why not kill this dead time by making phone calls, social networking, eating a croissant, putting on your eyeliner, having an (electric) shave, whilst all the time have the stereo turned-up to '11' and driving way too fast because you got out of bed too late/ got the time wrong/ have this terrible hangover!!!! We really need to indoctrinate people over the dangers of multi-multi-tasking whilst driving; it's a lethal mix for sure!!
- In developed countries young/inexperienced drivers are either not allowed by Law or are 'discouraged' by swingeing insurance costs to NOT drive 'Supercars'. Some vendors offer supplementary training to drive performance cars safely; in this region people do not avail themselves of this help. In my view, there should be a rule that no one under the age of 25 years be permitted to drive a 'Supercar', and they have also taken additional training to deal with driving a high-powered vehicle.
- Another common problem is the 'expected right of privilege' which is often displayed by a certain class of driver; either by reason of their driving a superior vehicle to yours, or their family's importance, these people imagine it is perfectly permissible to act forcefully (even aggressively) towards other road users whom dare to impede their progress. As with 'risk takers' above, give these people time and space, let them get on with it; they are the ones with a problem, not you! If you drive defensively, you will spot these people (they're usually in a high-end 4X4) or something German, and it's just not worth attempting to be forceful or 'pushy' in return; the highway is not a place to create a 'battleground'.
- Many Westerners whom should know better arrive in Dubai and seem to instantly revel in being able to drive recklessly - they 'go native'. This is truly saddening because these people know full well that 'Dubai Style' driving is foolhardy and dangerous, but exposure to better cars than they might afford in the West, high quality (fast) roads and almost no Policing around, allows these traits to surface.

- Tints.....Veils.....sunglasses.....roller screen blinds....these things and more abound here in the UAE. Some drivers can hardly see out of their vehicles in daylight, leave alone at twilight or night time. You can regularly see (for example) ladies wearing their sheilas, hijabs or niqabs, as well as sunglasses whilst driving a car with illegal (too dark) tints. These people are risking your life on the road in order to maintain their privacy and/or perhaps look cool. All drivers need to seriously consider the need to have good all-round clear visibility from the driver's point of view. Anything less is unacceptable in safety terms – If you don't have visibility – DON'T DRIVE!!

Indicator Usage & Hazard Lights - Indicator and hazard light use seems vastly different in Dubai to western countries - in what instances should hazards be used, and when should they not? And why does no-one indicate to change lanes/make a turn?

Indicators - People are very lazy and thoughtless in the (non) use of indicators, even though the use of indicators is always taught to all driving students and forms part of both the theory and practical driving tests. This behaviour is complex to explain, but is rooted in the psychological 'imprint' new residents bring with them from their home countries, where often the roads are mayhem. The non-use of indicators is actually a real problem in the UAE, because the country is relatively wealthy, people drive good quality cars at higher speeds than on the sub-continent and we have many World-class roads; therefore higher speeds, and a greater likelihood of a collision (the lane-change 'side-swipe' is the most common accident in Dubai)

Drivers just don't remember that driving is a form of 'team-sport'; whatever one car does will affect adjacent vehicles, hence it is really helpful to check FIRST if it safe to do a manoeuvre, and if so THEN signal your intent to do so.

Many pundits who advocate 'use your indicators' actually cause more problems because the use of the indicators is rarely understood in context. Taxi drivers are trained 'to use their indicators' in order that if they have an accident they (the taxi driver) can be said to have been driving properly! Putting an indicator on DOES NOT give any driver the right to cut-up or barge-in to another vehicle's safety space!

Indicators should ONLY be used as part of a safety sequence involving: **Observations** (mirror & blind spot checks); **Decision** (is it safe for me to change lane or position?); **Signal** (indicators used, driver head movement etc); **Manoeuvre** (move lane or change track); then, when in the new position...**Check!** (still safe? Speed OK? Indicator now off?)

In its simplest form of abbreviation this procedure can be thought of as **M S M... or 'Mirror; Signal; Manoeuvre'**.

As to **hazard lights**, drivers here are completely clueless in the proper use of these highly useful indicators.

Dubai drivers often drive along with their hazards flashing when it's foggy or raining, or if there's a sandstorm - **WRONG!!** This leads to confusion; people following behind do not know what the signals mean; are you stopping? Are you telling drivers to keep clear? Are you at the side of the road? Etc., etc., etc...

Often the mist/fog/ sand prevent following drivers from seeing you properly, or not able to look past you, so they don't know where you are going or when you are changing lanes. In poor visibility the very brightness of the hazard lights 'blind' drivers around them; Also the drivers using the hazard lights appear to think the lights bestow some mystical safety factor on their cars, and that no matter how fast they drive in low visibility, they just won't have an accident !! **WRONG!**

The **ONLY** 2x correct times to use hazard lights are:

1. When you are stopped (broken-down/ stuck/ no fuel etc) and are parked off the side of the road on the right-hand hard shoulder or the sand adjacent to the road, and therefore present a possible 'static hazard' to other vehicles/ approaching from behind. If you have to stop, then pull off the road, put your hazard lights on and then (if safe) get out of the vehicle and shelter in some shade away from the road. Cars careering into the back of stopped vehicles are the 3rd? most common form of accident in Dubai
2. When you stop somewhat suddenly on the road in traffic and are perhaps in a vulnerable position, and you need to warn vehicles approaching from behind that you are stationary. The hazard lights act as an extra 'alert' to other drivers whom may well be inattentive/ illegally using 'phones'/ drinking a coffee/ looking at their kids/ whatever... You may have stopped suddenly behind traffic hidden around a corner; you might be letting a pedestrian cross the road (your hazard lights also help 'protect' the pedestrians crossing); a car in front may have had a collision leaving you in an awkward/vulnerable place.

These are the only proper occasions during which to use hazard light; putting them on whilst you triple-park whilst you pop into the grocer's for a bag of falafels is NOT a reason to use hazard lights – go find a proper place to park considerately!! ☺

Defensive driving - most residents and expats have no idea what this phrase means; but ALL drivers in Dubai should be defensive drivers!!

The ONLY way to keep yourself and your passengers safer on our busy roads is to take positive charge of your own safety; you can't rely on other drivers to do this for you; they probably just don't care about you. You make yourself safer by driving defensively.....or in other words making sure that you and your vehicle are always in the right place at the right time and at the right speed. You will be 'ahead' of all those drivers around you in your ability to look further ahead, analyse and predict road and traffic situations BEFORE they arise. You will drive positively and considerately and always making correct vision and mirror checks. You will signal your intentions by correctly timed signals and indications.

You will wear seat belts at all times, and make sure that your passengers do also. Children will either be using seat belts (if they are not toddlers) or will be on a booster cushion or in a child-seat AT ALL TIMES.

You won't be using your telephone (other than hands-free), or eating or drinking whilst operating the vehicle. You will actually know what the road signs are telling you, and you will observe all speeds limits (they are LIMITS, not TARGETS). You will constantly observe and predict the changing dynamics of the scenario around your vehicle and attempt to keep a 'safety zone' all around your vehicle, thus giving you more options to move away /avoid danger. Etc., etc.,

The Institute of Advanced Motorists (and EDI and other international organisations) have statistics to show that (on average) a normal driver has a 31% likelihood of being involved in an accident in a 3x year period in Europe, whereas a PROPERLY trained defensive (or advanced) driver has a much smaller risk less than a 6% likelihood during the same 3x year period.....so a hugely reduced risk factor.

The likelihood of being involved in an accident in Dubai is very high (almost) one in three drivers will have an accident (minor to major) in any given year. There is a collision occurring somewhere in Dubai approximately every 2 ~3 minutes!!

'Advanced Driving' is an even higher form of driving skill which encompasses all of the defensive techniques with the addition of police-derived specialised observational and active planning skills. This level of expertise/safety is able to be trained in the UAE via EDI following an appraisal of a driver's current skills.

Major insurance firms around the world offer generous discounts to defensive or Advanced Certificated drivers, and many insurers of corporate fleets (trucks, cars, and courier motorcycles) are 'insisting' on defensive training courses for company drivers.

Seatbelt Law in Dubai - What are the actual Dubai laws on seatbelts in the front and back?

The UAE/Dubai sadly lags way behind the so-called 'developed world' in regard to the laws on usage of seatbelts; and unfortunately encouraging passengers to '*Buckle up in the Back*' only addresses part of the problem.

In Dubai, only the front-seat occupants are supposed to wear a seatbelt by Law. The other 'rule' is that all children (under 10 years) must be in the back of the car; no rules as to child seats. Booster seats or even having to actually be seated!! After the age of 10 years children can sit in the front, and are subject to the rule to wear a seatbelt

Many families (mothers) sit in the front seat without a belt on and also have a small kid on their lap; this provides high causal factors in death risk computations; it's patently madness. In an accident, the mother often survives because she has in effect used her own child as an additional 'airbag'; Crush injuries to children on mothers' laps are awful, and almost always fatal.....So....'*Buckle up in the Front*' (as well, eh?)

Kids are often allowed to stand in the rear of the car, between the two front seats so that they can talk to the parents and look out of the front windscreen; we in my profession call this area where the kids stand 'the Killing Zone'; in an impact the kids rocket forwards and either impact with the fascia, or (more usually) go towards the windshield, impact with it, push the screen out with their collapsing cranium and continue to fly forwards out of the vehicle. Kids often are found crumpled and dead up to 20 feet in front of the car.

ALL occupants of a car MUST be made by Law to wear a seat belt or other restraint. These belts are the single-most saver of lives on the road all over the World. To not wear a seat belt because 'it is uncomfortable' or 'it ruins the look of my kandura/abaya' are truly pathetic excuses.

I have witnessed the aftermath of many accidents as part of the accident investigation work I have handled in the past, and the damage caused to the (frail) human body by the (massive) kinetic forces of an impact are truly shocking. Human bodies often end up as assorted body parts; limbs, heads etc have to be searched for in hedgerows/ verges. If people were more aware of these tragic consequences, they would take more care and 'belt-up'.

Breakdowns - What should do you if you break down on a major highway? Or even on a small residential road? What should you do; who should you call to help?

If you breakdown on a highway you are suddenly in a place of real danger; always try to pull well-off the road safely; do as outlined in the paragraphs above with regard to **hazard lights**. Get away from the car if you can; many people are killed in static collisions (as above). If it's too hot to stay outside, or there's no shelter, sit in the car with everyone belted-in with a seatbelt (in case you are 'shunted').

In a residential area, again get your car off the road if possible so as not to be an obstruction; keep away from corners or junctions (accident risk) and stand somewhere safe until help arrives. See if someone will allow you to shelter in their premises. Use hazard lights to alert people to your car only if it is an obstruction, otherwise no need to.

Remember, if you are travelling long distances; remember we live in a desert!! Take bottled water with you wherever you go; it could end up saving your life if you break down on a mid-desert highway in the middle of July/August.

Contact the necessary help; if there's been an accident – 999 for the Police/ Ambulance, plus (if there leaking petrol or other contamination the Civil Defence on 997 or advise the Police operator of the situation. If there's a petrol leak DO NOT SMOKE, turn off mobile phones and turn-off vehicle ignition so as not to cause an explosion/fire.

If it's not an accident, then call any breakdown service/ a reliable firm or perhaps call the Police on their NON-EMERGENCY number (901) for advice as required. Dubai Police really are very professional and very helpful; great people!

Check if your car is covered under a warranty package for 'roadside recovery', if so you could call them for rescue. If not, have the number of a reliable recovery firm to hand (e.g. AAA recovery services/ Al Futtaim/ etc) in your glove locker and in your mobile phone; this way you won't panic, you will know who to call.

Learn how to use your car's satnav system, or your mobile phone to find out your GPS location coordinates; this makes it so much easier for the Police/ Civil Defence/ ambulances/recovery trucks to find your exact position and get to your position easily.

Crashes & Accidents - What is the correct course of action in the event of a crash? Who gets which slip?

Please note that a lot of the advice given for '**Breakdowns**' above pertains in this section; especially if there is an injured person.

By Law, if you have an accident, you MUST stay with your vehicle (all driver/s) and call the Police, and await their arrival. The Police will then make a decision over how/whether to move the vehicles.

Prior to the arrival of the Police, as always get yourself and your passengers to a place of safety off the carriageway; stand behind the barrier, or on the pavement

As part of the process the Police officers will discuss the accident with the drivers concerned, and where necessary measure glass-impact points etc, etc; they may also question witnesses/bystanders. Police officers may also examine/ measure/ photograph skid- marks/angles etc for the more major impacts.

Based on all of these factors and their experienced judgement & training, the senior officer will then decide whom is the 'guilty' party and will hand the red (pink) slip to that driver, and hand the green (no fault) slip to the other driver.

Please be aware that if the accident is considered to be serious enough, or involves injuries or loss of life, or alcohol consumption etc., the Police may warn the relevant driver/s of the possibility of a prosecution file being opened for consideration for a Court case. You can actually be arrested on the spot!

Please be advised - never be rude or insulting to a Police officer, they are doing an often difficult job in sometimes hazardous circumstances; besides which insulting an Officer is a prosecutable offence in itself. After an accident your adrenalin may be running very high, and may cause you to act irrationally; take slow deep breaths and control your 'ragged' emotions!

Speeding 1 - why is it such a big a problem in Dubai and the UAE?

Speeding is a big problem in the UAE and particularly so in Dubai. For some reason the culture locally seems often to be 'ignore the road Law and just do what you want' (or can get away with!).

Speed cameras have pros and cons – Cameras help obviously in speed regulation, but also can form a road hazard in themselves as speeding drivers stamp on their brakes to quickly get their speed to a legal level in the proximity of a radar camera. Accident 'black-spots' are often clustered immediately adjacent to speed camera sites.

The real problem is that most drivers do not realise what a huge causal or contributing factor over-speeding is in regard to accidents. Drivers don't find out until it is too late just how kinetic energy takes command of your car – causing skids/ over-steer/ under-steer/ rollovers/ etc.

Any mistake a driver is likely to make will be amplified (made worse) by the additional factor of over-speeding. For example: at 60 kph whilst driving along a road a car pulls out in front of you from a side road on the right; you slow-down with your brakes, and gently steer around them into the next lane on the left; no problem.

Then take the same incident, but this time you are travelling at 85 kph; you brake hard to avoid hitting the car (you were going so fast he couldn't see you), you get into a front-wheel skid, your steering feels strangely light, your car under-steers initially, you're think you are going to collide, so you keep braking harder and now turn the steering wheel way too much to avoid the other car, and your car suddenly has speed-related massive over-steer, your tyre bursts and the front of your car 'noses-over' and suddenly your car is rolling over and over.

...of course you didn't wear your seat belt, but you were lucky, you only lost your front teeth, had a broken arm, two broken ankles and have over 10 lacerations on your head and shoulders.....tell me.....was that extra (illegal) 25 kph really worth it?

Speeding 2 - What can be done to discourage speeding on Dubai's roads?

A combination of factors will need to be eventually implemented, including:

- More active Police speed patrol cars out on the roads (interdictive speed control); Black points last for 3x years, with a maximum of 12x black points resulting in a serious punishment. (at the moment black points only last for 1x year)
- Roadside Police mobile/handheld radar check points to be used in urban areas

- Change from 'point-check' radar cameras (as in Dubai) to 'averaging' speed cameras. This will enable the Police and Authorities to monitor vehicle speeds over long distances – effectively cars can be tracked for hundreds of kilometres if needed. Cameras are placed at entrances to highways, and then periodically along the road. Cameras are also placed at every highway exit point, and therefore every vehicle effectively is 'clocked-on' and clocked-off every major road. The cameras' central computer system then calculates the average speed of each vehicle during the whole length of its journey on a particular road system. No one can escape if they drive above the limit!
- Do more than just confiscate vehicles for repeat offenders; most of these people have access to other vehicles in their family...so they're not really punished at all. Perhaps these people should lose their driving licences for an extended period (1x year?), and if caught driving illegally during that year, then their licence is cancelled and they then have to retake the RTA Driving Test.
- Increase the speeding fines greatly – some people regard a large number of fines to pay as some sort of 'badge of honour' which endorses their high-speed prowess. Perhaps after 3x black points the fines increase steeply at each subsequent stage.
- Make all speeding fines payable within one week of notification thereof, or the fine doubles, then ditto for each subsequent week. This would stop the tradition of waiting until the yearly vehicle re-licensing comes around before the fines are paid.
- The authorities should not 'do deals' on reducing the amount of a person's cumulative fines, no matter what that person's position in society is. If you have been fined, all fine amounts should be paid in full. If they don't have the money, their cars should be confiscated and sold in order to settle their fines.
- Force repeat speeding offenders (and other dangerous drivers) to attend a 1x day workshop which shows graphic videos of road accidents, deaths. Disabled victims etc. Lectures & a discussion group to reinforce positive messaging over safe & legal driving and speed-reduction. A written multi-choice 'exam' to be included.

-----0-----

Attribute the Author in all quotes and extracts please

© Robert Hodges 2014