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“Je ne savais pas!” Drivers to the Continent don’t know about new French driving rules

More than half (59%) of drivers are unfamiliar with a range of new driving regulations introduced this year in France, a new study has found.

Research carried out with 1,400 drivers* for RAC Europe found more than three-quarters (78%) were not aware the speed limit on France’s secondary ‘D’ roads was reduced from 1 July from 90kph to 80kph (55mph to 50mph), a move designed to reduce accidents. Failure to comply could leave UK drivers with an awkward conversation with a gendarme – and a very unwelcome penalty of up to €750 (about £670), which is now all the more likely as fines can ‘follow’ drivers back home under an EU directive.**

The new speed limit is just one of a range of measures that have been introduced by the French government to improve safety on its roads, in the face of figures which show rising numbers are being killed.

Less than a quarter of drivers (23%) knew that using headphones or earphones while driving in France was illegal, while only 28% were aware drivers must now switch their engines off in a designated parking place in order to use a handheld mobile phone. Any driver ignoring this law faces the prospect of at least a €135 (£120) fine. Fifty-nine per cent of all drivers questioned said they were not aware of any of these new regulations.

Drivers to the Continent*** were also asked if their opinion of driving to Europe had changed as a result of the EU referendum result. While the majority (71%) are confident they will continue to make trips across the Channel after next March, 5% said they plan on stopping and 23% were

unsure.

As the clock ticks towards the UK's exit from the EU, drivers also expressed some concern about what driving to Europe might be like after next March. While the majority would like certainty that costs and inconvenience will not increase (59% and 57% respectively), four in 10 (41%) believe it will get more expensive and 55% think it will become more hassle – as a result of more border controls.

The RAC also asked drivers* if they knew the free number to dial for the emergency services anywhere in the EU. Less than half (42%) could correctly state it was 112, which is almost unchanged on the 38% who knew this when asked in 2015. Double the proportion of drivers compared to 2015 incorrectly thought it was 111 – which is actually the UK's non-emergency NHS number. Twelve per cent believe 911 which is used in the United States is the number to ring, while 9% thought calling the UK's 999 would help them when abroad.

RAC European driving spokesperson Rod Dennis said:

"France remains the most popular destination for British drivers, and some changes to driving regulations may come as a surprise to those that regularly cross the Channel by car.

"The French have witnessed a big increase in the number of fatalities on their departmental 'D' road network in recent years, and while the decision to cut the speed limit on these roads has been fiercely opposed by some, the law is the law. British drivers that have been driving to France for many years on the same roads should pay particular attention to speed limit signs, especially as new rules now mean any traffic offences committed while away follow UK motorists home again – so there really is no escaping them.

"As the UK moves closer to the moment when it formally leaves the European Union, drivers are also understandably concerned that the ease, and relative affordability, of driving across the Channel will be eroded from next March. Our research clearly shows they want reassurance from the UK government that their interests will be taken into account as part of the lengthy negotiations with the EU."

The RAC websites carries full guides on driving safely and confidently in France, as well as in other European counties.

Notes to Editors

* 1,476 drivers with experience of, or interest in, driving in continental Europe

** EU cross border enforcement directive

*** 1,070 drivers with experience of driving in continental Europe

About the RAC

First formed in 1897, the RAC has been looking after the needs of its members and championing the interests of motorists for more than 120 years.

Today it has more than eight million members and is one of the UK's most progressive motoring organisations, providing services for both private and business motorists. Whether it's roadside assistance, insurance, buying a used car, vehicle inspections and checks, legal services or up-to-the-minute traffic and travel information – the RAC offers a solution for all motoring needs. The RAC is committed to making motoring easier, safer, more affordable and more enjoyable for drivers and road users.

The RAC is the motorist's champion and campaigns to support the interests of its members and UK motorists at a national level. This includes voicing concerns about the increasing cost of motoring, particularly the price of fuel and the high level of tax levied on it, advancing levels of road safety, and supporting the needs of all drivers, from young to old.

The RAC's annual Report on Motoring – first published in 1989 – is one of a kind and provides a clear insight into the concerns and issues facing today's motorists.

For the very latest news on UK fuel prices, check RAC Fuel Watch. It provides a comprehensive guide to the latest UK unleaded petrol and diesel prices – both at the wholesale level and at the pump - and tracks these prices daily to help drivers check if the price they pay to fill up is a fair one.

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