

Gary France  
Motorcycling Guides

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number

**TIPS FOR  
MOTORCYCLE  
TOURING  
IN EUROPE**

**TOUR1**  
[www.tour1.co.uk](http://www.tour1.co.uk)

This guide has been written to help UK motorcyclists who are considering riding abroad in mainland Europe for the first time.

Seasoned riders might pick up a thing or two as well.

It equally applies to riders from other countries (the USA for example) but it may require a little interpretation.

[www.tour1.co.uk](http://www.tour1.co.uk)

## Documentation

There are certain requirements for carrying documentation when riding in Europe and this varies from country to country. This is what I carry when I tour abroad. The first and most obvious is your passport. I advise carrying this in a sealed (ziplock) plastic bag to keep it dry. In some countries, hotels ask to see your passport when checking in. They will sometimes keep it overnight or they may simply photocopy the photo page.

You must of course carry your full driving licence. I keep the licence in my wallet and a good quality photocopy in my luggage.

V5 Vehicle Registration Document - in some countries you are required to carry the original of your Registration Document at all times when riding. I personally never take the original, but instead I always take a good quality photocopy. If you are riding a rented motorcycle, you will need to take the rental agreement (or preferably a VE103R form) to show that you are allowed to have the motorcycle.



Always carry a photocopy of your insurance details, including confirmation that you are covered to ride in the countries you are visiting. Advise your insurance company where you are going and for how long, to ensure you are covered. Specifically ask them if you have the same coverage in mainland Europe as you do in the UK.

It is recommended you have roadside assistance / breakdown recovery service when riding in Europe. Remember to check in advance that you are covered for riding abroad. Remember to carry the policy / membership numbers with you, as well as the relevant breakdown telephone number(s).

It is advisable to have medical insurance for any trip abroad. Many people take out annual policies to cover all overseas trips, or you can arrange single trip policies. Whichever type you have, take the policy certificate with you.



Always carry a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) which demonstrates your right as a European citizen to free state healthcare wherever you are in Europe. If you haven't got one, you can apply for one on the NHS website.

I keep most of the documents mentioned above in a waterproof Ziploc bag in my luggage in a place where I can easily access them at the roadside, should I need to.

## Your Motorcycle

It is important to have a well-maintained motorcycle for your trip abroad. Make sure your tyres are at the correct pressure, your oil is at the correct level and all the basics of your motorcycle are right. Thoroughly examine your motorcycle to make sure everything is as it should be. Check all of your lights.



Before you leave on a long European road trip, examine your tyres and consider what the tread will be like during the trip. If the tread is already low before you leave, you might want to think about replacing your tyres before the trip. Remember you may well be taking your motorcycle on roads that are twisty and have significant elevation changes - under these conditions, you could be requiring your tyres to work much harder than they normally would.

If your bike is due to have a service soon, consider having that done before you leave.

Don't make the mistake of just jumping on your bike and hoping everything will be okay. Remember, a major breakdown will badly affect your holiday!

Breaking down is inconvenient anywhere, but even more so if you do not speak the local language. I think it is crucial therefore to have European breakdown cover / roadside assistance. Then, in the event of mechanical trouble, you can then talk to an English-speaking breakdown service on the telephone from the roadside.

Your motorcycle should have a relevant country sticker. This should be fixed to the rear of the motorcycle. For motorcycles using the newer style number plate that incorporates the country logo a separate sticker is not needed.

## Gear and Packing

What gear to take and how to pack it when touring in Europe causes more debate than almost any other topic. The answer is a very personal one and is often determined by....

- How much room you have on your motorcycle to pack items
- What you store your items in (panniers / tank bag / top box / rucksack)
- Whether there are one or two people on the bike
- Whether you are camping or not
- Whether your attitude is minimalist, or take everything
- What the weather conditions are likely to be
- Whether you want to carry any tools or spares
- The distance you will travel and how long you are away for

There is no right or wrong answer, as it is very much a personal choice. I am however a person who probably carries too much. You might like to read my guide entitled 'What to pack for a motorcycle tour' which can be found in the Guides section of [www.tour1.co.uk](http://www.tour1.co.uk)

## Loading your Motorcycle

When packing your gear onto your motorcycle, be careful that:

- You don't overload it
- You balance the weight roughly between right and left
- You don't place too much weight too far back on your bike (say on a rack), as this could affect the front end handling of your bike by making it lighter
- You adjust the tyre pressures to suit
- Once loaded, take the bike for a test ride to see how it handles and so you can get used to the changed handling characteristics. Don't leave this until the day you leave!



## Riding in Europe

If you are from the UK, don't forget to ride on the right side of the road (!), although this soon becomes second nature.

All of us are used to riding on our own and most know that we slightly change how we ride if we are riding in a group. This part of the guide discusses how riding in a group should be approached in mainland Europe.

Sometimes, when riding in a group, you don't know some of the people and if you haven't ridden with them before, you don't know their riding capabilities. It makes sense to take some time to watch and learn how those people ride, and give them lots of room while you learn their riding style.

Most groups of motorcyclists ride in a staggered pattern on the road. This is where one rider is on the left side of a lane, the next on the right side, the next on the left and so on (see photo below). This works well on straighter sections of road to increase visibility and stopping distances, but is not recommended on twisty sections where each rider often uses the full width of the lane they are in.

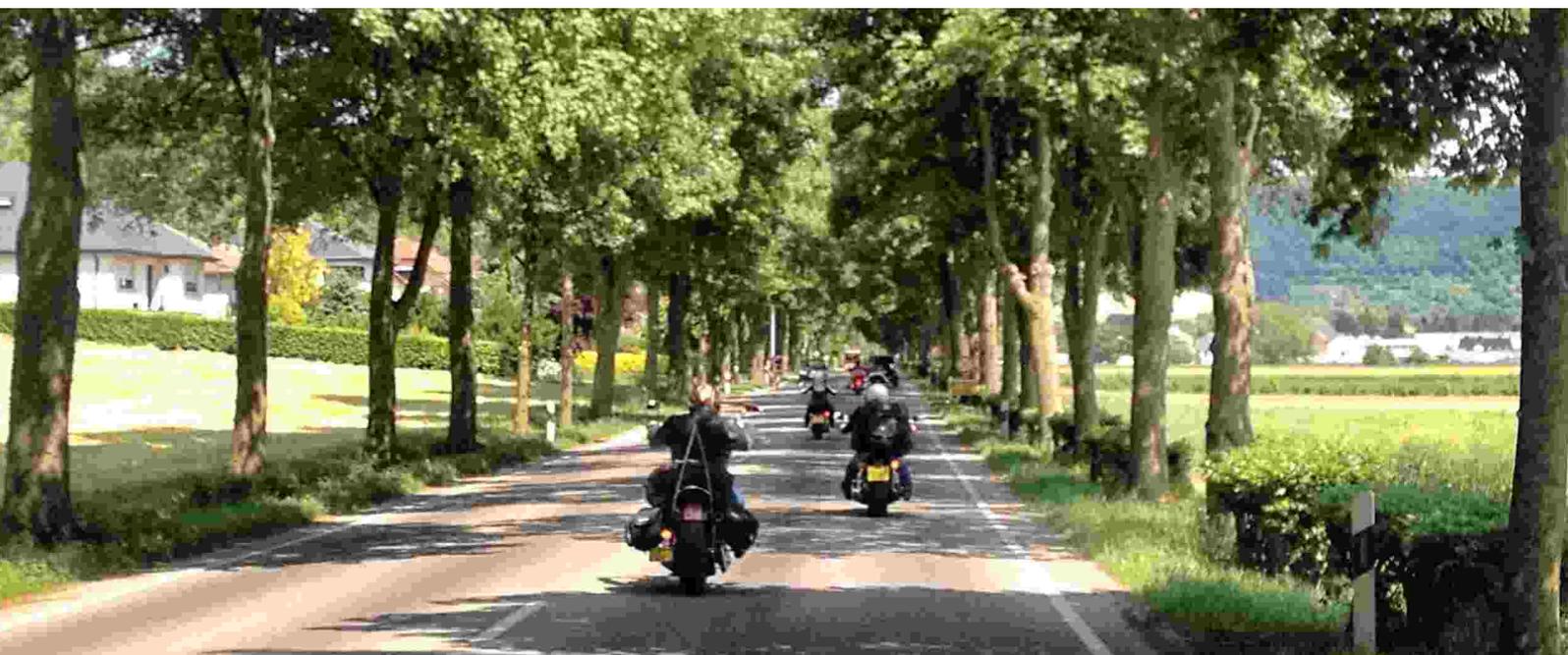
If allowed within your group, overtaking of other riders in that group has to be done very carefully. This is because after riding for a considerable

time in one position within a group, a rider gets used to seeing the same person around them and has become comfortable with what those people are likely to do. To be suddenly overtaken by another rider in the group can upset that regular pattern and can be unexpected. If you do want to overtake others within a group, please bear in mind that they may not be expecting this, so only do it with the greatest of care.

Generally speaking, riders in a group travel together at the same speed. There are however times when a rider or a small number of riders want to travel faster than others in the group. It makes sense therefore that faster riders are at the front of a group and slower riders towards the rear of the group.

It is inevitable that on occasions, a group will get split up. Traffic lights, congestion, or many other reasons may determine why a group becomes split. Where one person is leading a group from the front, he or she will not always know the group has become split, so a plan is needed to ensure split riders at the back do not get lost.

Two methods are generally used to prevent this and are known as the 'Drop-off system' and the 'Buddy system', both of which are explained next. At Tour1 we use the buddy system.



## The Drop Off System

While we don't use this at Tour1, it is worthwhile explaining it here.

When group riding, a larger group of riders sometimes uses the 'Drop Off' system. This ensures progress of the whole group is made whilst allowing the group to stay together even though there may be quite some distance between members of the group. In fact, at times, due to the group getting delayed and split, it may not even be possible for a rider to see the rider in front. That is not a problem however.

The idea behind the drop off system is members of the group show to other following members of the group which direction the group should follow, irrespective of any gaps which have occurred in the ride, so that riders don't have to 'keep up' with the rider in front.

This is how it works. The group will have a designated 'ride leader' and a 'last man' (or back marker). The positions of these two riders will not change throughout the ride. They will be introduced to all the riders in the group at the start of the ride and can be easily identified by a day-glow jacket or other identifier if possible.

Wherever there is a change of direction at junctions and roundabouts, the ride leader will indicate to the rider (the marker) immediately behind the leader where to stop in order to show to all following bikes the direction the following group should take. The ride leader normally touches his / her head first and then points to the place the marker should wait. The marker should pull in at the side of the road, in a safe place where he/she will be visible to the rest of the riders, so the direction can be indicated to all the following riders. It is most important that the marker stops in a position where it is safe to do so, they do not put themselves at any risk, and the rest of the following group can see them clearly as they approach the direction change. The marker should clearly indicate the direction taken by the leader, using their hands or arms. The marker should turn off their indicators. The following riders then take the direction indicated by the marker.

When the last man approaches the marker, that marker should move off and take up the position in front of the last man. The last man should leave enough space for this to happen. If it is not safe to pull out in front of the last man then the marker should rejoin the traffic when possible and take up position in front of the last man as soon as safe to do so.

Using this system, all of the riders of the group slowly move up through the group and play their part in the role of marker when they are riding immediately behind the ride leader. They simply wait to be told where to mark a junction.

This simple technique of riding allows the group of motorcycles to stay on the same route, even though they may be spread out. It could happen that the ride leaders forgets to mark a direction change - in which case the next rider should take it upon themselves to drop off and mark the direction change to prevent the chain from breaking. Riders unfamiliar with the drop off system should start towards the rear of the group so that they can observe the good practice of others before it is their turn to be a marker. The group may sometimes become very 'strung out', causing concern to some riders. The ride leader may then decide to stop, in a safe place, to allow the group to re-form before continuing.



## The Buddy System

This is what we use at Tour1.

This is easier to use than the drop off system because there is really only one thing to remember, but it does require everyone in the group to play their part at all times, to prevent a strung out group from becoming lost.

All riders in the group maintain their relative position in the group throughout the ride. Your 'buddy' is the rider behind you and it is your responsibility to make sure they can see and know which direction to ride. You look after the person BEHIND you.

For example, you are approaching a junction and can see the rider in front of you has turned left. The rider behind you (your buddy) is close to you and will see you make the turn. In this case, you need do nothing but make the turn. However, in the case (for example) where the rider in front of you has turned left at the junction and you are about to do so, BUT you cannot be sure the rider behind you will see you make the turn, you must mark that junction by waiting there until you are sure your buddy will see you turn. That could be a few seconds, or even a few minutes. It is VERY important that you wait until you know your buddy has seen you turn, for if you don't, then every rider behind you could miss the turn and travel in the wrong direction.

In practice, it is easy, as no matter how strung out the group gets, providing you look after the person behind you, nobody will get lost.

For both systems, it is not necessary to mark junctions where there is no change in direction. For example, there is no need to mark at a set of traffic lights where the group is simply going straight on. I am often asked if a roundabout should be marked where the group goes straight on. I would say yes, as roundabouts can lead to confusion especially if it is large, or there is a mound in its centre that prevents a good line of sight. The motto should always be "If in doubt, mark it."

## Motorway riding

Riding in a group on a motorway / autoroute in Europe is different from in the UK.

Traffic generally travels faster (especially in Germany and Italy) than you might be used to and in virtually all mainland European countries, lane discipline is much better than in the UK. Generally, vehicles stay in the slow lane and only move to the fast lane to overtake.

Do not ride in the fast lane unless you are overtaking and then move back to the slow lane as soon as possible. There is a very low tolerance for lane-hogging in mainland Europe.

As there is a much greater use of the slow lane in mainland Europe, riders and drivers in that lane must be prepared to move over to allow vehicles joining the motorway to do so easily. This is commonplace.

If you are from the US, where overtaking on either side is acceptable, do not do this in Europe. It is illegal.

When a group of riders needs to overtake a slower moving vehicle, I often see the whole group move out to the fast lane as a group. This is not a good thing as often, the riders in the middle or at the back of the group might take a minute or so to actually pass the slower vehicle. Cars approaching fast from behind then see a whole line of bikers in the fast lane effectively blocking their path and some don't take kindly to this. If in a group, only move out to the fast lane when you need to and don't move out just because the riders in front of you have.

When riding in a large group on an autoroute, don't forget to leave gaps to allow drivers to pass between. If a fast car driver overtaking the group wants to leave the motorway but is faced with a solid line of bikes preventing that car from exiting this can only lead to trouble. Let car drivers in between bikes if that is what is needed.

## Foreign Language

Not being able to speak the language of the country you are riding in does not pose too many problems. As you are reading this, you already speak one of the most common languages in the world and wherever you go, you will always get by.

A lot of people in larger towns and nearly all hotel staff in mainland Europe will be able to speak some English. Similarly, a lot of places in larger towns will have English menus in restaurants. However, people in smaller rural towns and in small cafes are unlikely to speak any English and here you will have more fun. Ordering drinks is relatively easy as coffee, coca-cola, coca-light and beer are universally understood! Choosing something off a foreign language menu can be more challenging, but believe me, you WILL get something to eat and you will survive!

I suggest that for the countries you will be visiting, write down common words of the food you like. Depending on what you like to eat, you can go far if you know the correct language words for just a handful of dishes such as omelette, chicken, pork, vegetables, potato, chips, meat, sausage, ice-cream, etc are enough to get by with.

Here is a starter..... print this out and take it with you....

English	French	German	Italian	Spanish	Czech	Croatian
bread	pain	brot	pane	pan	chléb	kruh
cake	gâteau	kuchen	torta	dort	pastel	torta
chicken	poulet	huhn	pollo	pollo	kuře	kuře
chips (fries)	frites	frites	patatine fritte	papas fritas	hranolky	krumpirići
fish	poisson	fisch	pesce	pescado	ryba	riba
fruit	fruit	obst	frutta	fruta	ovoce	voće
ice-cream	crème glacée	eis	gelato	helado	zmrzlina	sladoled
meat	viande	fleisch	carne	carne	maso	meso
omelette	omelette	omelett	frittata	tortilla	omeleta	omlet
pasta	pâtes	pasta	pasta	pasta	těstoviny	tjestenina
pizza	pizza	pizza	pizza	pizza	pizza	pizza
pork	porc	Schweinefleisch	carne di maiale	cerdo	vepřové	svinjetina
spaghetti	spaghetti	spaghetti	spaghetti	espaguetis	špagety	špageti
vegetables	légumes	gemüse	verdure	verduras	zelenina	povrće
beer	bière	bier	birra	cerveza	pivo	pivo
coca-cola	coca-cola	coca-cola	coca-cola	coca-cola	coca-cola	coca-cola
coffee (with milk)	café au lait	kaffee mit milch	caffè con latte	café con leche	káva s mlékem	kava s mlijekom
tea	thé	tee	tè	té	čaj	čaj
water	eau	wasser	acqua	agua	voda	voda
wine	vin	wein	vino	vino	víno	vino
hot	chaud	hot	caldo	caliente	horký	vruć
cold	froid	erkältung	freddo	frío	zima	hlada n
please	s'il vous plaît	gefallen	per favore	complacer	prosím	molim
thank you	merci	danke	grazie	gracias	děkuji	hvala

## The Law

You must familiarise yourself with the local laws for the countries you are visiting, and abide by them. Always check (for each country visiting) what the various speed limits are. These are often signposted at the borders, but it is a good idea to check in advance before you leave the UK. One of these motorcycling guides (number 4) shows the main European speed limits.

Generally speaking, it is crucial that you stick to speed limits when riding in towns in mainland Europe. If you are stopped for speeding anywhere, it is likely you will not be able to understand what the police are saying, you could have to pay a roadside fine, or could have your motorcycle confiscated until you pay the fine. If you don't speak the language, it can be a very difficult situation to get out of.

Some UK speedometers show kph as well as mph. If yours shows only mph you might want to add some marks with adhesive tape at the equivalent 50/70/90/130kph points on your speedo. The tape can be removed later.

Many sat nav / gps systems have a speed camera warning feature built in. While this is legal in the UK and most of Europe, it is illegal in France. The fine for using such a feature is €1,500, so before entering France, disable this feature! I am told they French police do check this if they stop you.

Some countries have stricter emission and noise laws than in the UK. For example, the UK authorities are often very lenient about the use of loud after-market pipes on a Harley-Davidson, but some countries, notably Switzerland, are far less tolerant and can issue on-the-spot fines for excessive noise.

Some countries require that you carry certain items as a safety measure. The law changes often on these matters as does opinion whether you need them or not on a motorcycle.

There is a separate guide concerning 'European Riding Laws' - see guide 16 in the guides section of [www.tour1.co.uk](http://www.tour1.co.uk)

This new guide 16 covers the following laws:

- Gloves in France
- Carrying your V5 registration document
- Breathalysers in France
- Warning triangles
- GB stickers
- Hi-vis in France
- Speed camera alerts
- Cross-border enforcement directives
- Carrying spare bulbs
- Headlight deflectors
- Reflective helmet stickers
- Using headphones and ear buds
- What to wear riding in Belgium
- Crit' Air system in France



## European Road Signs

If you are from the UK, or say America, you will be seeing road signs in mainland Europe that you are not familiar with. While it is your responsibility to familiarise yourself with all signs, here are the most likely that you will encounter. The ones shown below are mainly French.



National speed limit sign, generally at border crossings, meaning 50kph in towns, 90kph out of towns and 130kph on motorways.



Town name sign, with red border (often used in France). The red border means it is the start of a restricted speed limit, most often 50kph.



Leaving a town, and often end of town speed limit.



Means "All Directions" and is generally used to show the way out of a town. This will generally lead you to a later set of signs indicating the directions to other places.



Speed limit sign. Rappel means reminder



These all mean stop and you must do so. You should put a foot down on the ground.



Give way / yield. You do **not** need to come to a physical stop.



Toll road



For most visitors to France, there is a little known law that applies that is very important and you must learn it.

A yellow diamond road sign means the road you are on has priority. Vehicles coming from the right or left must give way to you. That is the simple bit.



However, for a yellow diamond sign with a diagonal black line through it, this means you must give way to the right. As the French say “Priorite a Droite” or in English, priority to the right.

Commonly seen as you approach a roundabout, this means you no longer have priority and you must give way to the traffic on the roundabout. So far, all sensible stuff.

However, these signs do sometimes appear on a straight road that you are travelling on and that means you must give way to a vehicle entering from the right. Sometimes these signs apply for the road ahead (perhaps a whole town) until you see the plain yellow diamond sign once more. This not common, but watch out for them! Just remember this sign means you no longer have priority. Take extreme care.



Junction ahead, where you do NOT have priority. Actually, nobody has priority at the junction (or junctions) that follow. This is used to slow everyone down. Take extreme care.

## Road markings in France (and generally the same elsewhere)

White lines mark the separation of traffic lanes. A solid single line means no overtaking in either direction. A solid line to the right of the centre line, i.e. on your side of the road, means that overtaking is prohibited in your direction. You may overtake only when there's a single broken line in the middle of the road or double lines with a broken line on your side of the road.

Note however, that if the gaps between the lines are short and the lines long you should overtake only slow-moving vehicles. No overtaking may also be shown by the international sign of two cars side by side (one red and one black). Processions, funeral corteges, horse riders and foot soldiers mustn't be overtaken at more than 30kph (18mph).

Don't drive in bus, taxi or cycle lanes (you can be fined for doing so) unless necessary to avoid a stationary vehicle or another obstruction. Bus lanes are generally identified by a continuous yellow line parallel to the kerb. Be sure to keep clear of tram lines and outside the restricted area, delineated by a line. Never cross tram lines unless at an acute angle - they can be very slippery.

## Petrol / Gasoline in Europe

The same pump colours as in the UK are used to denote grades of fuel. Black is diesel, green is unleaded fuel. "Sans Plomb" means unleaded in France. The range of different octane fuels does vary, with 95 and 98 being available in most larger petrol stations. In some rural areas, only 95 octane might be available. You may see SP95-E10 written on European pumps. The SP95 refers to 95 octane and the E10 means the fuel contains 10% ethanol. You might want to check before you leave if you can use this fuel in your motorcycle.

Most large petrol stations operate the same way as in the UK. Select your grade, pump your fuel, pay in the shop. However, a large number of rural petrol stations are small, unmanned and sometimes take only national bank cards or cash in their machines. Many visitors to mainland Europe fall foul of this by not being able to use their own international credit / debit cards. Always (and I mean always) carry small denomination cash notes to pay for your fuel. You will probably need more than you think if you are travelling in remote parts.

## Toll Roads

With few exceptions, namely Germany, if you use motorways or autoroutes in mainland Europe you will need to pay for this. There are a few things to watch out for. Most sections of toll roads or autoroutes mean you collect a ticket when entering the autoroute and you pay at the end of the autoroute or when you leave it. They can vary in price a great deal. Some are manned, but a lot of the tolls are machine operated. You can often pay in cash or with a credit card. Some countries (Italy I think) do not take international credit cards, so prepare wisely and always carry some cash should this be needed.

Keep credit cards / money in an outside pocket so they are readily available to help speed your progress through the tolls. At most tolls, you cannot use a credit card more than once, say for your buddy behind you.

Generally, the cost of a toll for a motorcycle is cheaper than for a car, but if you can only use a machine to pay, you will pay the normal car rate as the machine cannot distinguish a car from a motorcycle. If possible, always pay at an attended booth as you will generally pay less.

When traveling in a group, it is generally accepted that after you have passed through the toll, you should pull over to the right and wait for your fellow riders. There is normally a parking area.

In Switzerland, motorway tolls are paid through purchasing an annual vignette which you stick on your vehicle. These are generally available for purchase at border crossings into Switzerland. You don't need one if you don't intend to ride on Swiss motorways, but don't get caught out by deciding to use a Swiss motorway at the last minute. Austria has a similar vignette system, but these are available for shorter periods and can be purchased from most larger petrol stations.

## Disclaimer

This is a guide only. It is not a definitive document about the laws and practices of all European countries. As with visiting any country, you should familiarise yourself with the laws of that country and abide by them. It is your responsibility to keep yourself and those you are traveling with safe.