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AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND TRAFFIC ITEMS

Having recently returned from a conference/vacation in Australia and New Zealand, I thought it might be of some interest to our readers if I provided a US perspective on traffic operations in the land of kangaroos and emus.

One of the first things you notice about these two countries is how new everything is. They are one of the few areas of the world that has less of a history than us, with most of their development starting in the 1800's when England dumped a bunch of prisoners in what is now Sydney, Australia. Things are modern, the people are friendly, and in most cases there is plenty of room. You don't get the cramped feeling that you do in many European cities, although there is definitely a European influence.

In no particular order, here are some of my observations:

- 1.) As in countries such as England, Japan, and Barbados, they drive on the other side of the road. Most traffic laws appear to be the same as in the US, except that Right Turn on Red is generally prohibited. New Zealand has a funny rule whereby vehicles turning left (right in the US) must yield to opposing vehicles turning right (left in the US). At first I thought that oncoming motorists were just being overly nice to let me turn in front of them.
- 2.) Although there are many roundabouts, they are not as prevalent as I had expected. There are plenty of traffic signals and most major intersections are controlled by signals. This is somewhat different than in England where even major intersections have roundabouts, many of which are high-capacity multi-lane roundabouts. You don't see as many big multi-lane roundabouts "down under".
- 3.) I encountered in more than one location a large sign that read: "TRUCKS PLEASE USE LEFT OR CENTER LANE". Most truckers in the US would be stunned to see the word PLEASE on a US traffic sign.
- 4.) Australia road signs and pavement markings are a mix of US and European conventions. For example, warning signs are yellow and diamond shape as in the US (they are triangular in Europe) while pavement markings separating direction tend to be white as in Europe (they are yellow in the US). The metric system is used down under and all distance and speed signs are based on kilometers, as in Europe. However, work zone signage is orange on black and looks very much like that used in the US rather than the work zone signs used in Europe.
- 5.) There are a lot of dirt roads in Western Australia, even between cities of some size. And between these cities (which can be separated by a few hours' drive) you will find no gas stations, no convenience stores, no houses, no nothing! The only signs of civilization are a fence every so often and large tractor tires buried in the sand with numbers stenciled on them that appear to be mileposts (check that, kilometer posts). In one stretch of two hours driving I saw three other vehicles. Driving a low-ground-clearance Toyota Corolla with no extra water or fuel was not a particularly smart thing to do.

- 6.) The exchange rate is good, people are friendly, there are a lot of things to see and do, Qantas is the best airline I've ever flown on, and most things are run very efficiently - all in all not a bad place to visit. I was especially impressed with the people of New Zealand, who thank you before you give them your money. ("That will be 20 dollars, thank you".) In comparison, I was embarrassed when we got back to Los Angeles and I saw how cumbersome and unfriendly our immigration procedures were in comparison to those in Australia. We could learn a few things about customer service from the Aussies and Kiwis.
- 7.) Most of the traffic signals are post-mounted. There are not nearly as many overhead signal indications as in the US. One fellow that I met in Australia said that the thing he liked best about American roads was the good visibility of our overhead traffic signals.
- 8.) As in Europe, Australia and New Zealand use "little red and green men" for their WALK and DON'T WALK indications, not a white man and an orange hand like us. As I have mentioned before, our "international" pedestrian symbols are not really international.
- 9.) In the outback of Australia they have extremely long triple-unit trucks that they call "road trains". Special areas are provided outside of cities for assembling and de-assembling these road trains.
- 10.) They seem to be more concerned about visitors bringing illegal fruit into their country than illegal drugs. Where we have drug-sniffing dogs they have fruit-sniffing dogs. Getting busted for pomegranate possession would be a little tough to live down.
- 11.) In the rural areas of New Zealand there are quite a few 1-lane bridges. Although these bridges are short and traffic is light, the sight distance is not good and I often felt a little uncomfortable crossing them. I would guess that the rather high head-on collision potential could pose a problem. Some of the longer bridges are signaled to avoid this possibility.
- 12.) The European "keep right" sign (a circular sign with a downward angled white arrow on a blue background) is used. This sign is short (only about 3 feet tall) and points to the desired direction of travel. It is a very helpful sign, especially at complex intersections where the driver may not be sure of what path to take. In my opinion this sign is vastly superior to our tall black-on-white "keep right" signs and would be a great sign to introduce to the US.
- 13.) There are almost no rural freeways in either country and the number of urban freeways is very limited. Widespread grade-separated travel is a luxury that is somewhat unique to the United States.
- 14.) Similar to many states in the US, most signals in rural and suburban areas appear to be fully traffic-actuated with downtown signals operating pre-timed.
- 15.) The Australians have a rectangular black on yellow sign with the legend: "CHANGED TRAFFIC CONDITIONS AHEAD" that they appear to use to alert the driver of changes in intersection configuration or traffic signal operation. This could be a good sign to use in the US to alert drivers of signal phasing changes or even major signal timing changes.

As I stated to more than one individual that I met down under, if we put all of our prisoners on an island and let them fend for themselves, I don't think the end result would be quite as good.