

DRIVING RULES CALIFORNIA

road rules and driving laws are well-summarized in [The California Driver's Handbook](#), also available in booklet form from the [California Department of Motor Vehicles](#) (the DMV) at any DMV office or the head office in Sacramento. You can also browse the full California Vehicle Code (CVC) under the state's official [California Code Web Page](#).

Please do not rely on me or this Guide for legal advice; what follows is a brief informal summary that may be out of date and / or incomplete, or even entirely wrong — there's no excuse for not doing your own homework on this! And *please* don't ask me for legal advice or advice on getting around the law or whatever: I'm not a lawyer, or even particularly intimate with Californian law.

Road Rules

There are a few points that might confuse or surprise the visitor; the following relies heavily on the official driver's handbook and my own personal experience:

- **Motorcyclists** must wear approved helmets while on the road; motorcycles can legally [split lanes](#).
- The driver and *all* passengers must wear **seat belts** (or be in approved child-restraint holders — see below).
- All **children** under the age of 8 must be in approved child-restraint seats or holders; see the [official Child Booster Seats and Safety Seats page](#) for details.
- **DUI** — driving under the influence of alcohol — is a serious offense in California, with criminal penalties and drastic consequences. The blood alcohol limit is 0.08%, but you can also be charged regardless of blood alcohol amount if the police can prove you were affected by the alcohol. (And remember, regardless of DUI offenses, in the US the legal drinking age is 21).
- **Right turn on red** — in most cases, it is legal to make a right turn at an intersection even against a red light. This is not universal, and exceptions are always signed — but note that the exception signs are often tiny things in hard-to-see places. If you are turning right and the light is red, you are supposed to stop at the intersection before turning, then turn when you're sure there's no other traffic (through traffic, and traffic entering the intersection on green or yellow lights, have right of way). Many Californians don't quite stop, but it's still a good idea, particularly if you're used to driving on the "wrong" side of the road.
- **Passing** — it's usually legal to pass ("overtake") on the inside (i.e. to the right), as long as it's safe and in a properly-marked lane (i.e. only do this on multi-lane freeways and highways). Passing on the inside is pretty essential given the lack of lane discipline in California.
- **Four-way stop signs** — many four-way intersections have stop signs on all sides of the intersection. This sounds like a recipe for deadlock, but the rules for who gives way to whom are pretty easy. In general, you take turns to go through the intersection in the order at which you got to the edge of the intersection. If two

or more of you got there at the same time, the ordering is clock-wise (i.e. the driver to your right goes first). This scheme isn't fool-proof, so keep a tight watch.

- **U-turns** — U-turns are generally allowed at intersections except where explicitly not allowed (usually with a big sign saying “U Turns Prohibited”). You make the u-turn from the normal left turn lane, if it exists; at intersections controlled by traffic lights, you will normally only be able to make u-turns on the green arrow or similar. U-turns on busy streets or in business areas are generally not allowed except at intersections; in most other cases, you can make a u-turn with appropriate care, unless the street has a solid yellow line down the middle, or visibility is obstructed by terrain or turns. U-turns are of course strictly forbidden on freeways and most highways.
- **School buses** — when you come to a school bus stopped on *either side* of a road with the bus's red lights flashing, you must stop, and remain stopped as long as the red lights are flashing. These laws are strictly enforced in some places, not at all in others (e.g. in large parts of Berkeley you'll be roundly abused by drivers behind you if you stop for a school bus, as I quickly learned...). Californian school buses are immediately recognizable — they're the same as elsewhere in the US, i.e. special yellow buses clearly marked “School Bus” on the front and rear (at least). If you're a foreigner you've probably seen them on TV or in the movies — they're an inescapable part of life here. The flashing red lights on the bus mean that children are getting on or off the bus and are likely to try to cross the road near the bus.
- **Flashing traffic lights at intersections** — at some intersections, especially late at night, the traffic lights are set to continuously flash either red or yellow, rather than cycling through the normal pattern. This means that the lights are effectively off, and you should treat the intersection as though it were either a two-way or four-way stop sign intersection. Flashing red means you must stop; flashing yellow means you must slow down and exercise caution as you go through the intersection. Many intersections flash yellow along one road, red the other; no intersections flash yellow in all directions. It is usually pretty easy to tell which is which.
- **Traffic lights out** — if a particular set of traffic lights is actually completely out (not even flashing lights), you must treat the intersection as an all-way stop intersection. Unfortunately, at large multi-lane intersections this just usually results in chaos: some drivers don't even notice that the lights are out and sail straight through the intersection; others (the vast majority) can't keep track of who turned up when, and just try to slowly barge their way through. It's a mess, and if it's anywhere busy — and you're lucky — the police usually show up to direct the traffic manually until the lights are back.
- **Blocking intersections** — don't move into an intersection in such a way that you end up blocking it for other traffic. This is just common sense, but it's also illegal to block an intersection, and you can be heavily fined whether or not you think you were directly at fault for not being able to get through. Some intersections have large “Keep Clear” signs painted on the road to remind you of this (similar in intent to the old U.K. box junction), others have smaller signs somewhere around the intersection; in any case, it's always illegal to block an intersection, whether it's explicitly marked or not.

- **Pedestrians** — you *must* stop for pedestrians who have entered a crosswalk. Pedestrians have the right of way at uncontrolled pedestrian crosswalks (i.e. those without traffic lights), but (and this is somewhat new), pedestrians can not legally just cross whenever they want — they must wait for a *safe* time to try to cross. In California (as in the rest of the U.S.A.), a pedestrian crosswalk can be either explicit or implicit; quoting from the Department of Motor Vehicle’s handbook, “Every intersection where streets meet at right angles has a crosswalk for pedestrians to cross the street. [...] Many pedestrian crosswalks are marked by solid white lines. Some crosswalks, especially in residential areas, are not marked.” For some reason Californian drivers seem to ignore all this and just charge straight through crosswalks; many Californians seem unaware that the crosswalks are there whether they’re explicitly marked or not.
- **Carpool, High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV), or Multiple Occupancy Lanes** — many urban freeways or roads have a lane reserved during rush hours for buses, motorcycles, and cars with more than one or two people in them. These lanes are usually emptier and faster-moving than the others during rush hours, and sometimes offer other privileges such as free bridge tolls. These lanes are called Carpool Lanes or (especially in the Southland) HOV or Multiple Occupancy Lanes. They are usually well sign-posted with the relevant times and required minimum number of car occupants, and are marked with a large diamond in the lane itself every few hundred yards. There are fairly strict rules about driving in such a lane without at least the posted minimum number of people in your car (usually two or three) — if the CHP catches you, you’ll be heavily fined. Outside the posted rush hours, these lanes are usually available for all traffic. Just make sure you know for certain whether a particular carpool lane is active or not, or doesn’t have some other restriction posted as well. In at least one notorious and poorly sign-posted case here in the Bay Area a carpool lane leading to the Bay Bridge changes to a *bus-only* lane after hours rather than the more common all-traffic lane, with a \$271 fine for cars driving on it after hours regardless of the number of people in the car.
- **Metering lights** — freeway and major bridge on-ramps sometimes have “metering lights” to regulate the flow of traffic off the ramp and onto the freeway or bridge. These are special red/green traffic lights, often at the side of the ramp at driver level; when they’re in use (usually during commute rush hours) they let one car through each cycle, then wait a few seconds, then let another one through, etc. There is usually one metering light per on-ramp lane. This is pretty straight-forward, but if you’re not expecting them, you can just not notice the metering light and sail straight through... with potentially expensive results.
- **Bicycle lanes** — some cities like Berkeley, San Francisco, Santa Monica, Palo Alto, etc., have bicycle lanes painted onto selected streets. These are usually marked by a continuous thick white line on the right-hand side of the road, about a metre or so out from the curb or the parked cars. There’s usually also some sort of sign painted in the lane every so often saying something like “Bicycle Lane” on the road’s surface. It is illegal for cars to enter these lanes except to park or to turn into a driveway, or where the continuous white line turns into a dashed line, usually just before an intersection. In any case, always watch for cyclists coming up on your right — they have the right of way here. Also note that many bike lanes are simply too narrow for their intended purposes, and cyclists may have to veer out of them for parked cars, debris on the road, etc.

- **Accidents** — if you are involved in an accident that causes any injury or death, or more than \$750 worth of damage, you must file a traffic accident report with the California DMV within ten days of the accident. This report must be filed with the DMV, not the California Highway Patrol or other police departments; your insurance agent can also file this form for you.
- Cars driven in California should have both front and rear **license plates** (number plates). You are unlikely to get pulled over just for this, but it's a useful excuse if a police officer suspects you for something else, and it can cause you to get a small fine. I'm unclear on whether California respects the rules for cars from places like Arizona where front plates aren't mandatory, but you should probably play it safe anyway and not give a police officer any reason to pull you over.
- **Radar detectors** are legal in California.
- **Emergency vehicles** (police, fire, etc.) have right of way when using sirens or flashing lights. You must pull over and let them pass, regardless of the state of the traffic or traffic lights, etc.

Driver's Licenses

If you are temporarily visiting California, you can use your out-of-state or foreign driver's license for as long as it's valid where it was issued — you don't need to register with the DMV or do anything beyond making sure your license is valid and current. In most cases, (e.g. Western European countries, Australia, most of SE. Asia, etc.) foreigners do not really need one of those additional paper [International Driver's Licenses](#) as well, but if your license looks exotic, it might help to have one just in case (on the other hand, I doubt most Californians have ever seen a real IDL, at least in the last two or so decades).

If you intend working here, or establishing a long-term residence here, then technically you must get a California driver's license after ten days' residence. Drivers with valid licenses from other U.S. States usually need only pass a written road rules test and hand in their old license. Drivers from foreign countries normally have to take a full driving and road rules test; the old (foreign) license is then either endorsed as not valid for California, or, since everything is now computerized, it is given back to you untouched (but if you try to use it the DMV and police computers will flag it as invalid for use in California).

Actually getting your license is not that difficult, even with the tests. The road rules tests are fairly simple multiple choice, with only a few tricky ones; the road test itself is harder, but usually pretty fair. Most people pass on their first or second attempts; the driving tests do not have any tricks, but you will probably fail for silly reasons like forgetting to stop at the *first* white line near the stop sign, etc. (the sort of thing everyone does in real life all the time). Despite the crowds and lines at DMV offices, the test procedures do not take long, and it is possible (in many cases nowadays mandatory) to book a test place a week or two in advance so that there's minimal waiting around.

Out-Of-State Cars

If you're from another state you only need to register your car with the Californian DMV if you start working here in California, or you get a Californian driver's license. If you do this, you may end up paying a large (one-time) registration fee if your car is deemed by

the DMV to not meet California's emission standards, which are stricter than most other state's (the DMV doesn't actually test your car, it just assumes the worst based on the state or country of origin).

The Police

California has a *lot* of different police forces, in one form or another. Virtually every county, city, town, and large state institution (e.g. [BART](#) or the [University of California](#)) has its own police force; additionally, there's the statewide [California Highway Patrol](#) (CHP), the Military Police, and sundry others like the FBI. Even some private companies (like Union Pacific) have their own state-registered police forces. With the possible exception of the FBI, it seems that any officer from just about any police force can give you a ticket for speeding or arrest you for serious driving-related offenses (and yes, they all have guns). Police officers are sometimes referred to in official documents as "peace officers"; this is not a typo but the collective legal term covering the variety of police officers mentioned above. Police at the county level are normally part of the county sheriff's department, and may be called "Sheriff's deputies" or just "deputies" (and for those of you who remember the awful 70's show "CHiPs", no, no one 'round here *ever* uses the word "chips" to describe the CHP, except maybe ironically. And no, I've never watched more than a few minutes of "CHiPs" in my life).

The quickest way to contact the police for serious accidents, crime, injury, etc., is the emergency number **911** (nine-one-one). This is the main number for emergency medical and fire services as well. All other non-emergency inquiries, reports, and general office contacts should be made through the normal local contact number listed in the phone book; some police departments allow you to file police reports for things like theft, etc., online at their official web site(s).

The different police forces tend to enforce different aspects of the law, and use different methods. For example, city and county police forces will enforce parking and city street offenses (e.g. not stopping at a stop sign, or speeding on suburban streets), while the California Highway Patrol's specialty is, unsurprisingly, the freeways and state highways. City and county police often use radar for speed limit enforcement (radar detectors are legal here), whereas the CHP tends to rely more on tailing offenders or using airplanes to time cars over a distance. The CHP often seems more interested in patently unsafe driving rather than absolute speed per se; CHP cars will often sneak up on a suspect by hiding behind some other car for a while, just observing, and then pouncing. This can be unnerving for the covering car, especially if you're clearly doing well over the speed limit yourself.... Some cities also use automatic photo systems to catch red light runners, so watch out if you're stupidly tempted to step on the accelerator as the traffic light in front of you turns red.

Police cars used for traffic work are usually clearly marked and have some sort of red/blue and/or yellow flasher setup on the roof; they may also use alternate-side flashing of the headlights, especially if the car is unmarked and in a hurry (unmarked cars are not normally used for traffic work). The CHP also uses airplanes for spotting and speed enforcement work, especially on the rural freeways (an acquaintance of mine flies for the CHP). This is very difficult to detect; there will usually be some roadside signs warning you of this, but it is otherwise nearly invisible to you. The helicopters that several other forces (e.g. the LAPD and Oakland PD) have aren't usually used for traffic enforcement, but they're often up there nonetheless.

The sign that you are being pulled over or stopped by the police is a bright red light shining at you from the windshield or roof of the police car behind (and probably some

sort of flashing lights on top of the car as well, but it's the red light that's the sign to pull over), or some sort of easily-understood hand signals from a uniformed officer on the side of the road. The police car may also use a very loud PA speaker on the front of the car to tell you to pull over or to tell you what to do. Try to pull over where it's safe to do so — usually you will be told where to do this by the CHP (you may be asked to exit onto a freeway off-ramp, for example); otherwise, use your common sense.

If you are pulled over for any reason, *stay in the car* until the officer tells you what to do. It is a very good idea to keep your hands where he or she can see them, preferably on the steering wheel, and to have your license ready. Do not fumble around under the dash or between the seats — the officer might suspect that you're reaching for a gun, with fairly dire consequences for you. You will usually be asked to produce your license and proof of insurance (see above). You should always be given a paper copy of your charge (assuming the officer decides to charge you), and you can expect to undergo a computer check for both you and the car you're driving to unearth any outstanding warrants or stolen cars, etc. If the officer gives you a ticket, you'll be asked to sign it there and then. Signing it really involves bail and a promise for you to appear in court, *not* an admission of guilt; if you do not sign the ticket at this point, the officer can haul you off to the local jail. This might spoil your vacation somewhat.

Note that due to the use of a national computer system, if you get a traffic ticket here in California, it will follow you pretty much wherever you go in the U.S. (this isn't true for parking offenses, luckily enough).

Speed Limits

The most important speed limits you need to know about here are the two "default" limits, 25 M.P.H. (40 K.P.H.) and 55 M.P.H. (90 K.P.H.), for suburban and city roads, and for freeways or highways, respectively. Although limits vary around these figures (e.g. 30 or 35 M.P.H. (roughly 50 and 60 K.P.H. respectively) on some large city streets, 65 or 70 M.P.H. (100 and 110 K.P.H.) on many freeways), if no limit is posted, you should assume one or other of these two speeds. Speed limits signs (black lettering on a rectangular white background) are usually posted at regular intervals along freeways, highways, and other major roads.

No one ever seems to observe the limits strictly; not even the police (except when revenue is getting low). In general, it seems that 30 M.P.H. is the norm for 25 M.P.H. areas, 60-65 M.P.H. for 55 M.P.H. freeways, and 70 M.P.H. for 65 M.P.H. roads, etc.; the police generally don't seem to worry about this sort of speeding (but don't count on it — enforcement has been tightened up a bit since the freeway speed limits were raised from 55 M.P.H., and there are places like [Alameda](#) where even a couple of MPH over the limit can get you a ticket).