

What the ancients never taught us about driving

By Patrick Dewhurst Published on February 21, 2010



I HAD just skirted a roundabout anti-clockwise, crossed a pelican crossing at 62 kph and nearly missed my slip lane when Steve Tucker, my advanced driving instructor for the day, delivers his assessment.

"I've learnt a lot about your driving style already" he says cheerfully. "You are what we call a 'reactive' driver."

On a sleepy Saturday afternoon in Paphos, a co-student and I had met with Tucker for an introduction to the advanced driving lessons, which are now offered free of charge in Cyprus.

Tucker, a former London Met Police officer and advanced driving instructor, it turns out, is also a consummate diplomat - I suspect that "reactive" might be a euphemistic term. We park up and run through a few advanced driving, or road craft, techniques to encourage a more "proactive" style.

Earlier on, my co-student and I were shown how to check the car. There is an acronym, "POWER" corresponding to petrol, oil, water, electrics and rubber - all fairly common sense stuff, but then again, how often do we actually do this?

In the first ten minutes Tucker proves to be a goldmine of useful information, explaining, for example, how and when to swap front and rear tyres to maximize their life span (saving hundreds of euros) and how to locate bonnet release levers.

He notes that in Cyprus there is no law on depth of tyre tread (it is 1.6mm in the UK) and so it is the responsibility of drivers to ensure tyres are safe.

The checks and road craft skills we are about to learn have a common theme. Advanced driving, it seems, is as much about gathering as much information about your surroundings as possible, so that you can manage hazards in a safe way. In other words, it is about anticipation, not reaction...

"For example, let's suppose you check the tyres and find that they are almost bald, and you think that they might have another week before they are dangerous. If you are aware of this and there is heavy rain you will remember it. You might still drive but you will know to go slower."

When this principle of gathering information and hazard management is applied to driving, Tucker explains, humans are disadvantaged by evolution. Having evolved from hunter gatherers on the African plains "We are accustomed to act on our fight or flight response. This means we tend to focus up to 100m ahead, so that we see a threat and then fight or run."

This limits the amount of hazards we are inclined to look for, and therefore, we come to rely on reactions. To overcome this, advanced drivers use a technique call "scanning". This means noting every possible danger within view as far as the horizon, and factoring it into our choice of speed, gear and road position.

"It is about using sights, smells and sounds to increase our awareness. For example, I am also a motorcyclist, and for us the smell of diesel is our worst nightmare."

Back on the road, we begin to put it into practice. "I don't just want you to look at the car, but underneath the wheels, through windscreens and either side. Often you can see little feet, the brow of a hill or oncoming traffic."

Tucker then tells us he will begin to speak out aloud his "scan". Immediately, he begins a running telemetry that covers every potential hazard from straight in front of me up to a mile away. With astonishing attention to detail, he notes an oncoming car's dipping bonnet, indicating that he's braking, and therefore likely to wait for us to pass. Between the wheels of the car on a crest in front, he spots a camber at the next bend, and as we come into the village he checks the clock and notes the increased chance of pedestrians, especially children playing since it is the weekend. It is like having a Jedi master for a co-driver.

After a few minutes of demonstrating this, it is my turn. This practice lends support to the idea that men can't multi-task (at least not without practice) for no sooner had I started speaking out aloud, when the car's speed dropped to below the speed limit. Tucker, who has a talent for building confidence, assures me that this is normal and my speed will increase with practice. Sure enough, I start to get the hang of it, spotting pelican crossings and slip lanes far off in the distance.

The next aspects of road craft are road positioning and acceleration, through the use of "limit points". It is a tricky technique to master, but the two or three times I got it right, I really felt the car's increased grip on the roads.

Employing the techniques is fun, though it requires a big leap in concentration and after half an hour I feel much more tired than I would otherwise. However, I also felt much more safe and controlled. Though this was only an introduction (reaching advanced driver status requires weeks of practice) I have already noticed a big change in my driving style. Just one week after my lesson, I avoided a certain crash in Nicosia's old town when I saw (through a parked car's windscreen) a driver about to speed past a stop sign.

Watching him whizz by looking the other way, and disappearing up a one-way street, I realised how essential these classes are. I cannot recommend these classes highly enough.

For more information on the free classes, you can call Steve Tucker on 97727635 or Gwynne Pritchard on 97732724

Malcolm Smith, a driving instructor in the Paphos area, was the first member of our group to pass the advanced driving test and receive the gold award. He took the test in December 2009, his certificate arrived this month and Steve Tucker (the tall guy on the left) was his tutor and Gwyn Pritchard was his examiner.