

## Practical tips for self-driving in Africa

Have you read the Tales from Africa Travel e-book about the joys of self-driving in Africa, 'The freedom to drive yourself'? In that e-book we tell you about which countries are best for self-driving, driving conditions, which car to choose, papers you need, safety etc. to help you decide whether you want to self-drive in Africa.

If you choose to enjoy the freedom to drive yourself, these practical tips for self-driving will come in handy. We focus here on South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho, because these countries are the best for self-driving. They are also applicable for other African countries though speed limits and other rules change slightly from country to country.

### Speed

Though you'll likely be the slowest vehicle around if you keep to the speed limits, speeding is controlled regularly and unannounced with cameras or laser guns by Traffic Officers in hiding and fines are relatively steep. Underneath are general guidelines for the speed limits in Southern Africa, but always adhere to the signposted speeds.

- On highways and main through ways the speed limit is 120 km/hour (90 miles/hour)
- on secondary roads 100 km/h and in urban areas 60 km/h. Important: an urban area starts and ends at the name sign, even if a new speed limit is not indicated there.
- In many towns you'll find dual carriage ways which carry their own speed limit.
- Keep an eye out for differing speed signs in towns in any case, there are areas where speed is limited to 30 km/h.
- Most Game reserves have their own, much lower speed limits; you'll find these indicated at the gates. There are speed traps within the game parks too!

### Parking

You won't find many parking meters in Southern Africa, but especially in South Africa you'll find plenty of parking attendants, usually in bright day-glow vests. Most are official but you'll also find unofficial ones coming up to you and asking if they can 'look after your car'. This is actually a good thing: people make money guarding your vehicle instead of breaking into it or turning to petty crime. The standard rate is 5 Rand, 5 Namibian Dollars or 5 Botswana Pula, depending on how long you parked. Never expect change so have small money handy for this.

Usually your vehicle is secure, however don't tempt fate: never leave any valuables (camera, bags, satnav etc.) in sight.

In cities you'll also find parking lots where you pay at the gates. Almost tourist attractions, hotels, lodges and guesthouses have their own secure parking area, usually free of charge.

### Petrol

Where to find petrol is one of the most top practical tips for self-driving in Africa. Filling stations are found in most towns and larger villages and at regular intervals along the major highways. Some tips:

- Don't wait too long with filling up though: as a rule of thumb, if you have less than 100 km's left, fill up.
- Most petrol stations accept bank cards and credit cards except American Express. You only get a receipt if you ask for it.

- Self-service as known in the west does not exist in Africa. You'll always have an attendant coming up to you to fill your tank, clean your windshield and offering to check your oil and water. Prices are government fixed so competition is based on service. Tipping is not obligatory but it is common to tip a few Rands or the equivalent. For instance, most South Africans round off the amount due within 5 to 10 Rands.
- Service stations along the major roads often incorporate services like a parking, toilet, restaurant and/or snack bar and shop. Smaller service stations can be very basic so don't always count on there being a toilet. You might have to go to a restaurant or bar to find one – or use the omnipresent bush toilet.



### **Gravel road driving**

Most major roads are tar roads, but many game parks and sights can only be reached by untarred roads. Some of these are very sandy or muddy, but most are gravel roads. The actual driving on gravel roads differs very much from tar roads.

- Easy does it, both for speeding up and for slowing down. Avoid slipping on the gravel by gently using your foot, both on the gas and on the brake.
- If you have a 4x4, switch the four-wheel drive on the moment you leave the tar. You hardly ever need it due to the state of the road, but it gives you much more grip. Remember to switch it back on when you hit the tar road again!
- Try not to drive on the edge of the road. The sharpest stones get collected on the sides of the road and you have a much higher risk of getting a flat tyre.
- If you get into a slip, do NOT brake. The best thing to do feels unnatural: gently gas up, in many instances you'll break out of the slip that way.
- When you encounter traffic, slow down. First of all, the dust from the other traffic can make it difficult to see the road and if there is more than one car. Secondly, both of you often throw up small stones that can crack a windshield; the faster you go, the higher the chance of this.
- Most accidents and turn-overs happen in corners, because drivers take these too quick. Slow down before corners, not in them – ideally you enter the corner at the speed you want to go through. Never use your brake when cornering since loose gravel or dirt is easy to slide on. If you find you are going too fast and need

to slow down in a corner, use your engine brake! Only use your footbrake in emergencies – with the lightest touch possible.

- Make sure you have a spare tyre when taking these roads – and know how to change a tyre.

### **Robots, sleeping policemen and such**

Some things are very different in Africa and it really helps to read the following practical tips for self-driving in Africa. For instance, you'll generally find many more roadblocks than in Western Countries. Always come to a full stop just before the stop sign and stay polite and you'll be fine. Some things are a bit quirker though. Here are some examples.

- When asking directions, in South Africa and Namibia you'll often be told to turn right at the next robot. Don't go looking for R2D2: a robot is a traffic light.
- Another confusing point can be three- or four-way crossings with stop signs on all roads. You have to stop at the stop sign, but then it is first come first serve: you cross the road in order of arrival at the crossing. These types of crossings can be recognised by a small '3' or '4' in a square sign underneath the stop sign.
- During working hours roadworks are usually indicated with a lot of enthusiastic flag-swaying. Often one lane is closed and traffic allowed through in one direction at the time, the so-called Stop-and-Goes. Waiting times can be up to 20 minutes so prepare to be patient.
- 'Sleeping Policemen', i.e. speedbumps are not always clearly indicated by white stripes and are much higher and steeper than in the Western countries, so slow down to a crawl!
- Having more than one drink, not completely stopping at a stop sign, not wearing seat belts (for all passengers) and using a hand-held phone are all illegal and the fines are just not worth it.
- Having said this, driving in the daytime is a pleasurable experience! It is for instance very common to see a car go into the hard shoulder to enable you to overtake them, turning most roads virtually into three lanes. Sometimes blinking left is added. It's a nice custom and good to follow, but not before a turn-off, corner, or the top of a hill though – you can't see what's parked there. Thank you is said by flashing your alarm lights once or twice.



### **Animals**

One of the most practical tips for self-driving in Africa is often overlooked: animals on the road. No matter what road you're driving on, be on the lookout for animals crossing the roads – usually domesticated. Cows and goats graze in the countryside often in the roadsides and are not always tied up, and chickens are everywhere. So slow down when you see animals in the road-side or when nearing a village!

## Safety

Safety and car theft, especially in South Africa, have made headlines around the world. Though the situation in reality is much better than described, it IS wise to take precautions and do what most Africans do. So, when driving anywhere in Southern Africa, use common sense and try to apply the following practical tips for self-driving in Africa:

- In larger towns and cities, or when stopping for people on the road, always drive with your doors locked and windows wound up – especially when you stop at traffic lights.
- Never pick up hitchhikers, however innocent, lost or appealing they look. Your car insurance doesn't cover this because hitch-hiking is considered commercial passenger transport – people usually pay locals for it. However, sometimes a receptionist or a game reserve ranger can ask you to take a colleague to the next town. This is ok but it is up to you to honour this request or not.
- Beggars are common at intersections. We advise to ignore them, however hard that may be. Many children work in gangs and are begging for someone else's wallet, not themselves. A large part of the beggars is however in real need, so if you want to help, donate to a charity that actually helps these beggars.
- Never ever leave valuables on show in your car, and always lock your car when leaving it – even if it is for a couple of minutes.
- Always park in a guarded area.
- If possible, avoid traveling at night. If you do and it is quiet, slow down rather than stop at traffic lights or crossings. Watch out for people coming up to you – always drive away immediately. Don't forget to watch your mirrors for this.
- Though very rare, thieves have been known to employ unusual methods to make a vehicle stop, like placing large stones in the middle of the road. If you see this, drive carefully around the obstacle or turn back, rather than stop the vehicle.
- If after all you are unlucky enough to get robbed, give what they ask for. Your travel insurance will cover it.
- If you have an accident, take photos and always call the police – it is not only the law, but you also need an official police registration number for the rental company and your insurance. Sometimes that number is all the help you will get from the police.
- Ask your hosts for advice when unsure about anything. When on the road, if you need directions, it is best to stop and ask at a petrol station.

Finally, before you leave, remember to pack your driver's license, credit card and driver's licenses of the additional drivers. And enjoy your road trip in Africa!

