

# HAZARDOUS DRIVING SITUATIONS

The leading cause of death among Americans between the ages of 1 and 24 is motor vehicle crashes. And over 75% of the time, the factors contributing to crashes are related to driver error. There are upwards of 400 to 500 car crashes involving the 7000 US Service Members, their family members, and US government civilians in Sicily each year (the current average rate is 2 and one half accidents daily). There are cultural differences between how Americans understand the "rules of the road" and how driving is understood in Sicily.

## **It seems like people here in Sicily run "stop" signs all the time. How can I avoid an accident?**

By never assuming a driver will stop at a stop sign, you may avoid hitting a driver who pulls in front of you. There's little consolation in knowing an accident isn't your fault just because you had the right of way. Even though you were in the right, perhaps you could have actually avoided the collision simply by driving defensively. Ask yourself "what will I do if that guy pulls out in front of me?" Understand that Italians follow the "logical" choice. If they see no on-coming traffic, they may assume running a stop sign is okay. If you approach an intersection with a stop sign and a car is following you, look left, right, and left again as you would in the United States, but consider that if you do stop at an otherwise empty intersection, you may get "rear-ended." Stop signs are treated in a similar manner to "yield" signs; therefore the local drivers are usually ready to give right of way (if you do run a stop sign and collide with a vehicle, you will likely be found at fault for the accident).

**Cars seem to pull over in front of me for no reason. Can I do anything about that?** Welcome to Sicily. You should assume that cars would in fact pull out in front of you. It is important not to "race" or "compete" with other vehicles; just drive defensively.

**Is "right-of-way" understood here?** Try to observe how Sicilian drivers observe right of way. Do not be surprised if, while driving down an "arterial" protected by stop signs, the car in front of you stops (don't rear end that car) to allow a car stopped at a side street to proceed (this is the "after you" style of driving). The car at the stop sign may have been waiting for a long while. While chivalrous, this behavior surprises American drivers. Do not "rear end" the car in front of you!

**What kinds of road hazards are common in Sicily?** Livestock (e.g., "geep") may be herded across the road, or you may encounter other stray animals. Other common hazards are bicycle races (or bicyclists in training), farm tractors, three-wheeled trucks, and construction equipment of every manner. You can expect other cars passing on blind hills and curves. Try to imagine road hazards around blind curves and adjust your speed accordingly.

**Suppose another car is coming right at me what should I do?** It is expected that you will shift towards the right shoulder if a car is passing at the worst possible moment. Right is often the right way. Try to escape to the right if possible. Almost anything is better than a head-on collision. Remember that if you move to the left, the oncoming driver might correct at the last minute and turn back in the direction you've just gone (also you will likely be found at fault for any accident). While you're moving to the right, blow your horn. And if you can't avoid a collision, brake firmly and steadily. Every mile per hour you slow down will reduce the damage.

**What if I have an accident?** A left turn signal means a left turn in America. In Sicily it can mean that or the driver is saying "get out of my way, I am passing." If you have an accident get your car to a safe place (out of the roadway), if possible. **Make sure you are safe. Call 095-86-1911.** Communicate that you do not understand Italian (even if you do). State that you are calling "Polizia, Sigonella." Keep saying "No capisco Italiano." (I don't understand Italian). Do not get into an argument with the Italians. (Usually, if you say "No capisco Italiano." Enough, they will give up trying to communicate with you. This is good.) **Security will bring a translator with them.** Do not sign or give paperwork until Security arrives. **Remember, 1.) slow down, 2.) drive defensively, and 3.) don't drink and drive.**