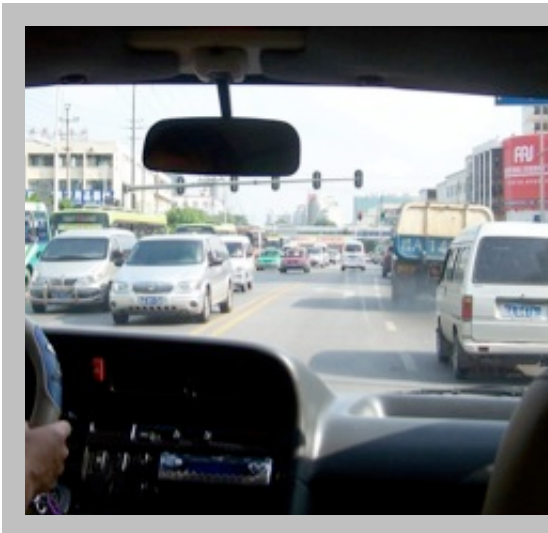


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Traffic

It's good you're not driving on this trip...

If all you've experienced is traffic in a major American city, then you are utterly unprepared for what awaits you on the streets of China. Perhaps if you've spent time in Italy or the Middle East you'll be ready, but New York is sedate in comparison.

First, do not panic.

Second, be very glad that you are not the one behind the wheel.

Third, relax and observe. You're actually pretty* safe.

Fourth, try to not focus on the lack of protective railings and crash zones on highway bridges, how close your lane of traffic is to the tenth-story windows of apartment buildings, the fact that this pavement was built by hand rather than by machine, the lack of stopping distance your driver is leaving, or the pedestrians stepping out in front of you.

Finally, remember that traffic lanes, signals, and posted signs are merely suggestions.

When you let go of your Western perceptions of speed and space, forget what you learned in drivers' training and through experience, and simply let yourself be a passenger, over your journey you will begin to appreciate the almost-psychoic ability of Chinese drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians to synchronize their movements. Like a school of fish or flock of birds, everyone seems to know what everyone else is doing, and the maximum capacity of the road is completely utilized.

What - at first - seems to be the worst driving in the world, over time is revealed to be some of the best**. Here's why we say this:

- ◎ Drivers' licenses are much harder to earn than in the States, with multiple behind-the-wheel tests required.
- ◎ Relative to personal income, cars, fuel, and insurance are *much* more

External Links (will open in a new window)

New York Times article about Beijing Olympics preparation re: smog and traffic
 Traffic fatalities down in 2008 (Reuters)

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expensive. People want to protect their investment.

- ⊙ Drivers do not eat while on the road, or listen to the radio, or talk on the phone. There aren't even any drive-through restaurants!
- ⊙ We've seen vehicles pulled over to the side of the road so the driver can take a nap.
- ⊙ The lack of safety elements on the roadways, plus the heavy traffic, makes you more aware of your surroundings. Not paying attention carries a heavy penalty.
- ⊙ We didn't see drivers acting like jerks - flipping people off or cutting across multiple lanes. Other bloggers say that road rage just does not happen - whether cultural programming or realization that everyone needs to cooperate, drivers find a way to get along to be able to get through the constrained roads.

When you get home, it will take you a few weeks to get used to how open our roads are, how rudely we act, how much fuel we waste, how much we distract ourselves, and in general how much we live in our cars. Truly, you shouldn't attempt to drive home from the airport - have someone pick you up or take a taxi. You will re-integrate eventually, but take it easy.

* Pretty much, mostly. The accident statistics are much higher than the USA. Doesn't seem to jibe with what we've seen, but it's a big country with a lot of new drivers...

** This could be your survival instinct kicking in, however, helping you to acclimate to the new "normal."



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