

# A GUIDELINE TO EXPATRIATES BEING STATIONED IN AFRICA

By Ambassador Erik Fill  
Photo by Kjaer Group A/S

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If the above headline should be taken literally and dealt with exhaustively a major volume and several scores of pages would be required. However, as this is not the format of CarNation, let me stress that what is to follow touches upon only a few aspects of “expatriate living” in Africa, some of those related to the very important issue of motoring a.k.a. transport. And as the undersigned is mainly familiar with Africa, having lived over the last two decade as an expat in all four corners of this vast and fascinating continent, unavoidably my observations and points are mainly based upon my own experiences as well as those of my colleagues and friends.



If you for the first time are assigned to an African country without much prior knowledge of the continent, you may – like myself at that time – live in the misunderstanding that Africa is Africa, and what is normal for one African country is also valid for another one. But no way, African countries are not identical with one another in many respects, and definitely not when it comes to motoring. One main difference is of course that some countries have left hand drive while others have right hand drive – mainly depending on which colonial power introduced a formal highway code in the particular country a century or so ago.

Driving habits and traffic “culture” may be identical or at least similar in neighboring countries, but this can certainly never be taken for granted. However, I suppose the same applies in other neighboring countries elsewhere in the World like en Europe for example. Exactly the same is the case for rules and regulations when registering and insuring vehicles. Moving from one country to another in Africa therefore always entails a new beginning – every time!

In reality for an expatriate, the only available safe and reliable means of moving from one place to another is by individual transport on four wheels, or for the brave and young at heart, two motorized wheels. In Africa the quality and condition of roads and streets are for many first-timers an eye opener. In many towns and even big cities one may navigate around a corner from an excellent street to find oneself on dirt or gravel roads in a condition, which back home, would make it impassable and closed off. Outside towns you may be confronted with a variety of road types; excellent tarred roads with an occasional deep pothole, strip roads (one tarred lane flanked by a gravel lane on each side), proper gravel and dirt roads with dubious or sometimes excellent but always deceptive surfaces. Add this to the real challenges of adventuring out into the vast open expanses in the bush or driving on barely visible tracks over the savannah, maneuvering through deep loose sand on narrow bush tracks alternating with knee-deep mud holes and not to speak of rocky roads through mountainous tracts or of treacherous cotton soil.

*“Driving in Africa is great fun on all levels - I am sure it will bring you a wealth of unforgettable experiences and adventures.”*

Of course, the above description does not cover everywhere in Africa. Some of the more developed countries also have excellent highways and roads of more familiar quality. That goes i. e. for South Africa in the South and Tunisia in the North, but then another challenge becomes “the order of the day” such as; heavy traffic and what would be considered reckless driving by most of your co-road users. Another angle to the traffic problems in most African problems is the frequent sight of road blocks which are put up by the police, sometimes as an added income generating activity. The local police are poorly paid but always well armed.

Talking about driving habits, let me stress again: not two countries are alike, but all are challenging. In some countries all drivers are hell-bent suicide candidates, in others (but much fewer!) even bus drivers can be courteous and helpful. Just a few years ago imprecise maps or no available maps at all could make any excursion challenging anywhere an Africa. But an almost complete coverage of the continent by GPS, and mobile phone networks, has radically changed the modes of navigation for the better.

I believe you are in for extraordinary driving experiences in Africa, which are always challenging but also very rewarding. Without sufficient preparations and caution it can however also be a dangerous experience.





Based on friends' and my own personal experiences let me try to give you a few useful tips and advice, especially for first-time expatriates in Africa.

Before deciding on your choice of vehicle(s), you should forget all about your preferences back home! Try to gain as much knowledge as possible about the country, and the location where you are going to live, before making any decisions, without a solid and detailed knowledge you run the risk of making decisions which you may live to regret.

Once you have collected such information the first question to consider is whether to buy a new vehicle, which nearly always means importing a car, or go for a second hand car bought locally.

If the latter is the preferred option a useful advice is that unless you buy from a trusted expat you are most likely going to be cheated – in one way or another! If you decide to import a new vehicle to arrive at your own time of arrival, the ordering of the vehicle may be necessary

several months before the time of delivery, depending on the geographical location of your port of duty. In spite of this, before ordering the vehicle try to assess your needs taking the following elements into consideration:

- > Your (and your family's) requirements for daily transport.
- > Your maximum requirements for transport (vacations, visitors).
- > The type of roads and general environment you will be exposed to during daily transport.
- > The most utilized makes of cars at your destination.
- > Fuel availability (Petrol or diesel).
- > Needs of special features due to climate and/or security risks.
- > Need of additional features and equipment for longer journeys, spare parts etc.
- > Will you employ a local driver or will you always drive the car yourself.

*"Do resist any temptation to choose your dream car or even your dream make of car if it does not live up to the considerations listed in this article, it could easily be a choice to regret!"*

On the basis of such information you may proceed to define the vehicle you are looking for. The first choice is to select type of vehicle – sedan, station wagon, 2x4 or 4x4 (real 4x4 or SUV), may be a double cab. Secondly the size of the vehicle and of the engine (petrol or diesel), then identification of suitable makes. Only then come the final choice of model. Once that is decided, the details regarding specifications, equipment, extras, spare parts, etc. follows.

If you follow the selection procedure above, you should end up with a vehicle that is safe, dependable and suitable for your needs at your proper destination. But one final advice: In spite of economic (and CO2!) considerations, you will always benefit from choosing a larger, more powerful and more safe vehicle than you would be tempted to do back home. Do resist any temptation to choose your "dream car" or even your "dream make of car" if it does not live up to the considerations listed in this article, it could easily be a choice to regret!

Even Kjaer Group and other purveyors of new cars for expats in Africa have a gold mine of experiences and readily will advise you, do not forget that the final decision is always yours – and that a wrong choice is often difficult to undo! After your arrival and the arrival of your vehicle an often very slow and bureaucratic process will follow in order to get the vehicle through customs, licensed and on the road. It will always be helpful if somebody familiar with these routines (and sometimes local languages) can escort and guide you through

this process. Otherwise my best advice is: Take your time and show your utmost patience – and keep smiling! In many cases it will also be appreciated, by those you encounter during this process, if you give a few coins or notes as a thank you, preferably AFTER they have helped you through to the next step in the procedure.

With respect to insurance, local third party insurance is obligatory in almost all African countries, but in some countries you can have your vehicle registered without showing proof of such insurance being bought. The issue of additional third party over and above the obligatory amount should in many cases be considered as the obligatory amounts are very low. Other insurance – comprehensive or all-risk insurance - is for yourself to choose, either from your usual insurance company or from one of the international companies specializing in such insurance, in the latter case your supplier of vehicle is normally ready to assist.

A similar complicated thorough procedure, as the registration, is in most cases to be followed in order to obtain a local driving license. Even that an international driving license in most cases will be valid you cannot expect all police personnel to be familiar with anything but local licenses.

Once you are through with these often intricate and time consuming bureaucracies you should be able to take your vehicle to the streets and enjoy the feeling of freedom, which is part of driving one's own vehicle.

Living in Africa, even as an expatriate for a short period of time, is an experience that I would not have been without. The beauty of the landscape, the colors and ever changing light, the fauna and flora – the smell of Africa will forever stick with me. But above all, the memories of the people, their kindness and helpfulness, their positive approach to life in spite of all earthly problems I will always remember their humor and wisdom.

And driving in Africa is great fun on all levels – I'm sure it will bring you a wealth of unforgettable experiences and adventures.

I wish you a safe and memorable stay in Africa!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador Erik Fiil

*has recently retired from the Danish Foreign Service after more than 40 years of service in Denmark and abroad. Most of the last 20 years he spent on various posts in Africa. Erik Fiil now lives in Lusaka, Zambia.*