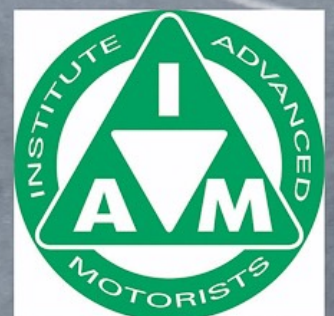


The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



Summer 2019





The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group (Group 8199)

Helping to Improve the Standard of Driving and Riding on the Roads in Northern Ireland and the advancement of road safety

Summer 2019

<http://www.amni.org.uk/groups/northdown/>

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This month we welcome to the Group car members Andrew Whitely and Gareth Stewart. We hope you not only gain from being members of our Group but will also enjoy the friendship and camaraderie of our get-togethers.

Test Passes

Congratulations this month to bike member

Derek Kane

and to car members

Ruben Nield

Martin Watterson

All three achieved a F1RST pass.

Good luck and safe driving or riding to any Associates approaching their test.

May cover picture

This was too easy. The location was High Street, Hollywood looking in the Bangor direction. Congratulations to Shaun McKittrick, Norman Shearer, Annie McFarland, Sheila Palmer, Ralph Magee and Gareth Hughes. Can you identify the location of this month's cover. Just the satisfaction of good observation and of course a mention in the next Road Observer.

Dates for your diary

- 13 August - STAC 38 Enrolment (Observers required for demo drives and taster sessions)
- 27 August - Observer training - **for existing Observers and trainee Observers**
- 3 September- STAC 1 Human Factors
- 10 September - Group Night - to be confirmed
- 24 September - STAC 2 - IPSGA (Information, Position, Speed, Gear, Acceleration)
- 1 October - STAC 3 - Core driving skills
- 8 October - Group Night - AGM - speaker to be confirmed
- 22 October - STAC 4 Bends and cornering
- 29 October - STAC 5 - Roundabouts and junctions
- 5 November - STAC 6 - Overtaking
- 12 November - Group Night - to be confirmed
- 26 November - STAC 7 - Motorways and dual carriageways
- 3 December - STAC 8 - Manoeuvring
- 10 December - Group Night - Christmas dinner.

STAC - Short Term Associate Course. Associate Members should ensure that you are familiar with the relevant section of the "Associate Handbook" before each STAC night so that you can get the most benefit from the theory session as well as your observed drive.

June Group night: Ice-cream run



I first heard of The Rinkha in Islandmagee a couple of years ago when someone said it had the best ice-cream in Northern Ireland. A claim that had to be tested!

At Committee earlier in the year we were considering what to do for the June Group night which would involve both cars and bikes. We've had barbecues, treasure hunt type events, even a construct a device (Blue Peter style) capable of carrying eggs and able to survive a serious impact from a baseball bat. This year we wanted something a bit different but which would involve driving/riding. Someone suggested, perhaps tongue in cheek, going for ice-cream and immediately a drive to The Rinkha was on the schedule.

A number of us assembled at the Boathouse and others made their own way. In total over 30 car and bike members made it. The bike members have a system for their run outs which makes sure no-one gets lost or left behind. However this wouldn't work for cars and for car members who departed from the Boathouse we had the option of 3 routes with detailed route directions - via Glenoe or the Knockagh monument or simply direct along the A2. As far as I know no-one took the Knockagh option missing out on the great hairpin bends. A number of cars and bikes went via Glenoe. The car I was in took the Glenoe route and we added a bit more with a detour at Glenoe to drive down through the village (19% descent - unsuitable for heavy traffic) and then a further brief detour to see Glenoe waterfall which was well worth a 5 minute visit. We couldn't stay any longer in case the bikers got all the ice-cream!



Bill and Paul at Glenoe waterfall

Despite many bikers taking an indirect route to Belfast and then through Glenoe, they arrived ahead of many of the cars. We were probably last to arrive having taken the additional detours at Glenoe and arrived to get the last parking spot and to see the queue for ice-cream stretching out of the door.

We were fortunate with the weather - dry and sunny and this probably contributed to the good turn-out of bikes. Despite the sun there was a cool wind but the bikers, equipped with the clothing to keep



them warm on the bike, were quite content to sit outside. We don't get many bikers attending our Group nights as they tend to be more car focussed and it was great that so many turned out for this event (Kyle counted 17 bikes).

Maybe it is something we could repeat next year as a joint car/bike event?

As if the ride out to The Rinka wasn't enough some of the bikers took the long way back via Glenoe,



Shane's Hill, passing the Misty Burn cafe (some car members will remember we stopped here for coffee and a bun on the drive to the North Coast in June 2016) and through Ballyclare.

And how was the ice-cream? There appeared to be a general consensus that it was good. I can only speak authoritatively about mine. I was hoping that they would have some of the pistachio (made with Sicilian pistachios!) which featured on their Facebook page but in its absence settled for one scoop of honeycomb and one of coffee and walnut. Was it good? It was excellent. Was it the best in NI? - I need to do some more tasting. Morelli's in Portstewart anyone? Now that would be a good run on a Tuesday evening, especially on the back roads.

Hire cars by Mike Quinton IAM RoadSmart CEO

Having just returned from a long weekend visiting relatives in Spain, here are my reflections and top tips for anyone contemplating driving a hire car on the continent this summer.

Driving any unfamiliar car demands extra care and attention, especially so when this is combined with a different country, a language you may not understand, and following a long and stressful flight. So number one top tip is take your time to familiarise yourself with your new vehicle. Ideally choose one with which you are familiar, in my case a BMW.

This saves lots of angst I can assure you! Ideally carry out POWDERY checks, but at the very least make sure you know where the windscreen wipers are and how they work - likewise the driving lights. And of course ensure all the mirrors are correctly positioned. It goes without saying that if you feel uncomfortable in any way with the car you have been allotted, then ask for another.

If the car has no sat-nav (mine did – hurrah) then take your own device and/or phone – but remember no touching them while on the move. Set your destination before you leave home, thus reducing the stress at the other end.

Number two top tip is learn a few essential words in the local language. My complete lack of Spanish and Valenciano meant that even “salida” stumped me for a while.

It takes time to become accustomed to driving any “new” car, even more so when it’s left-hand drive. Even the glance at the rear-view mirror, which is normally second nature, has to be relearnt.

So number three top tip is take it easy, take it slow. Whilst it’s tempting to rush to the villa and the beach, a little care and caution up front will help ensure you will soon be entering the emerald sea rather than the emergency room.



On this occasion having pre-booked a convertible, the irony of having to find the wipers was not lost on me. But we got going smoothly onto the motorway and all was plain sailing until we exited the autovia and approached the toll booth.

So number four top tip – have cash and credit card at the ready, as no-one wants the added stress of a queue of locals hooting irately as you search the boot for that mislaid wallet. I was prepared of course, but still stupidly drew up too far from the payment machine so had to contort myself through the window just to pay! Leading to number five top-tip.

All in all a very pleasant mini-break. And I am pleased to say the sun did come out and the roof came down leading me to the final top tip – apply that sunscreen before you drive. It may feel lovely in the breeze, but you will end the day with a red forehead otherwise! (Editor’s note - wear a hat)

A Ford C-Max (a more mundane but more affordable alternative) in France

The points Mike make in the article above are all relevant but here are a few more that you might like to consider. Pre-booking makes all the difference to getting from the plane to quickly driving away in the car. Firstly a check round the car to make sure that all the minor scrapes etc were recorded before the off. It’s an idea to look at the tyres - is there sufficient tread depth? I once rejected a car because the tyres were down to the tread wear indicators.

Checking the seat position, mirrors, how many gears, and all the other controls is essential before heading off. Is it petrol or diesel and which side is the fuel filler cap on?



Do you think of checking the fuel gauge? I got caught once when about 15 minutes along the autoroute I noticed that the gauge was reading 3/4 instead of full. Also, before leaving the desk check if a code is needed to exit the rental carpark. I recall arriving at the barrier and no idea where to find the code resulting in a mild panic. It was on a separate slip of paper in the rental documents.

If you are using your own sat-nav and picking the car up from a multi-story car park remember that your sat-nav may take some time to acquire the satellites once you emerge from the car park. Find somewhere safe to pull in until it discovers where you are. If you are touring about, have maps with you. Sat-navs are great for getting from A-B but if you want to find interesting scenic roads, isolated villages to explore etc maps can be a better bet.

Anyway, back to the C-Max. This was a comfortable car with plenty of room and a reasonably sized boot which, if required, could be enlarged by sliding the back seats forward. I have been accustomed to having parking sensors for many years but the Ford didn't have any and with restricted vision out the back reversing was, shall we say, a bit of a challenge.

As you would expect from a low cost rental car it was the absolute basic model fitted with a 1litre



ecoboost turbo-charged engine with 99bhp and a 6 speed manual gearbox. It cruised comfortably on the autoroute at 130kph in 6th but getting caught behind slower moving traffic by those exceeding the speed limit in the outer lane required 5th and sometimes 4th for a swift overtake back up to 130 kph.

However, most of the 600 miles driven were relaxed driving on often remote rural roads in 4th and 5th where the engine/gearbox combination coped adequately.

Overall a pleasing enough car for a holiday rental but this particular car had one downside. At times there was a low frequency vibration from somewhere in or around the central console. Much pressing and pulling on the plastic components failed to reveal where it was coming from. I eventually found a loose piece of trim around the handbrake, pressed it back in place and *viola* the vibration was gone. Success, only for the vibration to return the next day even with the trim in place!

Towing a caravan this summer? Some tips from Dept of the Infrastructure

Can you tow with your driving licence?

Details of the requirements are here. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/driving-licence-tow-caravan-or-trailer>



What weight can you tow?

The Highway code say that you must not tow more than your licence permits. Towing limits are normally found in the vehicle handbook or specification. It may also be found on the manufacturers plate.

Tow bars need to be type approved. A type approved tow bar will have a label with an approval number and details of the vehicles it is approved for. If your car was first used before 1 August 1998 your tow bar does not need to be type approved.

Mirrors. If your caravan or trailer is wider than the rear of the towing vehicle you need to fit suitable towing mirrors.

Brakes. Any trailer weighing over 750kgs must have a working braking system. Some small trailers also have brakes although these are optional. Brakes must be in good working order.



Tow bar towing stabiliser. A stabiliser can make the combination safer to handle. However, you are responsible for loading the combination correctly. A good stabiliser will not cure instability caused by a poor towing vehicle/ trailer combination. The stabiliser does give added security in crosswinds, especially when large goods vehicles overtake on a motorway.

Safety checks

Before starting your journey check that the caravan, horsebox or trailer

- is loaded correctly with the right nose weight on the tow bar;
- is correctly hitched with the breakaway cable attached or secondary coupling head fully engaged and locked;
- lights and indicators are connected and working correctly;
- jockey wheel and assembly is fully retracted and in the stowed position;
- braking system is working correctly;
- windows, roof light and door are closed; and
- tyre pressures are correct.

Snaking

Never attempt to correct swerving or snaking by increasing speed, steering sharply or braking hard. The best advice is to ease off the accelerator slowly, allow a certain amount to twitch in the steering and reduce speed until the snaking has stopped. See this video for an example of snaking going wrong: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo-qpy0krkE>

High sided vehicles

Take extra care when passing or being passed by high-sided vehicles. Allow as much space as possible to avoid the effects of turbulence and buffeting.

Speed

Reduce your speed in high winds, when travelling downhill and in poor visibility. Maximum speed limits when towing (unless otherwise posted): 50 mph on single carriageways and 60 mph on dual carriageways or motorways.

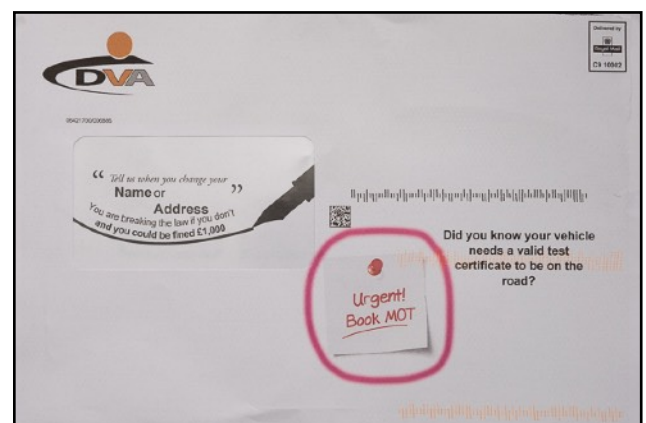
Show consideration

Be considerate - other road users can often become frustrated by slow moving towing vehicles, which can lead to dangerous risks being taken. So check your mirrors frequently and if you are holding up a queue of traffic, be prepared to pull in where it is safe to let other faster traffic pass.



MOT alert

On 18 June I received notification that my MOT would expire on 11 August. Being aware that there have been delays I immediately went online to book my test. Newtownards is the closest test centre and when I went to book it I discovered that I would have to wait at least a week after my certificate expired to get a test. OK, I thought, I'll have a look at the other test centres.



With one exception I would have to wait a minimum of one week and as much as 2 weeks after my expiry date. The exception was Larne which offered me 23 June but that wouldn't work as it was more than 28 days before my certificate expired. As I worked on down the list on the DVA website I came again to Newtownards (they are in alphabetical order) to find one slot had become available 5 days before my expiry date - presumably a cancellation. I grabbed it!

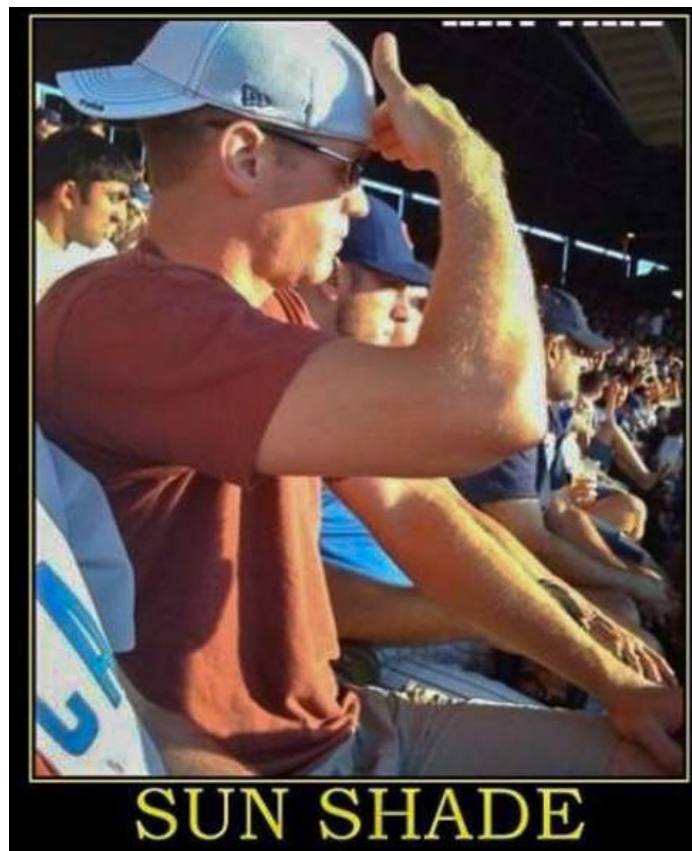
According to a press report dated 5 June the PSNI are in discussions with DVA about relaxing the rules but the official line from a DVA spokesperson was *"it is generally an offence to drive without a valid MOT certificate unless the journey is to-or-from a place of repair or a testing centre."*

The Department of Infrastructure has said additional staff are being recruited and "urgent consideration" is being given to the possibility of opening testing centres on Sundays for a limited period of time in order to address the current backlog.

If you have an MOT coming up try to **apply for it before you get the reminder letter** (which according to the DVA website is 7 weeks before the certificate's expiry). You will need the vehicle registration number and the last 4 digits of the vehicle chassis number.



And finally, hoping for good weather over the summer.....



Credit: Mike Johnston -The Online Photographer

If only there was a way to attach it to the hat!

The views expressed in the "Road Observer" are not necessarily those of the Editor, the North Down Advanced Motorists Group or the Institute of Advanced Motorists