

Driving in Spain as an American: Licences, Rules and Cars

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Free guide to driving in Spain with a US licence: the International Driving Permit, the six-month limit for residents, getting a Spanish licence, road rules, low-emission zones, buying a car, insurance and the ITV.

Read the live guide: <https://www.ourmixedpov.com/guides/driving-in-spain-americans>

IMPORTANT**Important: this is not professional advice**

This guide is what worked for us and the people we've helped - it is **not legal advice**, and we are not legal professionals. Rules change, every situation is different, and the cost of getting it wrong (denied visas, double taxation, fines, missed deadlines) is real.

Before you act on anything here, speak with a qualified legal professional - an immigration lawyer (abogado de extranjería), a cross-border tax accountant, or a licensed gestor - who can review your specific facts. Use this guide to know what questions to ask, not as a substitute for paid advice.

6 SECTIONS

The guide

SECTION 1

Start here: visitor or resident?

Visiting as a tourist: you can drive with your valid US licence. Carry an **International Driving Permit (IDP)** with it - rental companies and police may ask for one. In the US, IDPs are issued by [AAA](#) and cost about \$20.

Living in Spain: once you become resident (from the date on your residence card or registration), your US licence is valid for **six months**. After that, driving on it is driving without a valid licence, and insurance may not pay out.

The traffic authority is the **DGT** ([Dirección General de Tráfico](#)). Its website has the official rules and lets you book appointments.

SECTION 2

Getting a Spanish licence as a US resident

Can you swap your US licence? Spain only lets you exchange licences from countries it has an agreement with. Historically, **no US state has had an exchange agreement with Spain**. Check the DGT's list of countries before deciding, because agreements can change.

Without an exchange, you take the Spanish tests: a **medical and eye test** at an approved centre (centro de reconocimiento de conductores), a **theory exam** (available in English in many provinces), and a **practical driving test** in a dual-control car.

Most people sign up with a **driving school (autoescuela)**. They provide the car for the test and handle the paperwork. Budget roughly **?600-?1,200** including lessons, depending on how many you need.

Tip: start the process soon after you arrive. Theory and practical test dates can take weeks to get, and the six-month limit doesn't pause.

New drivers in Spain start with **8 points** instead of 12 for the first two years - even if you have driven in

the US for decades.

SECTION 3

Road rules that surprise Americans

Speed limits: 120 km/h on motorways (autopistas and autovías), 90 km/h on most other roads, and 50 km/h in towns - **30 km/h** on single-lane urban streets. Speed cameras are everywhere.

No right turn on red. Turning right on a red light is not allowed unless a flashing amber arrow says so.

Roundabouts: traffic already on the roundabout has priority. Use the outer lane to exit.

Alcohol limit: 0.5 g/l in blood (0.25 mg/l in breath), and **0.3 g/l** for new drivers and professional drivers. Random breath tests are common.

Phones: holding a phone while driving costs a fine and **six points**. Hands-free is allowed.

Required in the car: your licence, the car's registration and ITV papers, proof of insurance, reflective vests, and the **V-16 warning light** (required from 2026, replacing warning triangles).

SECTION 4

Low-emission zones and the DGT sticker

Many Spanish cities have **low-emission zones (ZBE)** that limit which cars can enter, including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Sevilla and Málaga.

Access depends on your car's **DGT environmental sticker**: 0 (electric), ECO (hybrids), C and B (newer petrol and diesel). Older cars with no sticker may be banned from city centres.

Rental cars come with the sticker. If you buy a car, you can order the sticker at the post office (Correos) or online.

SECTION 5

Buying, insuring and maintaining a car

Buying: you need an [NIE](#) and usually your [padrón](#). Second-hand sales must be transferred at the DGT; a gestor can do this for you ([Hiring a Gestor](#)).

Insurance is required by law - at least third-party cover. Insurers will ask for your driving record; a letter from your US insurer showing no claims can lower your price.

The ITV is Spain's compulsory vehicle inspection, required every two years for cars over four years old and every year after ten.

Bringing your American car? It is usually expensive: US cars need technical changes to meet EU standards, and taxes may apply. Most people sell in the US and buy in Spain. See [Shipping Your Belongings to Spain](#).

SECTION 6

Fines, tolls and practical tips

Fines are sent to the address on the car's registration. Paying within 20 days usually cuts the amount by **50%**. You can sign up for the DGT's online notification service to receive them electronically.

Many motorways in Spain are toll-free, but some still charge tolls. Most accept cards.

Parking zones are colour-coded in many cities: **blue** is paid short-stay parking, **green** is often reserved for residents.

Living in a big city? Many residents get by without a car, using trains, buses and car-share. See [Best Cities in Spain for Expats](#) and our [first 30 days checklist](#).

0 ENTRIES

Latest updates

No live updates recorded for this guide yet.

0 CLAIMS REVIEWED

Fact check

No validations recorded.

2 REFERENCES

Verified sources

DGT - Dirección General de Tráfico

<https://www.dgt.es/>

AAA - International Driving Permit

<https://www.aaa.com/vacation/idpf.html>

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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