

DRIVING IN UNFAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

PART 1: INTERNATIONAL DRIVERS

Driving in unfamiliar surroundings is doubtless more dangerous than driving in one's own town or suburb. Unfamiliar territory can expose drivers to conditions they do not normally encounter, and increase their risk of being involved in a fatal crash.

This is the first of a series of three papers looking at driving in unfamiliar surroundings. This issue considers foreigners driving in Australia. The next issue will include driving outside one's own state/territory (Part 2 of the series) and country driving for city dwellers compared to city driving for country people (Part 3 of the series).

Fatal crashes involving foreign drivers

Fatal crashes involving international tourists are given considerable prominence in the media. Such crashes are rare, accounting for 1.5 per cent of all fatal crashes.

These crashes are important for the impact they have on the international assessment of Australia as a safe place in which to travel. This is especially relevant as we approach the Olympic Games in the year 2000.

International tourists as a group have a lower exposure than local drivers to road safety campaigns and education programmes.

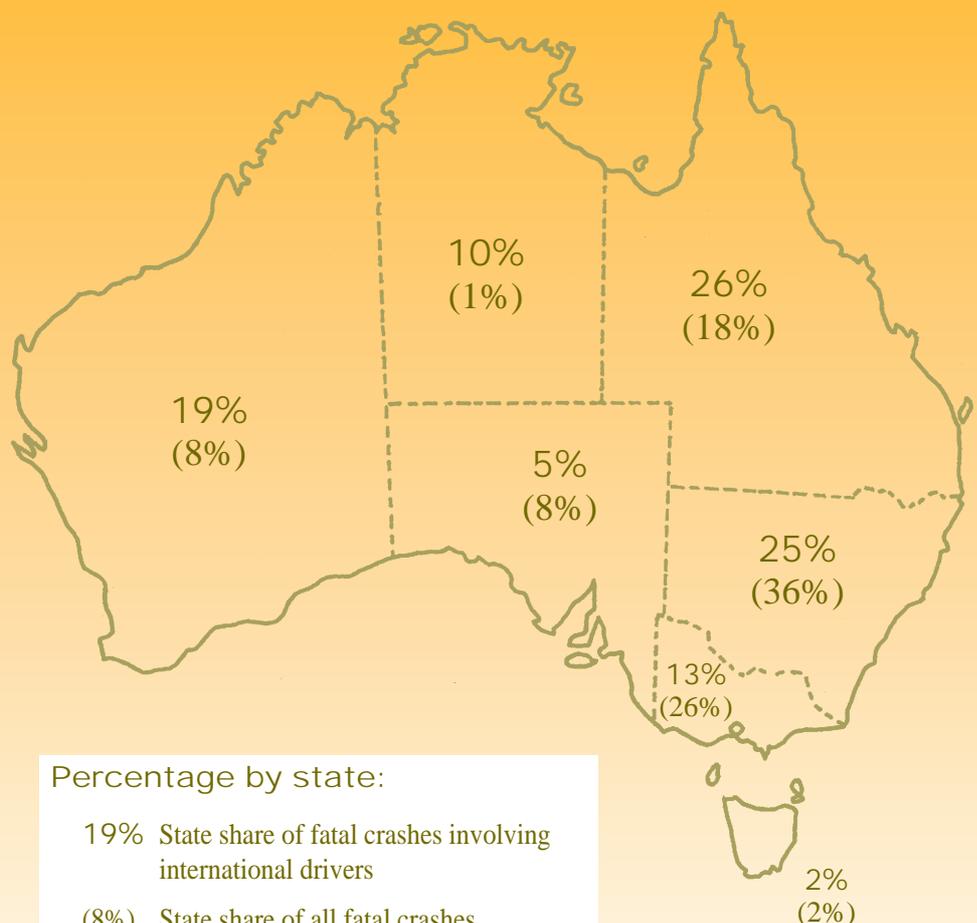
Foreign drivers, ie those holding an international drivers licence, can be identified from the Federal Office of Road Safety's Fatal File

collected for the years 1988, 1990 and 1992. This file is based on the outcomes of coroners' investigations into fatal crashes.

In general, there are about 30 crashes involving foreign drivers each year. Approximately 32 people are killed in these crashes and a further three international tourists are killed as pedestrians each year.

The accompanying map illustrates the distribution of fatal crashes involving international drivers. Over half the crashes occur in NSW (25%) and Queensland (26%). Western Australia and the Northern Territory are both over-represented in these statistics. Western Australia accounts for approximately 8% of all crashes and 19% of crashes involving international drivers. For the Northern Territory, the figures are 1% and 10% respectively.

Crashes in Australia involving international drivers



Percentage by state:

19% State share of fatal crashes involving international drivers

(8%) State share of all fatal crashes

	Australian	International
Driver Age		
under 25 years	34%	25%
25 to 60 years	53%	72%
over 60 years	13%	2%
Driver Sex		
male	74%	73%
female	26%	27%

Excessive speed and alcohol are important factors in fatal crashes. There is some evidence that international drivers are somewhat more cautious in relation to these factors. They are less likely to be speeding and less likely to be driving with an illegal blood alcohol level than Australian drivers.

The incidence of fatigue is related to the fact that many tourists undertake long distance driving on country roads.

Improving safety for international drivers

Road safety for international drivers is much the same as for the rest of the population. Alcohol and speed remain relevant factors in fatal crashes, yet there are some specific factors which may be applicable to international drivers:

Choice of vehicle

Efforts should be made to ensure that international drivers are aware of the road-handling properties of vehicles such as four wheel drives and minibuses, especially on rural roads.

Country driving

International drivers should be aware of the varying quality of rural roads in Australia. Distances should not be underestimated, as fatigue is a major consideration in long-distance trips.

Buckle up

International drivers and their passengers should be informed of the legal requirement in Australia to wear seat belts. They should be made aware of the increased safety that seat belts provide.

The Federal Office of Road Safety will soon begin a publicity campaign aimed to increase international tourists' awareness of Australian driving conditions, and the attendant dangers.

Who is involved

For drivers involved in fatal crashes, those on international licences tend to fall into similar categories to Australian drivers in most respects, although there are few drivers aged over 60 with international licences.

International drivers are typically on a leisure trip when involved in a fatal crash, and in 71 per cent of cases they have at least one other person in the car. (Australian drivers have passengers in 49 per cent of cases.)

International drivers involved in fatal crashes are driving a four wheel drive vehicle, minibus or utility in 32 per cent of cases, compared with 20 per cent for Australian drivers. This choice of vehicle is consistent with the leisure purpose of their travel.

The person most likely to be killed in a crash is the passenger of the international driver (41 per cent of fatalities), followed by the international drivers themselves (31 per cent).

How are they killed

Again consistent with their leisure travel pattern, 64 per cent of fatal crashes involving international drivers happen on country roads (45 per cent for Australian drivers). The crash is more likely to occur on a week day.

Comparing factors in fatal crashes

International drivers, however, are far more likely to overturn their vehicles. Overturns occur in 30 per cent of fatal crashes involving international drivers (16 per cent for Australian drivers). This is probably related to their choice of vehicle and lack of familiarity with rural roads. The injury consequences of an overturn are exaggerated by a failure to wear seat belts.

Unfortunately, international drivers and the occupants of their car are less likely to be wearing seat belts. The failure to wear seat belts may be related to the law in their country of origin. Many countries do not require the compulsory wearing of seat belts. The failure of tourists to wear seat belts may reflect many years of experience in their own countries.

International drivers are also more involved in fatigue-related crashes.

	Australian	International
International drivers do better:		
Excessive speed	15%	9%
Alcohol over .05	18%	11%
International drivers do worse:		
Fatigue	9%	13%
Not wearing seat belt	11%	19%
Overturned vehicle	16%	30%