

Motoring in the United States.

I recently had a short holiday in the Washington DC area. I'm not a seasoned traveller but I plan to change all that now that my children are becoming self-sufficient. Needless to say, I knew that I would be very impressionable with what I would experience and indeed, my impressions of the motoring world.

Having said that, I didn't have time to go to any motor shows or classic car events. What I did get to see in abundance was undoubtedly two of the biggest and best Air and Space Museums, both based in and around Washington. But that story is for another day.

Back to the world of motoring. Well, surprise surprise, no sooner had we unpacked and ventured out for a quick sightseeing visit to a quaint old town called Clifton, Fairfax County, when we caught up to a white Triumph TR3. We were lucky to pull alongside whereupon I showed him my Triumph Cap to grab his attention. Luckier still, we pulled up together at a traffic light for a brief chat and found out that he was in fact driving a beautifully restored TR3B – that's the rare 2100cc engine sports car that was sold alongside the recently released (then) TR4. Naturally I proudly passed on good wishes from the Johannesburg Centre.



Triumph TR3B

Other than that, the only other Triumphs that I spotted along the highways and byways were: An abandoned TR7 in poor shape on a farm in Middleburg of all places and a Spitfire running at a fair pace, loaded up with luggage on the boot rack, obviously embarking on a weekend away.

My personal experience in the art of driving in the U.S., apart from driving on the wrong side of the road was that one certainly arrives relaxed at the end of one's journey: the speed limit after all, is 55mph (90km/h). Besides witnessing all and sundry either talking or texting on their cell phones, I can't but help thinking that with that speed limit such as it is and much wider roads, good following distances etc, etc, it almost seems acceptably safe. Still, why can't motorists simply buy these Parrot Bluetooth hand-free devices, they're cheap enough?

Driving was actually a piece of cake, helped, no doubt by fellow motorists who were just plain courteous. Pedestrians are considered as a protected species, whether you are in a residential suburb or looking for a parking in a mall. It was also refreshing to see a traffic intersection devoid of any pedestrians. A nice touch which may or may not work here is that unless otherwise stated, at a red traffic light one may proceed to turn right if the road is clear – remember, we are talking about being on the right side of the road in America.

You may ask what type of cars I drove?

Why not plunge in the deep end? First car, or truck, as it turned out was a 5.7 litre Dodge Ram, owned by my 24 year old nephew. Incidentally, he's a bit of a biker too, owning a 1981 Honda Gold Wing, complete with touring kit.

Not to be outdone, my son Ross hired a 1600cc Harley Soft-Tail, on which I took a ride and if you don't believe me, I have the film footage from a GoPro camera to prove it. If you want to see it, you're welcome, but you will have to put up with my huge grin ear to ear; especially when accelerating that beast.

So easy to ride too, and I can understand why they are so popular in their home country, they are that comfortable. Remember, I only saw Washington and New York and as hard as I tried, I could only count three BMW 1200 GS bikes and a handful of super bikes on the roads.

The other two cars: a very nice Mercedes R350 seven-seater and a seven year old VW Jetta 2.5. My son borrowed this car from his generous uncle and travelled south to the Gulf of Mexico, Huston Texas, via Memphis, New Orleans and Nashville. Not in that order of course.

Freeway driving can be a chore at 55mph (most people creep up to 60) The roads can only be described as near perfect (I did mention I was impressionable): the whole bus journey we took to New York wound its way through dense forest and the lush grass on the roadside neatly manicured – yes, you read that correctly! Any roadwork was elaborately protected with flashing lights and excellent road warning signage.

The road building equipment too, notably impressive. There are very few forward-cab 2 and 3 tonne trucks that you get here in SA.

The Ford F250/Chev/Dodge double cabs are preferably used, properly kitted out with purpose made tools/machinery and able to haul huge trailers.

High Occupancy Vehicle (HOVs) lanes seem to work well and definitely save time and fuel: just don't get caught using one illegally. Not only do you get a spot fine but your insurance premiums increase too. Here is something that won't work in South Africa. The infrastructure is such that they have included pick-up and drop-off zones where, if you are driving alone, and want to make use of the HOV lane, simply pick up a willing traveller and you are on your way!

These travellers, just ordinary people like you and I are called Slugs and the whole exercise is considered normal. The name Slug is derived from the term given by bus drivers who found it difficult to determine who was a paying customer and who wasn't by virtue of certain individuals placing a slug, rather than a coin into the meter. Imagine the queues formed if they tried to introduce the idea here!

Those familiar yellow cabs in New York are amazing too. I'm convinced that the taxi drivers here could learn a thing or two from the New York Cabbie in terms of speed and agility, all this in Lincoln Crown Victorias.

I did feel safe in them however and on one occasion, I saw the speedo needle reach 60mph along Riverside Drive (Hudson River) Their useful life must be coming to an end as their shape is dated. Besides that, SUV five and seven seaters are looking far more practical

For the time I was in the States, my overall impression is that contrary to my belief formed whilst reading numerous motoring magazines in my youth, the average American is not absolutely in love with the car as may be found here. It is not necessary to "soup up" your car there.

It is a form of transport; mostly mid-sized Camry sized cars with a fair dose of the barge-sized Lincoln of yester year. Somehow, Mercs, and BMWs go almost unnoticed amongst good looking Hondas and the new wave of mid-sized Fords. Audi seems to have been ignored, but may be destined for a come-back with their fancy new models.

New shape Mustangs are a dime a dozen with Camaros and Challengers starting to sell well. Despite staying in a wealthy area, the supercars were few and far between.

Consider this: New Mustang V6: \$22 000 and a VW Golf GTi: \$24 000 Doesn't make sense. Why are GTi's so expensive here you may ask?

Happy Motoring!
Mike Gilchrist.

p.s. It is worth noting that the US will change from being a net importer to an exporter of oil and gas by 2017 as a result of fracking. Ref. Business Day 12th November, 2012.

Together with new discoveries of gas fields along the East African coastline and South America, surely the commodity price will drop significantly in the years to come?

Some major policy shifts in the Middle East too, I expect. A fascinating subject indeed.

Now, follow my example. Get out there and buy that big V8.