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Speed Cameras: A Flash of Irritation

By Nick Kurczewski



In France, speed camera warning signs are used to prevent drivers from suddenly slamming on the brakes. (Nick Kurczewski)

PARIS — The reputation of the French as being rude is completely unfounded, at least when it comes to speed cameras. While other European countries — and American cities — love to hide revenue-churning speed cameras in the sneakiest locations, the French are polite enough to install signs that warn drivers of impending cameras. Placed several hundred feet beforehand, these road-signs alert drivers to slow down or run the risk of being flashed. The rationale: It's better to have everyone slow down in a controlled manner, rather than have drivers slam on their brakes once they've spotted a camera at the last second. After all, a flurry of rear-end collisions does nothing to improve traffic flow — and even less in terms of keeping speed-camera revenue flowing.



In plain view: a speed camera in France. (Nick Kurczewski)

Yet, for France, where brusque waiters and cutting ahead in line are as much pillars of society as soccer and socialized medicine, this seems extraordinarily well-mannered. When I first

moved to Paris more than three years ago, I wondered if the French had somehow gone all soft and cuddly when it came to enforcing speed limits.

A few months ago, I found my answer.

Driving through Normandy, my partner and I were more absorbed in the beautiful scenery than the threat of receiving a traffic infraction. Despite pointing out every charming farmhouse for more than 100 miles, we managed to miss the huge sign warning us of an impending speed camera. A quick flash on the side of the road, and we were nabbed for going about eight miles an hour over the limit.

It could have been much worse. For infractions of 20 miles an hour (or more) over the posted speed limit, the fines can cost thousands of dollars and result in an immediate confiscation of your driver's license. After several weeks of anxious waiting, my ticket finally arrived in the mail. Comparatively speaking, it was a steal at only \$107. I could even pay it online. I typed in a code printed on the ticket and entered my banking information. Then it was a simple matter of point, click and done. My French legal woes were nothing but an expensive memory.

It's an efficient system, but still far from perfect. Auto Plus, a French automotive magazine, recently reported that in 2007, the French government pocketed 350 million euros in traffic fines because of faulty radar and speed camera equipment.

The information — reportedly obtained via a confidential document — cited minor miscalculations by police officers when using mobile radar detectors. If incorrectly aligned with the road, these radar units could provide a figure 10-13 percent higher than a driver's true speed. As for France's more than 1,000 stationary speed cameras (like the one that zapped me), the report says the problems include improper maintenance and miscommunication between the private company that maintains the cameras and the public body entrusted with seeing that the work was done correctly.

There is also the not-so-small problem of vandalism — I found several Web sites that list the locations of speed cameras, as well as pictures of vandalized cameras. The result is an increase in the price of traffic fines and tolls to help offset the money spent replacing broken cameras.

Like it or not, speed cameras aren't going away.

European countries have begun sharing traffic information with each other. This means that drivers will no longer be able to ignore tickets they receive in foreign countries. Several countries, France included, make foreign drivers pay on the spot. If you're pulled over and don't have enough cash for the fine, it's no problem. The police will happily escort you to the nearest cash machine. Camera technology may eventually include everything from monitoring simple speed infractions to how long you've been parked and even how much tread you have on your tires.

The automotive Web site TheNewspaper.Com reports that the German company ProContour has developed a camera that [scans the tires of passing cars](#) and then tickets drivers whose tires are deemed dangerously low on tread.

As for France's helpful speed-camera warning signs, there is a debate about whether to get rid of them. France's days of good speed-camera manners may be numbered.