

First impressions of Colombo

In trying to assemble some impressions of my first month in Colombo, I thought that it might be worth recording a few do's and don'ts for Sri Lankan students or their parents who might consider driving in any European country while studying abroad.

In the Ireland of my childhood we also operated the 'give-way to traffic on the right' rule, but unlike in Colombo, the average Irish driver was a 'wannabe' rugby player, who saw the road as an extension of the pitch. This was the cause of many accidents before the rule was abandoned in favour of a forest of traffic lights and Yield signs. It seems a mystery that there are not more accidents on Colombo streets, but then I suppose that everyone just gives a little to the others on the road, and traffic moves. However, the important message for those who would drive in UK or most places in western Europe is not to assume that the driver on the right has priority, unless there are notices (such as in France) which clearly indicate that they have such priority.

The next thing that struck me immediately on arrival was the use of the horn, which seems to be used as an "I am here" signal. Such use in many other countries would incur the wrath of other drivers and probably a fine from the police. The spirit of the UK rules imply that "A horn should only be used when warning someone of danger, not to indicate annoyance at a manner of driving. It should not be sounded when stationary on a road at anytime, other than at times of danger due to another vehicle on or near the road. Additionally, it should not be used on a moving vehicle on a restricted road (basically a road that has streetlights and a 30mph limit) between the times of 2330hrs and 0700hrs." I suppose that if this last rule were adopted in Colombo, then I and many others might get more sleep.

The horn might be annoying, but the use of the pavement by motorists causes astonishment for a newly arrived European. I was raised to believe that the pavement/sidewalk was a refuge for the pedestrian, a place where he/she had priority over traffic. You can imagine my surprise as I walk up/down Galle Road to ANC to find cars parked on the pavement, so that I and other pedestrians have to step out into the traffic. And that is not the worst of it. The sight of motorists using their vehicles to intimidate pedestrians away from whatever section of pavement where they would like to park beggars belief. I suppose that I have much to learn about life here, but, as a kindly word of advice to any Sri Lankan student who chooses to drive while studying abroad: in order to avoid a severe pain in the wallet you should read the official "Rules of the Road" booklet of that country very carefully before venturing out.