

Keep On Driving, Shanghai

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So you're thinking of joining the fray? Talk has rounded up everything you could possibly need to know when tackling the tricky issue of driving in China in this month's Auto Talk. Jia you, jia you!

How To Get Your Chinese Driving License

China is one of only five countries that does not recognise the International Driving Permit. This means, to drive legally, you have to obtain a Chinese license. If you are in China temporarily with a visa validity of less than 90 days, you can obtain a temporary license on arrival at the airport. To get a full license, you must have a visa of 90 days or more.

The first step is to get an official translation of your existing license. If you don't have a driver's license, you can go the whole hog and pass your test here, but it would require good Mandarin skills to do so. Armed with your translation and license, your passport and residence permit, you can then go to the drivers' centre at 1,221 Hami Lu in Hongqiao – it is also meant to be possible to use the one at 2,222 Huancheng Lu in Jiading. Here you will need to register and then take your medical test. Along with normal tests such as eyesight and hearing, there are, of course, some unusual ones. The strangest was being asked to squat – perhaps to show your ability at crouching behind your car in case of an emergency roadside stop when nature calls! Largely, however, it is a conveyor belt of stamping officials.

On completion, you will need to select a date for your theory test – the wait is generally around two weeks. It consists of a computer-based test comprising 100 questions and is offered in English and supposedly seven other languages including French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Korean. To pass, you need to score 90 or above and questions are selected from a bank of 1,500 standard questions. Candidates might find the app China Drive from Thinknao Software useful for studying the test, available to Apple and Android users (web: www.thinknao.com). Once you have passed, you will be issued with the license that day. In total, the whole process will cost around RMB 200 and take two to three weeks. Your first license will be valid for six years and subsequently, on renewal, for ten years.

Where To Park

Before you get your wheels, it is really best to sort out where you are going to park the vehicle. This may well involve a few gifts to your housing complex's parking attendants. Beware; some older complexes require you to hand over your keys to the attendant – a less than ideal situation.

Assume that unless you have to pay for parking, you are not allowed to park there. Unlike Beijing, where it seems possible to park on the side of the road without payment, in Shanghai this is likely to attract a RMB 200 ticket. Many shopping malls and office complexes have underground parking that usually runs at RMB 10 per hour. This is usually cheaper than roadside parking.

How To Buy A Car

Most car dealerships are situated in the outskirts of the city. Typically, dealers do not permit more than a short set route test drive. Second hand cars – purchased on sight – are overpriced and the industry dominated by dodgy used car salespeople. There are a number of areas around the city for second hand sales, but in Puxi, the most convenient is at Zhongshan Bei Lu, near Caoyang Lu, and in Pudong; at Yuqiao Lu (which is also home to many car dealerships).

There is a tax of around ten per cent on the cost of new cars. Dealers should be able to arrange the paperwork for a temporary number plate, and can also help get rid of Shanghai plates. Many second hand cars come with a 沪C Shanghai car number plate which is near useless. Whilst it allows you to drive through Tiananmen Square, you are not allowed to enter central Shanghai.

In December 2013, the average bid for a Shanghai plate was RMB 76,093, and from this year a price capping mechanism is being used. To participate in the auction you need a tender card valid for six months – RMB 2,000 deposit. Bidding can then be done in person, by telephone or on the Internet at a cost of RMB 100.

A non Shanghai plate will cost in the region of RMB 3,000. You will not be allowed to drive on the elevated roads on weekdays between 7:30 to 9:30am and 4:30 to 6:30pm. Furthermore, many older second hand cars are guosan (国三 standard equivalent to Euro III emissions), and can no longer be registered in Shanghai or neighbouring provinces. Theoretically, you are meant to have your vehicle checked annually in the city in which it is registered. In practice, you can use an agent who, for a fee (around RMB 1,000), will get the car passed in the Shanghai testing facility.

The Dreaded Car Insurance

There are two types of insurance: compulsory and commercial. Unlike in many western markets, insurance is only available from a handful of companies, Ping'an being the biggest. Compulsory insurance is at a set price of RMB 950 for vehicles with up to six seats. The commercial rate varies according to the type of cover, vehicle and insurer.

Follow The Rules Of The Road

Driving in Shanghai is really not as bad as it looks, but does require constant alertness – cyclists and e-bike riders seem to think traffic regulations do not apply to them. One of the biggest differences for European drivers is that you can turn right if the light is red unless there is a filter light – however, you are meant to yield to pedestrians! When on a non-elevated, multi-lane road, it is best to stick in the middle lane; the left lane has a nasty habit of suddenly becoming a lane only used for a left turn. Around intersections where a ramp from an elevated road has just come down, the lanes can be very unexpected – sometimes the lanes for turning left can be found right in the middle.

The biggest problem with driving in Shanghai is that at the intersection you are approaching, the name of that street is only written in Chinese – more distant roads are written in English. Signs also tend to mark only road names rather than destinations – except on highways outside the city.

There you have it, Shanghai. My last piece of advice is to try and keep your tank topped up as petrol stations are not always easy to find! Happy motoring.

Useful Resources:

For driving license translations, we suggest Shanghai SISU Translation Service Co. (web: www.sisuts.com) or Shanghai Interpreter's Association (web: www.shwsfy.com).

For a list of the official English driver's license theory test questions, visit www.shjtaq.com/db_update/dzjc/more/English.rar

Finally, here is a list of the Shanghai number plate tender card offices:

- 108 Fuzhou Lu, 福州路108号 (国拍大楼)
- 168 Xizang Nan Lu, 西藏南路168号 (工商银行)
- 800 Quyang Lu, 曲阳路800号 (工商银行)
- 82 Xintan Lu, 莘谭路82号 (交通银行)
- 1000 Moyu Nan Lu, 墨玉南路1000号 (上海二手车交易市场)
- 766 Pudong Nan Lu, 浦东南路766号 (交通银行) 办理登记手续