



FREE GUIDE • SPAIN CAR & DRIVING TIPS

The Expat's Guide to Cars & Driving Licences in Spain

28 practical tips on renting, buying, insuring and getting licensed, in plain English for expats.



INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Car Rental

6 tips

Buying

7 tips

Licence

10 tips

Insurance

5 tips

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Practical relocation tips for English speaking expats in Spain

General information only - not legal, tax or financial advice. Rules change; always confirm your own case.

START HERE

Spain is best seen by car. Getting one is the hard part.

Almost every expat arrives in Spain assuming the car side of life will be simple. Take a long term car rental for a few weeks, buy a runaround, swap the licence over, done. In practice each of those steps works differently here, and the driver's licence in particular has become an expensive trap for foreigners.

This guide collects what we tell our own clients, learned the hard way and backed by our investigation into the Spanish driving school industry. It is grouped into four sections so you can jump straight to whatever you are dealing with this week.

01**Long Term Car Rental** (6 tips)

Short term versus long term, and which provider suits each.

02**Buying a Car** (7 tips)

Why financing is hard, and how to buy used without regrets.

03**Your Driver's Licence** (10 tips)

Exchange rules by nationality, the six month clock, and the autoescuela system.

04**Car Insurance** (5 tips)

The licence catch, and who will actually cover a foreigner.

The one thing to plan around

Your home licence is valid in Spain for six months from the day you become resident. UK holders can exchange for a Spanish licence within that window with no driving test. USA, Canadian and Australian holders cannot, and the full test routinely takes longer than six months. Either way, start the month you arrive, not the month your six months runs out.

SECTION 01

Long Term Car Rental

Different providers win at different lengths of stay.

A long term car rental is the right answer for your first weeks and months in Spain, before you know which neighbourhood you want to live in or whether you even need to own a car. The trick is matching the provider to the length of your stay.

1 Use AutoEurope for short term car rental

For a normal holiday or a short trip, AutoEurope consistently returns excellent short term car rental rates across Spain. Insurance is bundled into the rental, so there is nothing separate to arrange and nothing to argue about at the desk.

2 Use OK Mobility for long term car rental up to 90 days

If you are landing as a digital nomad or a new resident, OK Mobility offers strong rates on long term car rental of up to 90 days. This is the sweet spot for your first weeks while you look at neighbourhoods, sort paperwork and decide what car you actually need.

3 Take a long term car rental before you buy, always

Do not buy a car in your first month. Take a long term car rental, drive the region, and find out whether you need a small city car for tight old town streets or something bigger for motorway runs. Spanish towns punish oversized cars in a way that is hard to appreciate from abroad.

4 Budget for an automatic, or learn the stick

Automatics are the minority in Spain and long term car rental fleets price them accordingly. If you cannot drive a manual, book well ahead and expect to pay more. If you can learn, do; it will save you money on the rental and again when you buy.

5 Check what your rental insurance actually excludes

Included cover is not unlimited cover. Tyres, glass, undercarriage and the excess are the usual gaps, and on a long term car rental you are exposed to them for longer. Confirm the excess before you drive off, especially if you are heading for mountain roads or unpaved tracks.

6

Keep your home licence and permit in the car

Spanish police can and do stop foreign drivers. Carry your home licence, your international driving permit, the rental agreement and your passport or residency card. Producing all four on the roadside makes the conversation short.

SECTION 02

Buying a Car

Cheaper than renting within months, if you buy sensibly.

If you are staying in Spain, buying beats a rolling long term car rental on cost fairly quickly. The obstacle is not the car, it is the financing, and the answer for most new arrivals is a good used car paid for outright.

1

Expect no car loan in your first year

Spanish banks assess you on your nomina, the local payroll slip proving steady Spanish income. New arrivals, remote workers paid from abroad and retirees usually do not have one, which closes off most car finance until you have built a Spanish financial history.

2

Buy used, and buy outright

Because financing is off the table, a solid used car bought outright is the realistic route. It sidesteps the paperwork entirely and you can always upgrade in a year or two once the bank recognises you exist.

3

Go to a brand dealership, not a used car chain

We recommend going directly to the dealership of your preferred brand rather than used car chains such as Flexicar. Dealerships generally do better maintenance on the used stock they sell, and there is more accountability if something goes wrong in the first months.

4

Manual will cost you less, twice over

Automatic cars are meaningfully more expensive in Spain, both to buy and to insure. If you are willing to learn to drive a stick, you will save money on the purchase and widen the pool of cars you can consider.

5

Budget beyond the sticker price

Add the transfer of ownership fee, the annual municipal road tax (IVTM), and the ITV roadworthiness inspection. None are huge individually but together they change what you can afford.

6

Check the ITV history and outstanding fines before you pay

Ask for the ITV record and confirm the car has no outstanding traffic fines or finance attached. In Spain these can follow the vehicle, and the DGT can tell you the vehicle's status before you hand over money.

7

Sort insurance before you complete the purchase

This is the step people leave until last and regret. Most Spanish insurers will not quote a driver without a Spanish licence, so confirm you can actually insure the car before you buy it. See section 04.

SECTION 03

Your Driver's Licence

The six month rule, and the autoescuela gauntlet that follows.

This is the section that costs expats the most money and the most patience. Read it before you walk into a driving school, not after.

1

You have six months on your home licence

You can drive on your USA, Canadian, Australian or UK licence for six months after becoming resident in Spain. Treat that as a countdown, not a grace period. For UK holders it is also the deadline to exchange. For everyone else it is the time you have to get the Spanish process moving.

2

Get an international driving permit before you leave home

If you plan to stay long term you will want an international driving permit alongside your home licence. In the USA your local AAA office issues them, and it is far easier to arrange before you fly than from Spain.

3

UK licences can be exchanged. USA, Canadian and Australian cannot

Under the UK and Spain licence agreement, UK holders resident in Spain can exchange a DVLA licence for a Spanish one without sitting any driving test. You will need a medical check at an authorised centre, a DGT appointment, and you surrender the UK licence. Spain has no such agreement for USA, Canadian or Australian licences, so those holders face the full theory and practical test through a certified driving school.

4

UK holders: do not miss the six month exchange window

The exchange route is tied to your first six months of residency. Miss it and that channel closes, leaving you in the same position as everyone else: the full test through an autoescuela. Book the medical and the DGT appointment early, because appointment availability is the usual bottleneck.

5

Interview driving schools before you pay anything

Enrolment alone typically starts around 300 euros and is not refundable. Before you hand it over, confirm in writing that they can teach in English, that they have an automatic car available if you need one, and what happens to your fees if you fail.

6

Get the automatic car promise in writing

One couple we interviewed passed the theory exam, were then ghosted for an entire summer, and finally learned no automatic car was available. They were transferred to another school and hit with a new 350 euro fee to make the change. Written confirmation avoids this.

7

Prepare properly for the theory test

The written exam is available in English, but the translation is notoriously poor and even native Spanish speakers from Latin America struggle with the regional vocabulary. Schools commonly push students through dozens of mock exams. Your theory pass stays valid for two years.

8

Expect a minimum lesson requirement, and question it

Lessons average around 50 euros each, and schools typically insist on a minimum of ten before they will put you forward. Some reportedly require far more. Ask upfront exactly how many they require and what determines the number.

9

Know that the exam is not always about your driving

Expats report examiners giving directions mid conversation with no warning, using vague landmarks, and failing candidates on judgement calls with no official infraction. One school owner told us plainly that the test is not there to check whether you can drive safely.

10

Budget for more than one attempt, and shop around

Most expats report needing several attempts. Each failure can mean re-enrolment plus another block of mandatory lessons, which is how people end up well over a thousand euros deep. Not every school is a bad one, so ask other expats locally for a school with a track record of passing foreigners.

Why we are blunt about this

We investigated the autoescuela industry after too many expats told us the same story. Schools profit every time a student fails, and the incentives are not on your side. That does not mean every school is a scam; some of our readers passed first time with an instructor who translated the examiner's directions. It means you should choose carefully, get commitments in writing, and walk away from a school that will not give you straight answers.

SECTION 04

Car Insurance

The licence catch, and how to get around it.

If you are on a short term or long term car rental, insurance is included and this section does not apply to you. The moment you buy a car of your own, it becomes the thing that can strand you.

1

Rentals already include cover

OK Mobility and AutoEurope both include insurance in their rates, on short term and long term car rental alike. Buying separate car insurance only becomes relevant once you own a vehicle in Spain.

2

Most Spanish insurers require a Spanish licence

This is the catch that surprises people. The majority of Spanish insurance companies will not sell car insurance to a driver without a Spanish driver's licence, which leaves a gap during the exact months you are still working through the autoescuela.

3

Expat focused brokers are the workaround

A smaller number of insurers and brokers specialise in foreign residents and will cover you on a foreign licence. We recommend starting with Abbeygate Insurance, who deal with foreign licence holders and work in English.

4

Confirm cover before you buy the car

Get a quote in your name, on your current licence, for the specific car you intend to buy, before you pay for it. An uninsurable car sitting on your street is an expensive lesson, and extending a long term car rental while you sort it out costs more again.

5

Check whether driver accident cover is included

Spain handles traffic accidents partly through the compulsory motor insurance system rather than private health policies. If you hold a private health plan for your visa, check whether it excludes traffic accidents, and make sure your motor policy includes seguro del conductor to fill that gap.

YOUR CAR PAPERWORK CHECKLIST**What to have ready, and what to keep in the glovebox**

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| ✓ NIE number | ✓ Home country driving licence |
| ✓ International driving permit | ✓ Passport or TIE residency card |
| ✓ Permiso de circulacion (registration) | ✓ Ficha tecnica (technical sheet) |
| ✓ Valid ITV inspection certificate | ✓ Proof of insurance |
| ✓ Road tax (IVTM) receipt | ✓ Proof of Spanish address |

BEFORE YOU GO

The short version

If you remember nothing else from this guide, remember these six things.

1

Take a long term car rental first. Do not buy a car in your first month in Spain.

2

Your home licence is good for six months. Start the Spanish licence process immediately.

3

UK licences exchange with no test inside six months. USA, Canadian and Australian mean the full test.

4

Interview driving schools, get English teaching and automatic cars confirmed in writing.

5

Spanish banks will not finance you without a nomina, so plan to buy used and outright.

6

Confirm you can insure a car on your foreign licence before you agree to buy it.

Getting on the road should not cost you a fortune in mistakes.

GuiriGuru helps English speaking expats rent, buy, insure and drive in Spain. We explain the process in plain English, point you to providers who actually work with foreigners, and tell you the truth about the driving school industry before it costs you money.

→ **Book your free relocation consultation:** guiriguru.com/spain-relocation-consultation

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