



Carson Varner

German mind revealed in trip on autobahn

How can the German autobahn, without speed limits be safer than our interstate highways? This is a lesson from the Illinois State University international business program. This interdisciplinary program, unique in Illinois, is now 20 years old.

Our Illinois born-and-bred graduates are doing business literally around the world helping keep Illinois and America competitive in the global economy. It appeals to students with a sense of adventure, who have a strong tolerance for change and enjoy the challenges and occasional frustrations of working with the world's differing peoples.

It also demands a student who will take all parts of a broad interdisciplinary education seriously. In addition to a full range of business courses, students are sent across campus to our friends in history, geography, political science and foreign language. When the students can navigate the globe a bit, appreciate another country's history and tradition and have stumbled away communicating in another language they are ready to learn international business.

Comparative law is part of this study. German traffic law and driving habits are an interesting topic but only become important when used as a key to understanding the people, a key to success in international business.

Autobahn construction started under Hitler in the 1930s as a measure to put people back to work. It had a military purpose but was probably of more use to General Patton than the Germans. The light traffic and slow-moving vehicles of the time made a speed limit seem unnecessary. The tradition stuck. In the 1950s and '60s, faster but not very safe vehicles made the autobahn a dangerous if exciting place.

How can it be so safe now? The answer lies in German culture and advance in safety technology.

Americans generally find Germans to be rule mongers. They make and enforce rules and laws on seemingly everything. "Alles hat seine Ordnung!" goes the German phrase. "Everything has its good order."

Germans by contrast feel our almost limitless freedom to abuse one another shows a society in chaos and near anarchy.

In Germany it is illegal to wash your car or mow the lawn on Sunday. (Sunday is a day of rest and peace.) Trees planted in your yard must be setback so that the branches will never intrude on the neighbor's airspace. (This keeps good order.)

You get the picture of what is to us a rigid, highly regulated society but to Germans just good order.

This is actually very relevant to safety on the autobahn. Every driver knows what is expected and there are few surprises.

Defensive driving is not a German habit. Driving habits are formed in driving school. Driving schools are all private. It costs about \$2,000 to get the lessons to pass the rigorous exam. The driving age is 18 in Germany, so the American sweet 16 summer on wheels doesn't exist. But, roads are safer. Today most Germans get their license at 18.

Imagine hitting a pothole at 110 mph. The German autobahn does not have potholes. The concrete and underlying roadbed is twice as thick, and the roads are rebuilt when they seem to American eyes to be in excellent condition.

German cars are engineered for high speed and safety. This fact is not lost on marketers of German cars in America and around the world. Cars in Germany are equally well maintained. It is the law.

There is the feared Tüv which is mercifully short abbreviation for the, Technischeüberwachungsverein (that's Germany — 26 letters but only one word!) This is a biannual inspection required by law. Nothing escapes them. A niece showed me her car and said it was headed to the shredder in a couple of weeks. The only thing I could see was some minor rust under the hood, but that and a few other small things sealed the car's doom.

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The autobahn is fast and safe not just because a few rules differ but because the entire culture differs. To drive safely at high speed requires more than we are willing to pay. The study of international business develops tolerance because students see that learning about differences is exciting and that there is usually more than one way in the world to do things right.

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