



## Education Abroad Student Perspective

*Jacob Unger, a current Princeton junior majoring in history, received a grant from his university this past summer to study in and tour Saudi Arabia and Taiwan.*

*Meeting with key imams in Saudi Arabia and learning Mandarin in Taiwan necessitated considerable travel in each of the countries. As a passenger, pedestrian, and at times, reluctant driver, Jacob, a former ASIRT intern, was keenly aware of risks involved in negotiating the roads and transportation systems in both countries and shares his observations.*

### Saudi Arabia:

When preparing for my trip to Saudi Arabia, I asked several people who had previously been to the country whether I should watch out for any potential dangers. They all gave me similar advice: “The country is very safe. Just make sure you’re careful on the roads. Driving there is a nightmare.” Indeed, throughout five weeks in Saudi Arabia, I felt completely safe everywhere except for on the road. The Saudi government has made road safety a top priority as a part of its Vision 2030, but the safety reforms are yet to take hold, leaving Saudi Arabia with a web of disorganized and dangerous roads.

A discussion of driving in Saudi Arabia can be broken down into three parts: infrastructure, practices, and alternatives. The driving infrastructure in Saudi Arabian cities mainly consists of highways, so even short rides become hectic affairs with several merges and exits. The areas around these highway on-ramps and exits tend to be particularly dangerous, as the roads are traffic-stricken and filled with aggressive drivers. Aside from on-ramps and exits, Saudi highways include special U-turn lanes—these lanes originate from the left-most lane, and they allow drivers to make a U-turn onto the other side of the highway. Although these U-turns make driving times slightly shorter, they create extremely unsafe driving conditions.

Drivers who make a U-turn must immediately accelerate to highway speeds and quickly merge onto the parallel highway, with only a tiny stretch of road to support the maneuver. Saudi roads are therefore flushed with cars performing dangerous merges from both the right- and left-hand sides. Traffic lights are encountered infrequently, and they often create disorganized intersections. Although the roads tend to be in good condition, the fact that most driving takes place on highways makes for an unsafe driving environment.

Driving practices in Saudi Arabia are extremely poor. Just a few moments after my taxi exited the airport, a car zoomed past us in the left-hand emergency lane, something that felt rather scary but which I, unfortunately, came to realize was an extremely popular maneuver among Saudi drivers. Cars consistently weave in and out of lanes, creating dangerous conditions on the traffic-clogged yet fast-moving streets. The many

drivers who drive in between lanes add even more chaos, as they create disorganized roads where safe and easy lane changes are quite infrequent. Distracted driving, including the use of cell phones and the consumption of food and drink, is also widespread. (Fortunately, because Saudi law bans the consumption of alcohol, drink driving is extremely rare.) Speeding, unsurprisingly, is extremely common. Taking a taxi or rideshare does not guarantee a safer ride; although many taxi and rideshare drivers engage in better driving practices while paying customers are in the car, some continue to drive as aggressively, distractedly, and recklessly as everyone else on the road. Fortunately, the Saudi government seems to be taking action to combat dangerous driving. Cameras that capture unsafe driving practices such as speeding and distracted driving have been installed all throughout the country. Drivers who are caught driving dangerously can face hefty fines. From what I heard, police enforcement of driving laws, which had previously been lacking, has steadily become more common. Hopefully, the enforcement of traffic laws will improve in the coming years, creating better driving habits and safer roads.

There are currently very few alternatives to driving in Saudi Arabia. The cities are impossible to traverse by foot or bike: they are extremely spread out, crisscrossed with highways, and almost entirely devoid of bike lanes and sidewalks. Plus, the oppressive heat often makes walking or biking quite uncomfortable. Public transportation is also lacking, as buses only service certain areas. All these factors make it difficult for one to travel around the country without renting a car or using a ride-share service. However, the Saudi government is working on expanding its public transit system, through the introduction of a train network in Riyadh and increased bus service throughout the country. This effort will hopefully make the roads less congested and less dangerous.

Due to a complicated system of roads and poor driving habits, the roads of Saudi Arabia can feel hectic and anxiety-inducing. I would suggest that anyone visiting Saudi Arabia find a trusted driver who they know will drive safely on the roads, and if renting a car, drive on simple routes and always stay alert. Even though the current state of Saudi road safety is subpar, I am optimistic about its future. Much of the country is undergoing massive reforms and improvements, and I hope that the efforts to improve Saudi road safety will yield positive results in the coming years.

### Taiwan:

Almost everything about Taiwan feels safer, more organized, and more manageable than the United States. However, its roads are surprisingly more hectic and dangerous than expected. Drivers tend to be aggressive, putting other vehicles and pedestrians at risk. The bulk of the disorganization seems to arise from the abundance of motorized scooters that crowd streets and alleyways throughout the country. Although Taiwan has excellent public transportation, scooters are an extremely popular mode of transportation due to their relatively low cost, small size, and ability to traverse windy roads in Taiwan's mountainous regions. The scooters themselves seem quite unsafe to drive — they share the roads with cars, trucks, and other scooters, creating many opportunities for crashes. Scooters are less stable and less protected than the other vehicles on the road, leaving drivers more exposed to injury. I witnessed a scooter driver getting thrown off his vehicle after attempting a routine left turn in slightly wet

driving conditions; luckily, the driver only sustained minor injuries, but the event was jarring nonetheless and testified to the potential dangers that the scooters present.

Pedestrians also face increased risks due to the high number of scooters. Several cities in Taiwan have small alleyways that branch out from bigger roads — pedestrians walking on sidewalks often have to cross over the openings of these alleyways, usually with very little visibility and a high potential for a scooter to emerge quickly. Pedestrians must constantly remain vigilant while walking. It is extremely important to look around for scooters and to wait for crossing signals at intersections. Overall, however, walking in Taiwan is quite manageable. There are sidewalks throughout most major cities, and even though summers can be quite hot, many sidewalks are entirely covered by the exteriors of buildings, providing both relief from the sun and extra separation from the road. Crosswalks are common and clearly demarcated. Rainfall can make certain sidewalks quite slick — I almost fell a few times — so walking slowly is a must. Pedestrians also always have easy access to public transportation. Buses run all throughout the country, and the Taipei subway system is an extremely comfortable and convenient experience. Throughout six weeks in Taiwan, I never entered a taxi because there was always a subway or bus stop nearby.

Biking is generally a convenient option in Taiwan, though a lack of consistent bike lanes can frequently make it unsafe. Taiwan's U-Bike service has bicycle pick-up/drop-off racks throughout major cities, and users can rent bikes at an extremely low cost. Though renting a bike is easy and cheap, riding it safely can be difficult. Major roads frequently have separate bike lanes, but on most other roads bikers must share the road with cars and scooters, making for a stressful experience. When there is no bike lane on the road, some bikers choose to bike on the sidewalk; however, this tactic can endanger pedestrians who are not expecting to look out for bikers. If choosing to bike in Taiwan, it is best to choose roads with bike paths or take advantage of the beautiful riverside bike paths in Taipei.

Above all, navigating roads safely in Taiwan requires both drivers and pedestrians to pay close attention to their surroundings and follow the rules of the road. The roads can often be chaotic, but remaining aware will help you stay safe.