It's difficult to avoid auto racing in France

LIVING ABROAD

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I once thought soccer or cyling would be labeled as the national pasttime of France, much like football is the "American pasttime." Not that every American is a football fan, but it's typically considered the "All-American sport." Similarly, I believed that either soccer or cycling would be the French passion, but once again I was wrong.

I've discovered that the national pasttime here is auto racing, and it's not just limited to the circuit or Formula I races. Rather, it is an everyday activity, practiced *by everyone in France — young* and old, on every street, auto route and alleyway in the country.

Whether on motorcycle, in a car, or behind the wheel of a semi-truck, everyone here thinks they are Alain Prost (the French Mario Andretti) or at least one of his distant relatives. And every narrow, winding, tree-lined, city or rural street becomes a race track on which the object of the course is to outspeed, outmaneuver and intimidate every other driver on the road while slamming on your brakes at the ultimate last second to avoid collisions with trees, building, pedestrians, cyclists and other vehicles.

At first I was falsely led to believe that it only seemed like the French were reckless drivers. After all, the cars here are smaller — the Ford Festiva being an averaged sized car — and the roads are narrower and curve continuously through the mountains, fields, and villages that fill the French countryside. These factors may make the speed of the car seem greater than it actually is.

And speeding is not a new concept for me. I've been on the 696 freeway doing 70 miles per hour (my Tempo starts to shake uncontrollably after 70 miles per hour) and have been passed by a blur I take to be another car. Nevertheless, the 696 is a freeway without intersections, cyclists or 90 degree turns appearing from nowhere like French roads. Thus, traveling at-a-speed equivalent to a car on the 696 here is a suicide mission. Yet this does not seem to stop the French motorist from attempting to break the sound barrier in between towns.

The French government acknowledges that reckless driving is a problem and has taken steps to decrease it on the roads. Actions such as improving the auto routes, setting speed limits, enforcing seatbelt laws and passing stricter drinking and driving laws have markedly decreased the annual number of accidents on the road. According to Quid, a statistical book published yearly in France, in 1991 there were 148,890 car accidents in which people were injured, which is roughly half the number of such accidents in 1972. Thus the changes are working. Yet speed is still the major cause of accidents in France and despite efforts to curb it, it is still a problem.

As of yet, I am unable to determine the role of the police in the scheme to curb speeding. There are plenty of them on the roads now because it is summer vacation nationwide which means an increase in the number of people and accidents on the roads. Their intention, however, doesn't seem to be to catch speeders because they're not hiding, like the Southfield police do on the side streets along Beech road.

Rather, they're standing on street corners or along the road, checking to make sure people are wearing their seatbelts. Here, when someone yells "flic!" (cop), it's not to warn the driver to slow down, but to start everyone in the car scrambling to fasten their seatbelts. Slowing down is not a problem since there is generally a traffic jam in front of the stationed police as a result of seatbelt alerts. Thus, the police never see anyone speeding. And I guess if they don't see the person getting his or her car air-borne off the speed bumps in town, it isn't a problem.

After having had my first driving lesson, I have a new respect for the maneuvers of which French drivers are capable. I, myself, am still trying to master the manual changing of gears — something I should have learned while in the states. Receiving driving instructions in French only complicates matters, especially when I confuse the words for brake, accelerator and clutch. Despite my incompetency, French drivers are phased by nothing. They can change gears, weave in and out of traffic and swerve around cars parked in the street while calmly illuminating a cigarette.

Karen Martinek was born and raised in Southfield and graduated from Marian High School in Bloomfield Township. She is working as a nanny for a year in the south of France and writes an occasional column comparing life there with our suburbs.

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