

# THE OUTSIDE EDGE

By: George Tranos



## SAFE SPEED.....

**S**o what is a safe speed? For safety of ships at sea, the navigation rules define a safe speed as one in which the vessel "can take proper and effective action to avoid collision and be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions." How does this equate to speed on the road?

Most traffic engineers believe that speed limits should be posted to reflect the maximum speed considered to be safe and reasonable by the majority of drivers using the roadway under favorable conditions. Generally, this means that speed limits should be set according to the 85th percentile of traffic speeds (or the speed at which 85 percent of people are driving).

So why are speed limits sometimes not the same as a safe speed that can be driven on a particular road? It's a good question and one that may not be answered so readily. In Germany, there is no speed limit on a portion of the Autobahn. Drivers there will travel at speeds they consider appropriate for road conditions. In general, drivers will move to the right and allow faster cars to pass on the left. Passing on the right is strictly forbidden and cars don't dawdle in the "fast" lane. While there are limits near urban areas and construction zones, on many portions of the highways the speed is unlimited. Does this lead to more accidents? Having ridden there recently, I can attest that most drivers have good lane discipline. Unlike the United States, drivers and riders alike will almost always move to the right. This allows travelers to choose their speed according to what they feel is reasonable and prudent at any given time. Crashes on the main arterial roads are extremely rare in Europe and are normally caused by inclement weather or poor judgment.

Statistically, you are more likely to be involved in a crash on a local road, typically at an intersection within 20 miles of your home. In most cases, the speed at the time of the crash is less than 30 miles-per-hour. Limited access highways are safer because everyone should be moving in the same direction at similar speeds.

It is the speed differential and lack of lane discipline that creates the majority of problems. Speed limits that are set artificially too low create larger differences in speeds and also turn the vast majority of road users into lawbreakers. If the speed limit is less than what most people are driving then it is hard to tell the normal drivers from the more serious offenders.

The flaw in the logic of setting the speed limit artificially low is it assumes most drivers would drive faster if the speed limit were raised. Most drivers would drive what they feel to be a safe speed on that road regardless of what the actual speed limit is. This is confirmed by my ride in Germany where most traffic flowed between 120 and 150 kilometers-per-hour (between 74 and 92 m.p.h.) on the straight-aways in areas with unlimited speeds. This is similar to the traffic speeds during good conditions in the western U.S. on long, boring straight roads. It is left up to the driver to decide what they consider to be a sensible speed.

Our roads today are considered safer than ever before. The national fatality rate (the number of deaths per vehicle mile traveled) is now the lowest on record. Yet municipalities continue to reduce speed limits to artificially low numbers. Obviously, revenue collection is a factor as traffic fines can bring in substantial amounts of revenue. However, there must be more at work here, as the thinking behind the lower limits must be dictated by other factors. While it is true that choosing too high a speed in a curve can lead to running off the road or into oncoming traffic, the prudent motorcyclist selects the proper entry speed for any given turn and then maintains or increases throttle through the turn. Your ability to select the proper speed when cornering is similar to the boat captain's proficiently deciding on the right cruising speed for their visibility, wind and wave conditions.

If more motorists simply obeyed the rules of the road, like seaman should follow the navigation rules, then fewer crashes would occur. Selecting the proper speed and keeping a good lookout are as important when piloting a motorcycle or car as they are when captaining a ship. Drive sensibly and look where you're going - what ever happened to that being the primary task when in your car or on your bike?

More lives would be saved if those whose business it is to be driving would pay more attention to the task at hand than to the other far more common distractions available to them today. Additional injuries would be prevented if people would refrain from driving when drinking, taking mind-altering substances or when drowsy. Maybe then we could be talking about raising the speed limits for those who are truly capable of traveling at the speeds for which our roads were designed.

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