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In the majority of countries around the world, a driver does not have to go too far before seeing a sign indicating the speed limit. These signs indicate the maximum speed at which the legislative bodies governing a certain area have determined that a vehicle can legally travel on a particular roadway. It is worth noting that in some instances, the speed limit may define the minimum speed at which a vehicle must travel.

The History of the Speed Limit

The very first legislative act to determine a speed limit occurred in 1865 in the UK with what was called the Locomotive Acts. This Act set the first speed limit, which at first was 10 mph, but later lowered to 4 mph for countryside traveling and 2 mph when traveling through towns. The first speeding ticket believed to be issued was in 1896 when Walter Arnold got caught doing 8 mph. Later that year, the speed limit was raised to 14 mph.

Regulations Governing Speed

In most countries, whether the roads are marked or unmarked, drivers are expected to travel at speeds that are safe for the road and weather conditions. This is often called the “basic rule” in the US, but in other countries it is known as the “reasonable man” requirement. This rule applies to the need to lower the speed of a vehicle to account for rain, snow, ice, fog, gravel and other potential issues that may make travel dangerous at the speed assigned to the roadway.

The US and the UK are the only countries that define speed in miles per hour. All other countries use kilometers per hour to define speed. Regardless, nearly all countries have assigned a legal speed limit maximum to any public roads. In many instances, the speed limit signs may show both the maximum and minimum speeds at which vehicles can travel legally. Some roads may indicate only the minimum speed limit, as these roads may pose a danger to motorists traveling at a slower pace.

Variable Speed Limits

The first variable speed limits began in 1965 in Germany on the A8. Video technology was used to monitor traffic and control the signs. As technology evolved, the methods used to monitor and control traffic did as well. Today, there are several variable speed limit highways, most of which utilize the variable speed limit to reduce the incidence of accidents on stretches of roadway that are commonly affected by adverse weather conditions.

No Speed Limit Roadways

Although roadways with no speed limit do exist, it is expected that motorists will always assume that the basic rule is in place. To reiterate, this rule deems that speed should not exceed that which may pose a danger to the driver, passengers, pedestrians, other motorists or property. In many states, a maximum speed exists to accompany the basic rule. Montana, for instance, deemed a 75 mph maximum on any unmarked rural freeways.

Speed Limit Enforcement

The enforcement of speed limits is handled by authorities around the world. Today, aside from law

enforcement, we also have cameras that record the speed at which motorists are traveling. These cameras are able to send information on speeders directly to the authorities, who will issue tickets by mail.

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