



Which colours and options do the Germans choose?

Germans, and the British, seem to prefer their Audis in silver.

If you were asked to describe the colour preferences of a typical German Audi driver what would you say? Silver? Or maybe black? Aah, stereotypes! I love to shatter them — but in this case I can't. The imagination of over 50 per cent of Audi drivers doesn't stretch beyond these two favourites. "It makes you wonder why we bother with a paint shop," shrugged one Audi source.

But it's not just an Audi thing. I visited the Mercedes S and E Class assembly line in Sindelfingen recently and such was the preponderance of monochrome I wondered if someone had switched the colour off.

According to Audi UK, silver is also the preferred choice for the TT on the British market — surprise, surprise — because it's so typically German, but second place goes not to black, but to the altogether more cheerful denim blue.

But even if our German friends lack variety in their choice of vehicle colour (hell, every taxi in the country has to be beige), they get to exercise their selection skills when it comes to options. You won't find option packages such as SE and Sport to ease the decision-making between leather seats or a sunroof. Oh no, they get simply a standard model, and a list — pick your own, mein Freund!

The standard package is a little more basic than on our shores. For example, A4 drivers in the UK get the Chorus stereo installation as standard, with associated rear screen aerial and more loudspeakers than you can shake a stick at. The carpet mats and anti-theft device are another two things that must be specified by German buyers — which almost all of them do anyway. As for favourite options, owners of TTs, allroads and A8s just love the smell of leather, and hands-free packages have enjoyed a boom in popularity recently, now that Germany has finally outlawed conventional use of mobile phones whilst driving.

As you might expect they are a pretty law-abiding bunch here. Crime rates are low, nobody drops litter and almost everybody adheres to speed limits, of which there are many more than you might think.

German motorways are actually more

regulated than any other road system in the world. On British motorways you can, in theory, get on to the M74 at Glasgow and maintain a steady 70mph all the way to London. Not so here! On one stretch between Munich and Ingolstadt the speed limit changes from 80km/h to 120, then unlimited (but 120 in the wet and between the hours of 22:00 and 06:00) then back to unlimited for a few kilometres, then 120 and 80 in the wet (cause of a sharp bend), then one last chance to blast as fast as you can before it changes to 120 again because the normally ultra-smooth road has a few ripples.

Germany's high traffic density can also be restrictive. But at 1.05 million km driven per km of road, it lags behind the UK, which tallies a teeth-grinding 1.25 million km/km — the highest in Europe. Despite the UK's high traffic density, it has the world's best motorway casualty rate of 2.5/million km, although, at 4/million km, Germany's rate is considerably better than some of its other European neighbours.

Figures estimate that only around 55 per cent (some 6,000km) of Germany's autobahns are unlimited. On top of that, limits can be imposed or changed at random via overhead gantry signs. And they are often cunningly equipped with speed traps. Being on your toes is the name of the speed game in Germany.

And on the topic of speed traps, they're a bit different too — they get you from the front with a red light, meaning they can see who was at the wheel (not that I have personal experience of this, you understand).

Confiscating driving licences is another popular pastime for the authorities. Not just for speeding offences either; it can result from repeated parking offences or simply being too late paying a ticket, as experienced by a friend of mine recently. She had to attend a driving course for "naughty boys and girls".

My one brush with the German law wasn't as severe. In the early hours of the morning, following a street party in a town in the former East Germany, I was behind the wheel of a fully loaded A3 180bhp while him indoors sat inebriated beside me. It took me a few moments to register that the man clad in beige in the middle of the road waving a red light was a police officer and not a leftover from the festivities. "Alcohol check," he said, smiling cheerfully.

After wrestling with my old-style British driving licence, the conversation went something like this:

"But there's no photo on it."

"It's British, I'm afraid."

"Oh, do you have your passport?"

More rustling of paper and peering at my face. "Did you drink any alcohol tonight?"

"No."

"That's fine, have a good journey Miss Catton."

ELAINE CATTON

