

# Driving in Utah/USA

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If you are moving to the United States for your higher studies, the odds of you driving here at some point in the next three years are very high.

Town planning in the USA has been centered on the assumption that every household owns at least one car. This makes life difficult for students like us who come here on a tight budget. Fortunately, for us at Salt Lake City, we have the necessary conveniences around where we live and manageable even without a car. The public transport here is quite reliable and can easily help you to get to the **U** and back, without any problem on most days (unless you get stuck until midnight in your lab). The city is quite safe that you could walk back home even if you miss the last *Trax* at 23h30.

However, you would need to be driving in the very near future once you land here. May be your internship/job could be in a suburban town with no/unreliable public transport. May be you want to travel around Utah and beyond (Vegas ☺). May be you need to move between apartments and need a truck. May be your cousin travels to SLC to see you and you might want him to take skiing in Park city. From what I have witnessed here, being able to drive can be a boon in certain situations and hence would be highly recommend.

This article is split into two different sections. The first one talks about driving in the USA and the second section talks about how to obtain a Drivers license here in Utah.

## • Driving

It might be natural for people to assume that adapting to the driving etiquette of USA would be difficult and takes a lot of time even if someone is an experienced driver from India. Well, this is not always true.

Quite a good number of students who move to the USA pickup the driving etiquette in a modest amount of time. Family/Friends/Seniors help you in adapting quickly. Sometimes, just by watching how the traffic moves around itself teaches you a lot if you pay close attention. As most cars have automatic transmission, it makes life more easier for a newbie driver. You just have to understand the discipline and adapt. If you are an experienced driver, it shouldn't be difficult.

*If you are an experienced driver*, this change wouldn't take too long. You would have to just pay close attention to driving etiquette and should be good to start driving after may be a week(or, even days) of effort. One day trip to *Zions* was all it took me to understand most of the driving discipline and manners that are needed to blend into the traffic. After watching my seniors drive on that day, I was confident enough to rent out a car for few hours and start driving. You *wouldn't* need to unlearn anything.

*If you don't know driving*, it might be a good idea to start picking up the basic while you are in India and come here with some driving skills. Starting from

scratch in the USA might be challenging and might involve some costs too. The next section explains why.

If incase you are curious on how rentals work, you could rent out cars on hourly basis ([Enterprise Car Share](#)) or daily basis ([Enterprise](#) and others...). It is always advisable to be fully protected with both Liability and Damage waiver until you get your own car insurance (or credit card, in some cases).

Most rental companies charge an underage fee (\$10 to \$20 per underage driver, per day) if any of the drivers is under 25 years of age.

**Utah Drivers Handbook** : [click here](#)

You would have to read this and give an exam if you come here without an Indian drivers license. More on this later.

## • Drivers License

It is always advisable that a person carries a government issued ID card irrespective of the place they are in. You might have followed this rule of thumb by carrying around your License back home in India (or, anywhere for that matter). Well the same rule applies here. However, your Indian Drivers License is not accepted if you want to prove your age and surely not your address. A Passport is what you would be left to carry around most often.

Imagine you are hiking in one of the five national parks here and you've carried along your Passport to prove your identity. You wouldn't want to be stuck in a situation where the rain or snow might cause any water damage to your passport. A passport is a delicate document and it better be in a safe place. This is where having a State-ID/State Drivers License would help.

A **State-ID** is a driver license sized document which can be obtained from the Utah Drivers License Department. This document would prove your age and current address and is sufficient in most situations.

A **Drivers License**, as expected, a document that proves your age, address and that you are legally permitted to drive a certain class of vehicles.

Another perk of obtaining a drivers license as early as possible would be that you would have a much longer driving history. This is of importance as your car insurance would be cheaper if you have a longer (and, of course *clean*) history. Suppose, you plan on taking a car three years after moving to the US. It would be much cheaper if you show a clean driving history for over 2 years rather than showing a history of 6 months or less. Just by getting your license in the first 6 months (and even by not driving at all in your college life) could potentially save your hundred's of \$ later.

## How to obtain a State-ID/DL ?

Both of these need to be applied at the *Utah Driver License Division's* office.

### State ID

A State ID can be applied once you have at least two address proofs of your current address, in Salt Lake City. After around one/two months, you would have received at least a couple of utility bills or bank statements which do serve

as your address proofs. Your lease agreement could also serve as your address proof. Your passport proves your age. Once you have all the documents ready, you can complete the paperwork within an hour or two at the DLD office and your card should be delivered to your home in a couple of weeks.

The fee for obtaining a State-ID is \$25.

### **Driver License**

As you would expect the process to apply for a drivers license needs much more effort. The DL requires all the documents stated above for a state-ID and more. I would again subdivide this section into two parts as the process is a tad bit different if you already posses an Indian Drivers License or not.

### **If you already have an Indian Drivers License :**

Your Indian Drivers License is sufficient to prove that you have already gone thru the process to learning how to drive and your Utah DL could be processed after a fairly simple open book exam and a driving test.

You will have to take an open book written exam on the rules and etiquette of driving in Utah. You can refer to the **Utah Drivers Handbook** (linked above) for complete details and rules. This is a fairly simple test as you can always refer to the book and then answer every question. You would have enough time during the test that you could search for the answer of each question. You need at least 80% to pass this test.

The fee for initiate (and possibly complete) the process is \$25. You are allowed up to 3 chances to re-attempt the written and driving test each.

After clearing the test, you will have to take a driving test. You could take this test in two ways. One way would be to get tested by DLD and the other alternative is to get tested by a private third party testers. The prices vary for each case.

I would suggest getting this done by a third party tester as you wouldn't have to rent a car by yourself and the time consumed for the whole process would be shorter too. The third party testers would charge you anywhere between \$30 to \$45. However, you save by not renting a car. You could get the whole process done in a single day and peacefully await the delivery of your DL.

On the other hand, you can get the driving test at the DLD with an official tester. The DLD (or tester) do not charge anything in this case. However, you would need to take a car to perform the test one. The testing car should have insurance and must be fully covered, in case of any accident. The cost for renting a car with full insurance cover is around \$40 - \$80. Unless you have a group of people who can take the test on the same day, this option is usually expensive. Not many Indian students at the U own cars. So, the possibility of asking a senior to lend his car is quite slim too. This process usually takes around 30 to 45 days as the latest available appointment for a driving test at DLD is usually around 4 weeks.

### If you do *NOT* have an Indian Drivers License :

Well, this process takes a bit more effort and would most certainly involve some more costs too.

Firstly, you would have to undergo the whole process of learning to drive from scratch. If you are 19 years or older, you do not need a formal certificate of Driver education. However, finding a friend/senior who is capable of teaching you to drive from the very basics is highly unlikely. You could find a Driving school to help you in this process, but at an expense. We are talking around \$500 or more in driving school fees.

If you are 18 years of age or younger (we do have some Indian undergrads here), then you **MUST** undergo a formal Drivers education. This will involve being trained and certified by a driving school and is usually is very rigorous and expensive excesses. As stated above, the fee would be several hundreds of dollars. The drivers education process usually happens in two steps. You'll be provided classroom training for a certain period of time. You will have to clear this process to start practicing on the road, along with an instructor. Based on your practice and ability to drive, eventually, you'd be offered the drivers education completion certificate.

After you have undergone some informal friendly training or formal driving school training, you will have the follow steps similar to what has been stated in the previous section to get your drivers license.

You will have to take a **closed book** written exam on the rules and etiquette of driving in Utah. You can refer to the **Utah Drivers Handbook** (linked above) all the necessary information. As it would be a closed book test for you, you would have to put in a lot of effort into preparation. You would have to score over 80% to pass the test.

The fee for initiate (and possibly complete) the process is \$25. You are allowed up to 3 chances to re-attempt the written and driving test each.

After clearing the written test, you will have to take a driving test. However, you might not have the possibility to take this test at a third party tester. Most likely you need to give your driving test at the DLD. This would mean, you would have to request a friend/senior to rent a car and come along on the day of test. As quoted earlier, the cost of renting a car is anywhere between \$40 to \$80.

The beauty of already possessing an Indian Drivers License is that it serves as a proof that you have undergone all the rigorous training back home. It would make your written exam much more easier. Not to mention, paying a driving school in India is much cheaper that paying for their counterparts in the USA. So, it is definitely advisable that you learn the basics of driving a four wheeler and obtain your Indian Drivers License before coming to the US.

Another reason in favour of undergoing the learning process in India is that you will be taught driving on a *Manual transmission* car. You wouldn't be taught driving with a manual transmission in the USA, unless you pay even more \$. This might not be major concern, but, the chances are that you end up being

able to drive only *automatics* might turn out to be a handicap at a later point of time (If you move back to India or elsewhere).

### • Other Frequently Asked Questions

– **Do I need to obtain an International drivers permit along with my Drivers License from RTA?**

Mostly, No. The international drivers permit is a document to establish that you hold a valid license and tells the foreign authorities that the person mentioned in the document is capable of driving. It is pointless unless your Driving License is in a regional language (Which is very rare these days). The DL itself is enough (at least for Utah). We have rented cars several dozen times on Indian Licenses and haven't ever been asked for the permit.

– **Motorcycle licenses ?**

Well, it involves quite a bit more rigorous testing procedure and a much more detailed exam. It is very rare that students own bikes here, so you might have to figure out the rules yourself after coming here.

– **What types of cars can I rent ?**

As long as you are over 21 years and are willing to pay the money (I'm talking around a \$80 - \$200 per day) You can rent anything from a small hatchback, to a Chevy Camaro or a Ford Mustang or a luxurious Cadillac or even a Dodge 2500 truck (Your heart will skip a few beats when you see its fuel economy meter. This bad boy gives less than 4 kmpl. No kidding! ☺).

If you are under 21 years of age, you might not have access to bigger cars. These rules are different for each state and each rental agency.

*PS: All the cost figures stated in this document are best to my knowledge as of date, but might have changed since. They are presented here just to give you an estimate.*

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