

# GET PRACTICAL...

with Deputy Editor Rachel Stothert



Happy New Year everyone. Welcome to 2011!

I'm already looking forward to next season and the surprises it will bring. I've been busy scheduling practical features for the months

to come, and we have some real crackers...

But do remember we always welcome DIY articles of all types and magnitudes. Are you currently planning a project? Then consider keeping a record of your work with pictures and words, to let others know about what you have done, whether its installing an accessory, renovating your current 'van, or building a brand-new motorhome from scratch.

Let others be inspired or learn from your experiences. Write or e-mail at the usual addresses.

Want some ideas? Then turn to the Interchange pages, where our 'experts' and regular readers offer up invaluable advice and answers to common – and not so common – questions each and every month, plus there's our pick of useful tips.

This could be anything from water in the shower tray to Volkswagen LT braking. Why not have a read and see if you can offer any further advice to this month's issues?

Other topics in Matters this month include the, sometimes thorny, issue of retrofitted rising roofs and high tops for panel van conversions: John Wickersham explores the correct installation process for a rising roof...

Or how about exploring the process of choosing and fitting a solar panel? Michael Thomas investigates whether a fixed panel or a freestanding one will function best.

I hope you all had a good Christmas, whether you were away in the 'van or at home with family and friends...

Rachel Stothert

Just some of the things you get from the IAM on a Skills for Life course, from left to right: the certificate to prove I passed, a copy of the examiners form, the handbook for studying from, a booklet of member discounts, windscreen sticker and the membership card

## MOTORHOME DRIVER

I've always thought that the UK's approach to driving licences and tests is almost wholly inadequate. Especially after the first time I drove on a motorway having passed my test only a few weeks before and had no training whatsoever. It was scary for me, and probably for the other drivers around me.

Ten years have now passed, and in the course of my job I've been behind the wheel of a lot of cars, towed caravans and driven a fair few motorhomes around the UK and in Europe. So I should be fairly confident, shouldn't I?

Well yes, and no. I've always had a nagging worry that my driving is a little erratic. Couple that with the statements of horror from friends and family when I suggest that I drive, and I'm almost sure the examiner was mad to give me a licence all those years ago.

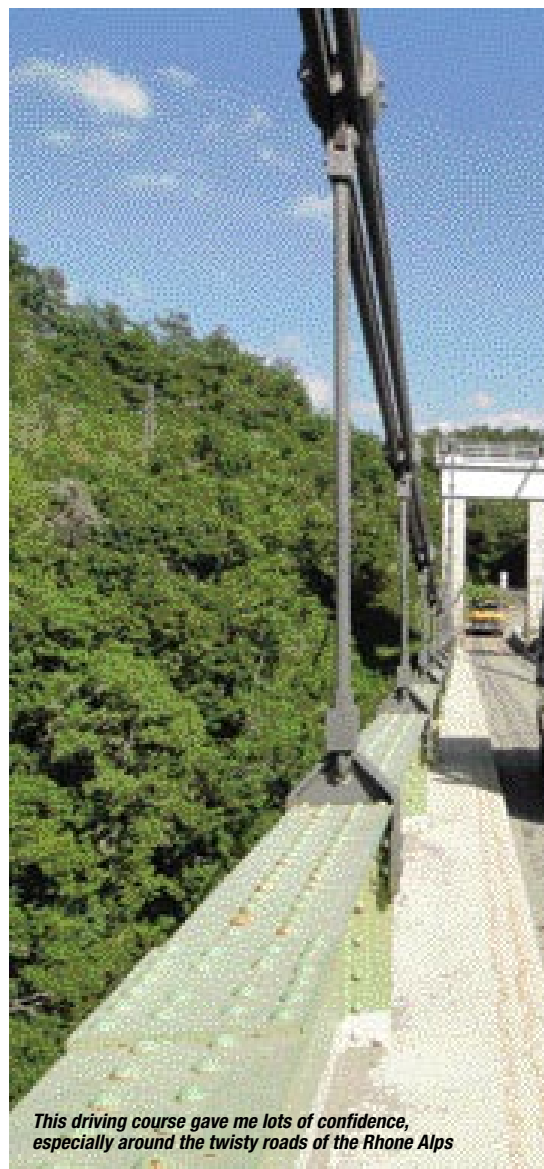
But what to do about it?

Well there's one clear course of action and that comes in the form of a driving course from the Institute of Advanced Motorists. This charitable organisation is at the forefront of road safety in the UK, promoting better driving standards.

The Skills for Life programme has been designed to offer all drivers better techniques for a safer, smoother drive. So what does this have to do with motorhomes? Well quite a lot actually.

Driving more smoothly in any vehicle can instantly ameliorate the rigour of driving for long distances, and smooth driving accounts for a lot of the IAM course.

This stems from police driving manuals, whilst being tailored to forward planning observation and simple driving techniques. Unfortunately, there are no dramatic high-speed chases involved.



This driving course gave me lots of confidence, especially around the twisty roads of the Rhone Alps

With all this in mind, I decided to do the course in the long-term test Autocruise Jazz, in order to find out if I could become a better motorhome driver.

## WHAT'S INVOLVED?

Get in touch with the IAM and book yourself on the course. Once you're all signed up you can contact your nearest IAM group to start your training. Find a list on the web site.

My branch was to be Peterborough and District. The initial contact was with Leon King the secretary, who rang me to explain a little of the process. This was then quickly followed up by a call from the training co-ordinator Sandy Reid who talked me through the initial process, and matched me up with an observer.

There are no 'instructors' with this course. You are assigned a volunteer observer, who will simply ride along with you and make suggestions.





control and gear changes. I'd also have to say that the Jazz certainly appreciated my efforts, making less rattles and improving fuel consumption over the last few months.

### WHY DO THIS?

As well as the aim to be a better driver, the IAM is a hefty organisation, which arranges discounts on various products for its full members. Saving money on things like insurance, etc, can maximise the enjoyment of your 'van.

And then there's the social aspect. While I was doing the course, my IAM branch organised various events for members. The treasure hunt around the local villages was a hoot, and you can experience talks and discounts on driving days. I certainly didn't expect all this.

### AND THE DETAILS...

The IAM web site is packed full of information, featuring the standard Skills for Life programme, as well as a whole load of other courses covering older and younger drivers, cyclists, motorcyclists and scooter riders. 'Skills for Life' costs just £139, and includes an advice-filled manual, the test and a membership card. There are no other costs associated with this course.

### THANKS TO...

... all at the IAM for allowing me to do this course, as well as the gang in the Peterborough and District Group, to Prue for all that valuable coaching, and to everyone else for making me feel so welcome. And special thanks to Kris Scaddon, the examiner who gave me the happy news!

### CONTACT

The Institute of Advanced Motorists,  
IAM House, 510 Chiswick High Road,  
London W4 5RG  
Tel: 020-8996 9646  
Web: [www.iam.org.uk](http://www.iam.org.uk)

Prue Lester was assigned to me: or should that be the other way round.

Although all parties had tried to reassure me otherwise, the first lesson felt like I was learning to drive again. The trick is to be frank and honest about your abilities. One of my real problems has always been using the clutch. Being a Stothert – basically guaranteeing a lack of coordination – the operation of both feet together as well as steering, indicating and changing gears has always been a little laboured.

And this is where I found revelation number one. Don't try and do everything at once.

Gear change, braking and steering should be separate actions. The trick is to brake, change gear and then steer. Sounds simple doesn't it.

It may sound that way, but changing the driving habits of a lifetime is the real challenge.

Once I'd developed a basic grasp of that principle we looked at the steering next. I actually never thought there was anything wrong with this aspect of my driving, but it turned out this was another area that needed work.

My steering wheel hold was a few hours out. It should have been quarter to three, but it was more like five past seven. The importance of this was not clear until I started to adjust my hold on the steering wheel and suddenly

found that I had more control.

And then there was the push-me-pull-me steering method. The first few times out in the motorhome trying to implement this was tricky, but after a few weeks, this too started to become normal practice.

It was only after this point that we talked about clutch control and gear changing...

That's what I like about this course. It is obviously tailored to individual needs, but it also makes no attempt to change everything all at once. New techniques are introduced week by week, allowing you to get the hang of one before you move onto the next.

There is of course, a sort of a test at the end of this process, but that is about as official as it gets. Simply meet up with the examiner and drive round for an hour or so. It's that easy. But yes, it felt like a proper test and I now understand why they never let you drive home after passing your test for the very first time. All that adrenalin... I went shopping and my credit card took the brunt of it, until I'd calmed down enough to motor home in the Jazz.

I passed. Hooray! And I am now a full member of the Institute of Advanced Motorists. I'm certainly not saying I'm a perfect driver, but I have a better understanding of how I can be a safer driver. I just have to work on my observation and getting the perfect clutch

*Taking on board all the tips and techniques, my driving in the long term test Autocruise Jazz became much smoother*

