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Listening to the BBC

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I'm in Denmark listening to the BBC on the short wave this evening and one of my favorite programs is on. It's called "Driving Tests Around the World." Each Sunday evening the BBC British reporter travels to another city in the world and practices driving with a local then takes the driving test from the police that is given to local people in order to get their licenses. Last week he was in Delhi, India. The week before he was in Beijing, China. I like this program because it gives you the sounds of the cities and some pretty funny driving experiences.

This week he is driving in Kabul Afghanistan. He is yelling into the microphone because it is so noisy there. Since the overthrow of the Taliban, there has been a dramatic upsurge in car ownership in Kabul. We can hardly hear him over the din of cars, people, and animals. He finds a driving school and takes a lesson with the owner in the car set up for teaching people to drive. The traffic is so loud and busy that he has trouble entering the driving surge. The driving instructor often applies his auxiliary break to avoid disasters and the BBC reporter is trying to describe his route with cars cutting in front and coming at him from the front. He passes a young boy with a chicken in a plastic bag. A live chicken with its head sticking out of the bag. He sees trucks with entire carcasses of animals bouncing around in the back, full of dust and dirt. He enters a traffic circle and describes the many Afghan rugs lying in the street so the cars run over them to give them an aged appearance. His instructor helps him navigate the circle successfully. When he stops he is breathing heavily and a bit giddy to have survived.

Others describe the new road to Kandohar which was paved by the US forces. How a trip that used to take 16 hours now takes 6, resulting in hundreds of busses and thousands of cars speeding carelessly along. If a bus stops along the way, it is not unusual for a car to plow right into it, killing some people. The Afghans telling this story complain that the Americans made the road too narrow and there is no place to pull off, so there are many deaths from accidents.

The driving instructor said that most of the drivers are men and almost no one has a driver's license. They drive completely by instinct, from their war experiences, he says. A majority of people who do take driving class fail the driving test and do not get a license. However, out of 75 women who took lessons, 45 passed the driving test on their first try. At first women were harassed while driving but now, a woman says, no one pays any attention to who is driving, only to trying to stay alive on the road.

So the BBC reported now is dropped off at the police driving test area where there are 60 men standing waiting their turn at the test. The driving test consists entirely of a large circle which is outlined on the dirt with two narrow lines. Drivers are supposed to drive

backward completely around the circle at a quick pace using only the mirrors. If they go outside the lines, they fail.

The men before the reporter drive backward around the circle correctly and the other waiting men applaud and yell encouragement. Then it is the reporters turn.

He tries it once and fails. They give him another try. But he fails that as well. The police says he must go away for one week and practice, then come back and try again. The other men laugh and pat him on the back.

He signs off, "This is the BBC from Kabul Afghanistan."