

Americans don't like roundabouts, but they should



Light trails from traffic are seen as they pass around the Old Street roundabout in the area known as London's Tech City on Dec. 17, 2013. (Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg)

France is ahead of the curve.

The country is among the world's leaders in circular intersections, or roundabouts. Every 45th intersection in France is a roundabout, whereas the United States lags far behind with one per 1,118 intersections.

That's a real problem because researchers say roundabouts can save lives. According to [data](#) by the American Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, "roundabouts reduced injury crashes by 75 percent at intersections where stop signs or signals were previously used for traffic control." Apart from preventing cars from crashing into each other, roundabouts also saved the lives of countless pedestrians.

Why is that? The Washington State Department of Transportation [points](#) to several main reasons. First, curved intersections "eliminate" the possibility of deadly head-on collisions.

Second, the nature of roundabouts forces drivers to reduce their speeds as they approach them. And third, "because traffic is constantly flowing through the intersection, drivers don't have the incentive to speed up to try and 'beat the light,' like they might at a traditional intersection," the Washington State Department of Transportation writes on its [website](#).

Despite all that, the United States is vastly outperformed in the number of circular intersections compared with many European nations. Britain, for instance, has about 10 times as many roundabouts relative to the number of total intersections, according to an analysis by geospatial designer Damien Saunder that is based on data from 2014.

"I came across the idea because I'm an Australian living in (southern California) and after moving to the U.S. I rarely had to navigate any roundabouts," Saunder said in an email. "In Australia we have roundabouts everywhere."

What keeps Americans on a straight course regarding street intersections is most likely culture and experience. As Zachary Crockett, a writer at the data analyzing company Priceonomics, [explains](#), "the roughly 3,700 circular traffic intersections in the U.S. are feared, avoided, and even loathed, often without good reason."

"It seems that every time traffic engineers propose to build a new one, there is protest and uproar," Crockett writes.

Saunder noticed that the extent to which Americans dislike roundabouts also strongly depends on the region. "We are definitely seeing the U.S. adopt more roundabouts in areas of new development on the outskirts of larger cities like Phoenix, for example."

But even in roundabout-friendly states, the number just doesn't compare to many other nations.

In Britain, fans of the circular intersections have even founded an association called the U.K. Roundabout Appreciation Society. With a good dose of British humor, the group celebrates a variety of aspects — including the beauty of the intersections.

"Roads are often condemned as being scars on the landscape, but with the coming of the roundabout in all their glory, they counteract the road's unsightliness," the association's members say on their website. "With infinite variety, colour and creative-ness, these bitumen babes lift our sagging spirits on long tiresome trips."

It's a love that has yet to arrive in the United States.

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