

'Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.' — Albert Einstein

Coming around to roundabouts for safety and efficiency



If you've ever been driving anywhere in Europe, chances are you've been through a roundabout. However, in America, roundabouts have been somewhat slower to catch on. ABALCAZAR/GETTY IMAGES



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Guest columnist

If you've ever driven in Europe, chances are you've been through a roundabout. However, in America, roundabouts have been somewhat slower to catch on.

Although it seems roundabouts are a new form of design for the United States, the basic shape actually goes back to the 1790s, when architect and engineer Pierre L'Enfant proposed a number of circular intersections in Washington, D.C., including the famous Dupont Circle.

While some still argue over the actual creator of the roundabout, we do know American businessman William Eno (the creator of the stop sign and one-way street) revived the form in 1905 for New York City's Columbus Circle, widely considered the country's first circular intersection designed for the automobile era.

There are two main types of roundabouts: the large aforementioned traffic circles, and what many American cities are now installing, the modern roundabout, which is smaller.

Roundabouts are designed to make

intersections safer and more efficient for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists. According to the Federal Highway Administration, by converting from a signalized intersection to a roundabout, a location can experience a 78 percent reduction in severe (injury/fatal) crashes and a 48 percent reduction in overall crashes.

Single-lane roundabouts offer the following safety benefits and features for pedestrians:

- » Lower motor vehicle speeds and increased yielding behavior
- » Fewer conflict points
- » Shorter wait time and crossing distance than a signalized intersection
- » Simpler crossing due to splitter islands, which provide mid-crossing refuge and allow pedestrians to focus on traffic from one direction at a time.

The Federal Highway Administration also states roundabouts are the best choice for aging drivers. Older users are especially at risk at intersections. About 35 to 40% of pedestrian deaths among those age 65 or older occur at intersections. In addition, older drivers are about twice as likely to be killed while driving through an intersection than younger drivers.

In lieu of intersections, roundabouts provide:

- » Lower speeds — situation

changes more slowly and mistakes are less likely to be lethal

- » More time to react
- » No demand to accurately judge closing speeds of traffic
- » No wide visual scans needed
- » Uncomplicated situations; simple decision-making

When driving a roundabout, there are a few things to remember:

- » Slow down as you approach the roundabout, and watch for pedestrians and cyclists in addition to cars.
- » Continue toward the roundabout and look to your left as you near the yield sign.
- » Yield to traffic already in the roundabout.

» Once you see a gap in traffic, enter the circle and proceed to your exit.

» Look for pedestrians, use your turn signal before you exit (while not required, this makes it easier for all), and make sure to stay in your lane as you navigate the roundabout.

Like many new things, roundabouts may seem daunting at first. However, once you get the hang of it, you may just learn to love them.

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