



When I passed my driving test on the first attempt in 1991, I'm not sure who was more surprised – me, or my driving instructor. Back then, all a nervous learner like me had to understand about “green” was that it followed red and amber.

But today, the growing popularity of eco-driving is fuelling a rise in a new breed of “green” driving schools around the country. And the instructors at these schools claim their techniques are not only better for the environment, they're also better for your wallet.

Learners are expected to know the basics of eco-driving for their driving test, so most instructors offer some element of it. But green driving schools proactively push the eco element from day one, with students learning to drive in a low-emission way and often in a correspondingly low-emissions vehicle.

Instructor Lizzie Whyte has seen interest grow in eco-driving since she set up Really Green Driving in Buckinghamshire two years ago. She says youngsters are very aware of the environment and want to reduce their carbon footprint – as well as their motoring costs.

“Cars aren't going to go away, they're a fact of life, we need them in order to run our lives,” says Lizzie, 42.

“We do need to look after the planet though, and we can do that in various ways – green driving is one of them. I'm not going to change the world, I know that, but it's about educating the next generation and just making a little difference. And, of course, it saves money as well.”

In Dorset, Steve Moody has taken things one step further at his driving school, PASStures New. Every time a student passes their test, he has a tree planted for them.

“It may seem like a gimmick, but for people who care about the environment,

it does make a difference,” he says. “I teach my students how to drive in a fuel-efficient way in a fuel-efficient car. Everything is in line with the Driving Standards Agency (DSA), but I put a huge emphasis on green driving. It's all about safety with efficiency and if you can build that in at a very early stage, drivers should continue with it after they pass.”

But it's not just smaller driving schools – BSM has been doing a lot of work teaching learners and its own instructors about eco-driving. According to Robin Cummins, road safety consultant at BSM, the company is also expecting its first cars with stop-start technology, where the engine

'A few basic changes to driving habits can make a big difference'

switches itself off in congestion and at traffic lights to save fuel and reduce emissions.

Eco-driving refresher courses are also available around the country for those who have already passed their test (see panel, right).

Martin Wake, who runs Driving Works in Lincolnshire, believes taking a refresher course can save between 10 and 20 per cent on an average car's annual fuel bill.

“Interest in eco-safe driving is definitely growing. A few basic changes to driving habits, such as planning journeys, limiting gear changes and allowing the car to do most of the work, can make a big difference to fuel consumption,” he says.

Really Green Driving also runs refresher courses. And so it is that, one chilly morning, I find myself climbing behind the wheel for my first driving



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In the driving seat: Linda Harrison during her refresher with Really Green Driving's Lizzie Whyte; the iPod application that charts her progress. **Top right:** instructor and pupil talk tyre pressures

lesson in almost two decades. Lizzie teaches in a low-emission VW Polo BlueMotion, which can do up to 74mpg. Slightly different to the much-loved, but rather battered, Vauxhall Nova that sported my first L-plates.

Before we set off, I get a run-down on car maintenance. Tyre pressure should be checked once a week and any excess weight ditched (there is much head shaking from Lizzie when I confess to

Eco-driving schools near you

- Driving Works, Lincolnshire, www.drivingworks.co.uk
- Really Green Driving, Bucks, www.reallyreallygreen.com
- PASStures New, Dorset, www.passturesnew.co.uk
- Eco Driven, Bristol, www.eco-driven.co.uk
- Drive-Eco, Stockport and Manchester, www.drive-eco.com
- Drive Time, Cornwall, www.drivetimecornwall.co.uk
- Acclaim Driving, Northern Ireland, south Wales, parts of England, www.acclaimdriving.com
- Eco-Drive, Plymouth, www.eco-drive-school.co.uk
- Eco Driving College, London, www.ecodrivingcollege.com

using the boot of my trusty Peugeot to store my camping gear).

I also learn how to fill up smartly – not more than half a tank, to keep weight to a minimum.

And then we're off. I get a running commentary on my progress from the DriveGain app on the iPod fixed to the windscreen, with feedback on how I'm doing stage-by-stage as well as the cost per mile and CO₂ emitted. It also blasts out my recommended gear and “smoothness” reading at regular intervals.

The important things are anticipation and planning, which can help with keeping revs down, and using the correct gear, with the added benefit of making driving a less stressful experience.

Students are also taught how to park in a fuel-efficient way – reversing into a space when the engine is warm uses less fuel than reversing out when it's just started and therefore at its least efficient.

My strong points on the course? I get into higher gears reasonably quickly and I'm quite smooth with the gear changes. At one stage, I score more than 80 per cent in my “smoothness” – all ruined when I brake too late when approaching a roundabout.

My weak points? Anticipation and planning: I don't look far enough ahead to see what's going on. As well as making journeys smoother and less stressful, it also avoids wasting energy and losing hard-won momentum by having to apply the brakes. And I need to remember to check my mirrors.

But overall, I end with a CO₂ use of 3.077kg over 25km (14.7 miles), which is average for the car when it's not running in its optimum environment. I also get 80 per cent for my eco-driving, which is better than average.

In the interests of greener motoring, I think it might be time to find a new home for that tent.