

## Circular Reasoning about Roundabouts

I love roundabouts.

Yes, I'm talking about those circular thingies that are increasingly replacing conventional stoplight-controlled road intersections.

In Canada, enough people dislike them that an uproar resulted when an April Fool's article appeared this year in the Winnipeg Sun claiming that nine major intersections would be replaced with roundabouts. It didn't seem to bother anyone that the reason for the change was attributed to data compiled by noted (and knighted) British civil engineer "Sir Reginald Cumference. "

If you don't care for roundabouts (sometimes called traffic circles or rotaries), you're probably just not used to them yet. According to a survey by the Washington State DOT, the number of people strongly opposed to them drops from 41% before construction to 15% afterwards. Similarly, the number of people favoring them increases from 31% to 63%.

I don't know if roundabout etiquette is being taught in modern driver's education courses, but I do know there is a need for remedial education among a lot of existing drivers. It's not uncommon to see a car more or less parked at the entrance to a roundabout while the driver evaluates his or her chances of survival. At first glance it must look like a demonic contrivance designed to ensnare unsuspecting motorists and fling them in random directions as their kinetic energy spirals out of control.

If you are a roundabout newbie, here's some advice; gird your loins. I say this partly because I have always wanted to use that phrase in a sentence, but it really is all a matter of attitude. The same principle applies on a drive to Chicago; the closer you get to the Loop, the tighter you grip the steering wheel becomes, the more you lean forward, pay attention to your surroundings and make rude gestures to fellow drivers.

A roundabout is one of the few places in the world of transportation where driving like a jerk (i.e. aggressively) is rewarded. Unlike conventional intersections, you don't necessarily have to wait your turn. While other milquetoast drivers are sitting paralyzed with indecision at the yield lines that mark the entry points, the bold among us can safely nose into small gaps in the whirling traffic and forge on through without stopping.

Not everyone realizes that you don't necessarily have to exit the roundabout when you think you need to. If you get trapped in the inside lane in one of the larger ones, there's no shame in making a couple of extra trips around until you can work yourself into a position to exit. A friend told me last week that she spotted an elderly driver trapped in the inside lane who had come to a full stop and kept motioning all the other drivers by until he could pull straight out in the direction he wanted to go.

You may as well get used to these things because they have proven to reduce crashes, traffic delays, fuel consumption, air pollution, and construction and maintenance costs. Studies by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety show that roundabouts provide a 90 percent reduction in fatal crashes, 76 percent reduction in injury crashes, a 30 to 40 percent reduction in pedestrian crashes and a 10 percent reduction in bicycle crashes. That's a whole lot of crashing that's not happening anymore.

If you want to do a little homework before attempting another go-around, there's a cool animated illustration in Wikipedia under "Roundabout" that illustrates the proper functioning of the two-lane version. It also demonstrates how to properly use your turn signals when entering and exiting – we both know you're not doing that now.

Most of us in this geographic area are getting used to roundabouts. Coralville has four - its first one was installed at Holiday Road and First Avenue in 2002. Iowa City has two, and there's a large, beautiful, brand new one in Mt. Vernon at the intersection of Highways 1 and 30. You might consider packing a lunch and making a day of it.

So do your homework, get an attitude, gird your loins (there's that phrase again) and seek out some roundabouts. You'll be glad you did.

*Writers Group member Dave Parsons is planning an extended vacation tour of exotic and historic U.S. roundabouts, instead of actually working in the business he co-owns on the Coralville Strip.*