

The 10 Scariest Places To Drive



Where are the worst spots in America? Here's what over 100 experts and cross-country drivers had to say.

BY ED FALES

You're in the San Geronio Pass on I-10 above Palm Springs, Calif. A sudden "blowhole wind" sandblasts your windshield in seconds, strips your paint, knocks cars and trucks together. A trucker from Waco, Tex., finds his 18-wheeler kicked into another lane, wrestles it back and stops. When gales hit the San Geronio, says Southern Cal's AAA, even trains stop, hang out flares and wait.

You're southbound on the notorious Beltway (I-495) around Washington, D.C. On a bridge ahead a car clips a truck. The truck's cab flies open, and its driver sails head-over-heels across the rail into the Potomac below. Then flames close the bridge.

You're following a truck on New

York's nightmarish Cross-Bronx Expressway (I-95). It's really no proper expressway at all, just a concrete chute where smashups echo. The truck stalls in an area where vandals can strip the rig. The trucker phones for help, but is refused by a dispatcher. Finally, it costs the driver \$400 to get a tow and his engine started, a rip-off he calls "hostage ransom."

Where are the scariest places to drive in the whole U.S.? The worst engineering traps? The worst drivers?

We asked more than 100 experts and learned that drivers all over America point the finger at each other. Some curse the "stupidity" of Los Angeles freeway drivers who, they say, do okay when the sun shines, but rush pell-mell



into 100-car pileups when fog rolls in. Others get violent about weirdo crashes by people who run red lights on the Las Vegas "Strip" after drinking hours. Some damn the emotional drivers in Dallas: "They've been known to shoot you there." Others are paranoid about drivers on Philadelphia's Schuylkill Expressway: "If you don't go too fast, they look at you like you're nuts." In Houston, some drivers said, "people steer with coffee in one hand. It's crazy."

Just where the "worst" places are depends, of course, on whom you ask. We spoke to engineers at the Triple A's headquarters near Washington, to Chicago's Motor Club, the Auto Club of Southern California, AAA of Texas, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the feds, and the all-industry Research and Advisory Council.

According to the National Safety Council's list of dangerous places, Houston is the deadliest spot in the United States, with 4.8 deaths per



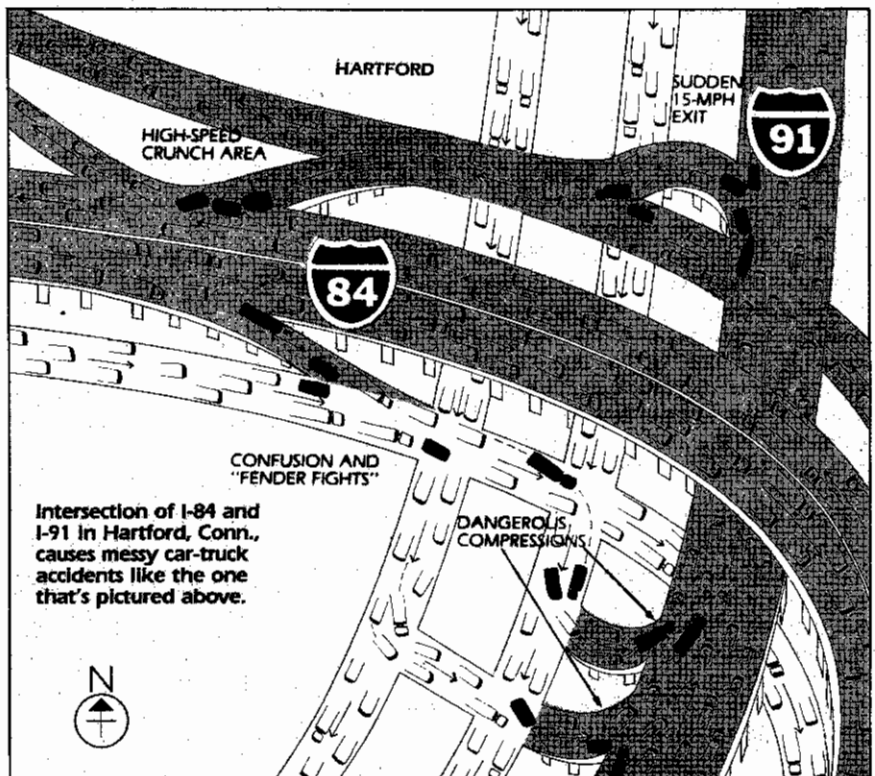
HARTFORD

I-84, I-91

The "Hartford Mixmaster," where I-84 feeds into I-91, simply infuriates drivers. The problem is the absolutely unbelievable high-speed traffic mess—much of it wall-to-wall. "It's even worse than Boston," says Wisconsin trucker John Janovetz. "Just sit and wait. You'll see an accident," says Steve Oliver of Albany, N.Y.

10,000 cars. Looking at it another way, nearly one car in 2,000 in Houston is involved in a fatal accident each year. That's pretty bad. Next on the NSC list are San Antonio (4.3), El Paso (3.8), Oklahoma City (3.7), Jacksonville (3.6), Dallas (3.6), Kansas City, Mo. (3.5), Corpus Christi, Tex. (3.5), Boston (3.1) and Nashville (3.0).

But here's an oddity. When we asked 100 long-distance drivers at roadside stops what city they were most glad to



Intersection of I-84 and I-91 in Hartford, Conn., causes messy car-truck accidents like the one that's pictured above.

DANGEROUS COMPRESSIONS



get out of alive, many simply exploded: "New York!"

"Nobody signals," drivers said. "The roads are awful." "Nobody gives you a break." Several said: "The taxi drivers are a menace."

Okay, New York's got problems. But take another look at the NSC list above. See New York anywhere? They must (Please turn to page 167)



NEW YORK Cross-Bronx Expy.

New York City, home of red-light runners, is on the list because its trashy expressways are so terrible, and no one seems to care. Driving there, the author heard a crash behind him. Someone's wheel came rolling merrily along, overtaking him at 45 mph. No one even slowed down to look! On another day, from somewhere behind, a spring-loaded bumper went up like a satellite and came down ahead of the author's car. New Yorkers just yawn. In one awful crash on the George Washington Bridge, a truckload of chickens hit a gasoline tanker and caused a world record barbecue.

One day recently three 18-wheelers overturned, blocking three expressways in the same rush hour. New Yorkers simply waited, some for hours. It's old stuff in the Big Apple.

George Mattson used to haul beef from Dallas. "When my codrivers saw New York, they'd pull off and stop," he says. "They'd say, 'You take it now. I'm chicken.'"

Mostly, drivers fear the "chute" that begins at the northern end of the New Jersey Turnpike, fires them over the George Washington Bridge and lands them on the crash-prone West Side Highway or that awful Cross-Bronx Expressway.



BOSTON 128, I-93

Even the patrician *Boston Globe* quotes a local official as saying: "A yellow light here is a sign to speed up, and a red light is strictly advisory." Boston's high-tech industry highway, Route 128, "has to be one of the world's worst" admits Administration Dean E.F. Petersen of the Bay State's Middlesex College. "It's plagued by fast lane changers. Avoid it in rush hours."

And Boston radios crackle with reports of crashes on its Southeast Expressway (I-93), where drivers say no one would think of giving anyone else a break. "I have been absolutely petrified," says a young Boston executive, "trying to stay alive in 65-mph traffic on Boston's Storrow Drive, where no one even slows for ice."



WASHINGTON—The Beltway (I-495)

Washington's Beltway (I-495) does to cars what cyclotrons do to atoms. Commuters can cope, but for strangers the mix of on-off traffic, the uncontrolled lane-changing and the

speed threaten disaster. Most people agree: Duck it if you can, especially in Washington's rush hours, which begin at 6 a.m. and 3 p.m. and continue for hours.



Notorious Beltway around Washington, D.C., seems to cause endless trouble, especially when doddering tourists mix it up

with hotshot commuters. AAA maps warn members to pay attention to confusing signs at southern junction of I-95 and I-495.

What Drivers Say About Other Places

Cleveland: Look out for the suicidal 20-mph corner on the Lake Shore Expressway (I-70). "You have to see it to believe it."
North Carolina's I-77: "You look down 2,000 feet, then look back and find a truck on your tail—and a runaway spillout area ahead."

Denver: "Worrisome congestion on I-25 and I-70."

St. Louis: "Too many expressways merge to cross the Mississippi."

Birmingham: "Streets okay, but Interstates are bad."

Salt Lake City to Denver: Mountainous I-70 is so risky some pros now use I-80.

Loveland Pass, Colo.: Well engineered, but so high (11,000 feet) "it scares hell out of us, especially in snowstorms."

Northern New Jersey: "Awful congestion, squeezes."

Detroit: Dangerous left-side lane drop-offs and exits, especially on freeways like the John Lodge.

U.S. 19, Florida: Some drivers fear the cloud-busting Tampa Bay Bridge (knocked down by a ship a few years ago). They also fear collisions near Pinellas Park and Bradenton. Some bumper stickers say: "Pray for me. I use U.S. 19."

Fort Worth: Sharp turn in its "Mixmaster" traffic regularly turns over vehicles.

Indianapolis: "Too many lights."

Fort Wayne: "Screwed up by too much development along the Coliseum Blvd. Bypass (U.S. 30-24). All those stoplights now cause wrecks. It's sometimes quicker and safer to go through the city."

Seattle: "Beautiful!"

Kansas City: "Not too bad."

Oklahoma City: "They got some fast drivers down there. And bad fogs all the way to Memphis."

Atlanta: "No real problems."

West Virginia Turnpike: "Real scary. Two high-speed lanes, one each way. Even the road maps warn you. Potholes, construction."

Cincinnati: "Hardnosed combat driving. Some people hell-for-leather. Won't give an inch."

I-80N between Portland and Boise: Some fear the Deadman's and Cabbage Head Passes, especially in snows.

Ogden, Utah: Drivers don't like the "black ice stretch" that forms on I-15 between Tremonton and Salt Lake City.

San Francisco: "Not too bad until you get downtown."



DALLAS

Real cowboys

Drivers who can tolerate Houston somehow find trouble with Dallas. Commuters are experts at dodging and weaving. But visitors hate the scary zigs and zags through high-speed on- and off-ramp traffic. Even worse, they hate the rear-end crashes on the frantic, creeping North Central Expressway, said to be the busiest superhighway in the country.

Exploding growth has trapped Dallas with expressways that are years behind the times, says the AAA's Southwest Motor Club.



LOS ANGELES

Freeway system

The drivers I've interviewed are divided. Some call L.A. drivers the most sophisticated and the fairest. ("They'll let you in.") But all that sophistication vanishes when fog rolls in, long-haul drivers say. "They follow each other like kids at 70 mph right into doom. It's Pied Piper driving. When fog comes down, they all become amateurs."

One trap for travelers is the mad downhill rush through Sepulveda Pass on I-405 near Encino. Suddenly, cars travelling at 70 to 80 mph plow into slower traffic floundering along near the Ventura Freeway. "It's everyone for himself out there. And the road is scarred with rubber," Los Angeles drivers say.

Even hairier are the tragic Southern California "burners," when cars crash head-on with trucks on narrow, inadequate Route 86 near the Salton Sea and Route 126, east of Santa Paula. "Horrible," says an AAA expert. "Fiery, spectacular."

THE SAFEST CITIES TO DRIVE IN

Here's how the National Safety Council rates the best big cities on the basis of number of deaths per 10,000 cars.

1. Minneapolis (0.5)
2. Washington, D.C. (1.0—Good enforcement *within* the city. The infamous Beltway is outside city limits.)
3. Oakland, Calif. (1.1)
4. St. Paul (1.1)
5. Akron (1.2)
6. Indianapolis (1.2)
7. Milwaukee (1.2)
8. Buffalo (1.2)
9. Seattle (1.2)
10. Anchorage (1.2)



PHILADELPHIA

Schuylkill Expy.

Some Philadelphians like the Schuylkill Expressway, but others call it the "Surekill": miles of narrow lanes with blind twists—and the usual suicidal city expressway speeds. It feeds western traffic into the city from the Pennsylvania Turnpike. "A trip through hell," one truck driver said.



CHICAGO

Dan Ryan, Edens

Hypnotism and confusion typify Chicago's problem traffic. Chicago itself isn't bad. The streets are straight arrows: You can see home 20 miles away in rush hour. But not on the "Dirty Dan" (I-90/I-94). The trouble is confusing on-off feeds, squeezes and lane drops. Some exits, like one to the Eisenhower Expressway, spiral down into a single deadly lane—the crazy sort of windup exit that should be barred by law.

Even worse is the giant waterfall of traffic that pours down into the Dan Ryan each morning from the Kennedy Expressway, where reversing commuter lanes—east in the morning, west in afternoon—help get visitors to Chicago in trouble.

Visitors should beware the Ryan. There are eight lanes each way, 16 in all. If you ever get in Lane No. 8, you've got only seconds to fight back across seven lanes to make your exit. No wonder that in three miles, last year, there were 1,474 wrecks!

Chicago's other hot spot is at the north end of the famous Edens Expressway (I-94 Extension). Let's say you're just in from Florida, Maine, Texas or California—you've driven 1,500 to 3,000 miles without a traffic light. Suddenly: uproar. Everyone slides, tires smoking, toward the Clavey Road traffic light.

The Illinois DOT has tried everything: strobe lights, signs, rumblestrips. The accidents just keep coming. In despair, an engineer cries: "How do you cope with Interstate hypnosis"?



HOUSTON

24-hour rush

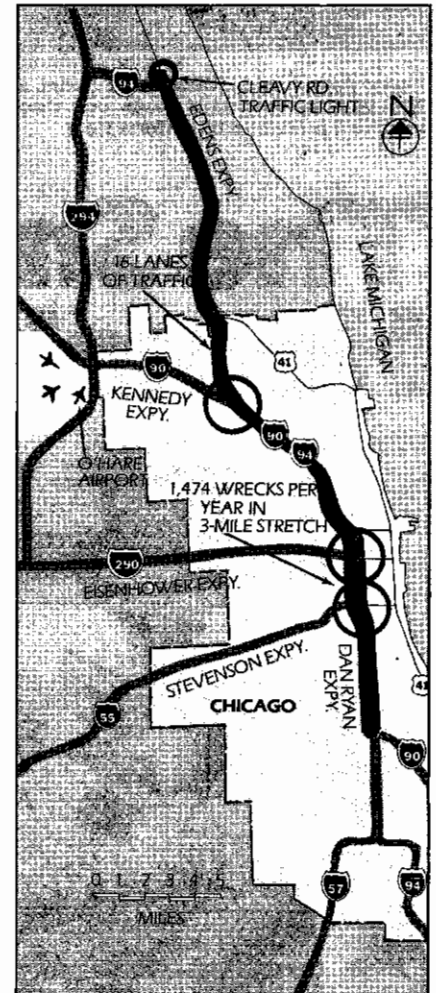
Houston is drowning in sheer numbers. The rush hour in this booming city, which has outgrown its own belted highway system, begins at midnight and ends at midnight. Even going through Houston on I-10 at 4 a.m., the author found, can be wild: a melee of shifting, rushing traffic made worse by a jungle of headlights.



BALTIMORE

Tipsy drivers

In brief, the big problem in Baltimore is said to be drunk drivers. When even California drivers talk about it, Baltimore definitely has a problem! You should stay out of Baltimore, especially at night. I've ridden with city police patrols and I even feel sorry for them.



Chicago's Dan Ryan and Edens Expressways funnel 16 lanes down to a traffic light.

Despite its bad record, the pros didn't damn Houston as vociferously as they did some other places.

Most fearful crunch area is the intersection of the partly built "B-8" and the Imperial Valley Road near International Airport. The problem: There are too many expanding developments, a mall, offices and motels. Runaway development causes many Houston expressways to suffer from severe arteriosclerosis.