

Air bags and Headlights

Last October I went through the same experience that most of my customers over the past few years have suffered. It was the old Citroen's turn to go through the ITV inspection. Despite having done it hundreds of times before with vehicles belonging to others, this time I learned what customers go through, which is a cross between going to the dentists and waiting to see the headmaster after being a naughty boy (a regular occurrence for me many years ago)

Why would I be nervous? I was in my usual place of work and my car has always been well maintained; fear of surprises or potential emptying of the wallet I guess. I was pretty surprised when it failed. Not because I know all of the guys at the ITV and bring them lots of business. I was expecting no favours; they are totally impartial which is one of the advantages of the Spanish system over that in the UK. It failed uniquely in my experience of the time because the air bag warning light was not functioning

Air bag warning light

This light is supposed to come on when you turn on the ignition, and then go off a few seconds later. Mine wasn't working at all which was no surprise as I later discovered that there was no bulb in the dash for it; no doubt a previous owner had removed it. Anyway, the bulb was replaced and after further remedial work the light did what it should and I shelled out another 21 euros for the re-test which was passed

This experience came home to me last week when on consecutive days I had two high end cars fail for similar reasons. The air bag light came on, but didn't go off again. Fortunately, I was put in touch with a specialist mobile mechanic who is sorting out the problem for my customers. Apparently, this problem can be due to wiring as it was in my case, but more often than not is due to a faulty control unit which not only has to be changed but also configured to the car.

Checked yours lately, if at all? If you're like me no, but now you know what to look out for, but don't wait for the ITV as I'm sure that this clever device has saved hundreds of lives when it explodes for a nano second before collapsing again, saving us from biting the steering wheel or head butting the windshield

Biased headlights

Many previous customers have told me that the headlights on their cars have been altered to perform to Continental standard which means pointing to the right kerb instead of the left. Experience has taught me that very few cars have this ability, though some can be adjusted to prevent you blinding oncoming drivers and receiving full beam in return. I always used to think that the plastic beam benders that we buy from Halfords or on the ferry made the light point in the right direction, but they don't, they merely take out the beam that so annoys the natives. This is one reason

why they are not acceptable for an import standard ITV, though you can probably get away with candle lit coach lights for a Voluntary ITV!

UK or Continental?

Let me try and explain why as the question comes up time and again. All headlights emit a beam of light parallel to the road surface. UK and Irish cars for example also emit a secondary beam pointing to the left hand kerb. Spanish and other Continental lights emit the secondary beam to the right. Putting the plastic beam benders on your lights merely eliminates the secondary beam. In Europe, this secondary beam is compulsory. This is quite odd really because in the USA where there are probably more cars than in the rest of the world combined, headlights are routinely “flat lined” with no bias, so if you have a car that originated in the USA, but now has UK lights, don’t make the mistake of buying replacement lights from the America

Whilst it is a pity that the whole of Europe does not adopt the flat beam policy (no dear this is nothing to do with the “flat earth society” whose members have gone clean off the edge), but unless they do, you will need to conform. Not sure which yours are? The best way to find out is to take your car to a garage and ask them to check and if possible adjust them against a beam setter, the same type that is used at the ITV station. A simple check that you can carry out yourself, preferably but not necessarily at night is to put your headlights on dipped beam and hold a piece of white A4 paper in front of the light. The left or right bias can be seen either as a sharp line or sometimes as a blob of light

Bike lights

Oddly enough, the headlights on most motorbikes are flat lined and the ITV seem to have no problem with these. Even where there is a left kerb bias, this can often be adjusted out on bike lights

Thumb wheel adjuster

Ever seen that little thumb wheel on the dash with a picture of a headlight next to it? Some people think that this is an adjuster for changing the bias of the lights from UK to Continental standard; if only it was, but no. This moves the headlight beams up and down and is very rarely used unless you are in the habit of towing a trailer or caravan or loading the boot with breeze blocks, all of which bring the front of the car up and make the lights look like they are searching for Messerschmitts. The thumb wheel is designed to adjust the lights down again during the period of carrying loads or towing.

Well, I hope that you found that illuminating (oh dear) and please keep the questions coming

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