



Assess the state of the road before departure and anticipate hazards such as pedestrians, livestock, or debris. PHOTO/FILE

Holiday roads are tricky: Here is how to stay safe

From sudden detours and crumbling highways to heavy traffic and unpredictable weather, driving in Uganda during the festive season can be challenging. Here is how motorists can stay alert, avoid accidents, and navigate safely on unfamiliar roads.



Prepare in advance by checking the weather and other road conditions.

Many drivers in Uganda simply set off without establishing what lies ahead, a habit that can lead to avoidable accidents," he warns. Prior knowledge helps drivers anticipate hazards such as construction works, rough surfaces, or sharp bends.

— Benson Kilama, a Kampala-based road safety expert

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

When relentless rains battered the Karuma-Kamdini stretch on the Gulu highway, thousands of motorists faced a daunting detour that tested both patience and driving skills. The vital northern corridor, already prone to wear and tear, had become unstable, prompting the Ministry of Works and Transport to order an emergency diversion while engineering teams rushed in to restore the road.

Drivers were guided along a winding route: through the URA checkpoint at Pakwach junction, past Olwiyi Trading Centre, and then right through Anaka before rejoining the Gulu highway. Those coming from Gulu followed the same route in reverse.

The diversion increased transport fares from Kampala to Gulu by Shs10,000, from Shs30,000 to Shs40,000. With the festive season approaching, the Uganda Traffic Police intensified road safety campaigns, reminding motorists to navigate the new route cautiously.

FIVE MUST-FOLLOW SAFETY RULES ON UNFAMILIAR ROADS

1. Know your route

Before setting out, check the road conditions, possible detours, and expected hazards. Use maps, traffic updates, or local contacts to avoid surprises.

2. Adjust your speed

Stick to speed limits, especially on bends, narrow stretches, and under-construction roads. Slow down to 30 km/h when navigating unfamiliar routes or temporary diversions.

3. Keep your vehicle roadworthy

Ensure tires, brakes, lights, and fluids are in good condition. A well-maintained vehicle is your first line of defense against accidents.

4. Stay alert and vigilant

Watch out for sudden potholes, debris, pedestrians, livestock, or wildlife. Avoid distractions; keep your focus fully on the road.

5. Prepare for emergencies

Carry an emergency kit, including first-aid supplies, a spare tire, water, and essential documents. Plan for unexpected delays or breakdowns.

By November 30, the Ministry of Works announced the completion of the temporary diversion. Only light vehicles, including buses, medium trucks, vans, and saloon cars, were allowed through the temporary road from 11am on Monday, December 1.

Why roads deteriorate

The deteriorating condition of the Kamdini-Karuma stretch is not an isolated case. Other major roads, including Tirinyi-Mbale, Kamdini-Lira, and Kafu-Karuma, have faced similar challenges before government intervention improved their status.

Simon Okurut, a road works specialist, attributes road deterioration to budget constraints and poor-quality materials.

"For stronger roads, there is a need for full-throttle financing to acquire necessary materials," he explains.

Okurut also cites poor workmanship and unprofessional engineering practices, advising clients to engage only registered engineers certified by the Engineers Registration Board (ERB).

Adding to the strain, the State Minister for Works, Mr Musa Eweru, notes that a Shs1.3 trillion debt owed by the streamlined Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA) to contractors has slowed ongoing maintenance.

"The backlog of unpaid obligations for stalled, delayed, or incomplete infrastructure projects has constrained repair efforts," he says.

Motorist experiences

Daniel Kilama, a motorist travelling from Kampala to Gulu, recalls the challenges of navigating the Anaka-Olwiyo detour for the first time.

"This diversion was really tedious, especially for first-time drivers. I hope the Ministry of Works expedites reconstruction along Kamdini-Karuma to restore the usual road chart," he said.

Grace Ajok, traveling to Lira, said the diversion through the eastern corridor was even more inconvenient.

"We could not use Kamdini because the route through Anaka is too far," she explained.

Expert advice: Do your road homework

Benson Kilama, a Kampala-based road safety expert, urges motorists to perform due diligence on road conditions before travelling to unfamiliar destinations.

"Many drivers in Uganda simply set off without establishing what lies ahead, a habit that can lead to avoidable accidents," he warns. Prior knowledge helps drivers anticipate hazards such as construction works, rough surfaces, or sharp bends," he says.

Kilama recommends checking the route alongside weather conditions, ensuring the vehicle is roadworthy, and preparing emergency kits and personal essentials.

He recalls a recent incident along the Kiira-Kasangati Road, where a motorist collided with a barricade—an accident he says could have been avoided with simple prior checks.

Michael Kananura, the spokesperson for the Uganda Traffic Police, advises drivers to reduce speed to 30km/h on unfamiliar or under-construction roads.

"Some motorists lose control at bends because they fail to heed speed limits. These limits are essential, especially on narrow, winding roads," he notes.

Practical tips for safe driving

Joel Kinene, a driving school instructor in Wakiso District, emphasises adopting a defensive driving mindset while navigating Uganda's roads:

- Stay vigilant: Ensure tyres, lights, and fluids are in optimal condition, and prepare mentally for the journey.
- Heed speed limits: Follow posted speed limits, especially on sharp bends and under-construction stretches.
- Stay alert: Assess the state of the road before departure and anticipate hazards such as pedestrians, livestock, or debris.
- Check weather conditions: Heavy rain, fog, or strong winds can affect driving safety; plan accordingly.

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A call to action

As the festive season approaches, the police Ministry of Works are stepping up safety campaigns along key routes, including Karuma-Pakwach.

Motorists are urged to exercise personal responsibility, adhere to traffic rules, and drive defensively.

"The roads may be challenging, but with vigilance and proper preparation, drivers can navigate safely," Kinene says.