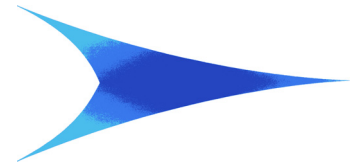


The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community
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MEDIA RELEASE

Recognition of Driving Licences Boosts Aussie Expats in Belgium

Hundreds of Australians living in Belgium are celebrating this week at the news that Belgian authorities have at last agreed to recognise their Australian driving licences.

The Southern Cross Group (SCG) today congratulated the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Belgian government for reaching an administrative arrangement on the recognition of Australian driving licences after almost a decade of bilateral negotiations.

SCG Co-founder Anne MacGregor in Brussels said that the new arrangement was a significant achievement, but pointed out that a great deal of work remains to be done by DFAT in other countries on behalf of overseas Australians.

"We understand that Australians in Switzerland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and quite a number of other Continental European countries have run up against similar licence difficulties", she said. "A bilateral solution needs to be found in all those countries as well."

Kylie Bonython, an Australian who has lived in Belgium for nearly five years was absolutely ecstatic at the news. "This changes everything for me," she said. "It gives me my freedom back. I've been totally reliant on people around me to drive me everywhere." Bonython met her Belgian husband while working on a cruise ship about seven years ago, and the couple now run a café/pub in a small town in Flanders.

Bonython considered sitting the local theory and practical driving tests to obtain a Belgian licence from scratch but never did so, lacking the finances and the language skills required. "Not having a valid driving licence placed a great deal of stress on me while I've been trying to adapt to my new life in Belgium," she said. "I sometimes felt that I was imprisoned in the village where we live. It's had a huge negative impact. I'm really looking forward to putting that all behind me now."

Emma Lee, an Australian scientist who arrived in Belgium to work with the Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen-Cilag in April 2002 did put herself through the Belgian licence tests just after arriving but is still recovering from the experience. She has a PhD in molecular biology but says that the Belgian driving tests reduced her to a "quivering heap". She was unable to take delivery of the company car that was part of her employment package until she had obtained her Belgian licence, which she sat for in Antwerp, in Dutch. The process involved more than 40 hours off work, and cost in excess of Euro 1500 (AUD 2500), and she only passed each of the two tests on the third attempt. "It has easily been the most distressing time of my tenure here," she says.

MacGregor said that the SCG had become aware of a number of cases of Australians living in Belgium who had illegally masqueraded on their Australian licences coupled with an international driving permit, due to the lack of a recognition arrangement and the hurdles in obtaining a local licence. She stressed that within three months of becoming resident in Belgium it is necessary under Belgian law to have a full Belgian driving licence. "The consequences of driving without a valid licence in any country can be very serious. Quite apart from the criminal law implications, if an accident happens in which property is damaged or people are injured, it might well be the case that insurance cover falls away if a person has been driving illegally. And the implications for the local Australian consular authorities trying to sort out the mess hardly bear thinking about. We fear that there are still quite a number of Australians elsewhere in Continental Europe who may be putting themselves at risk in the absence of licence recognition arrangements in the countries where they reside".

The SCG urged State and Territory licensing authorities around Australia to engage in enhanced coordination with the peak body AustRoads and the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services and DFAT. "It's not just about recognising overseas licences for those arriving to live in Australia", said MacGregor. "These bodies shouldn't be agreeing to recognise any foreign licences in Australia without making sure that an appropriate reciprocal deal is struck to look after expatriate Australians at the other end. Unfortunately in the past we've sometimes seen Australia simply throw away significant bargaining power that it could have used to help its own citizens abroad."

"Many expats complain to the SCG that they don't feel that DFAT and other Australian government agencies do enough to support Australian citizens who live and work abroad. Especially with the more recent focus on terrorism, it can sometimes seem that DFAT is only concerned with bailing out people who get into difficulties while travelling abroad for shorter periods. That's important work, but a million Australians now live abroad on a longer-term basis and these people have longer-term consular needs. The driving licence problem and the result we now have on that in Belgium is one very positive example of how Australian government efforts can significantly facilitate and simplify both the private and professional lives of many Australians abroad."

The SCG is currently promoting **One Million More**, an independent online survey of the Australian diaspora, open until 30 September. The survey includes one question on driving licence difficulties, and the SCG hopes that information gained from what is already the largest-ever survey of Australian expats will help focus future work in this area.

<http://www.onemillionmore.com/>

For further information on the new driving licence recognition arrangement with Belgium, see:

<http://www.austemb.be/bsls/ConSerDriLic.html>

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About the Southern Cross Group

The Southern Cross Group is an international non-profit volunteer-run and independently-funded advocacy and support organisation for the Australian diaspora. The SCG takes an inclusive approach in defining the Australian overseas community and works on behalf of everyone in that community, regardless of their age, educational background, occupation, professional status or income. Those who are not technically Australian citizens but who are former citizens or future citizens or otherwise have a very close family connection with Australia are also within the SCG's constituency. Since its formation in early 2000, the SCG has established a consistent track record of intelligent and timely submissions to Government on a host of Australian expatriate issues, taking the lead in establishing "the Australian diaspora" firmly in Australian domestic consciousness. The Group is best known for its work in reforming Australian citizenship law. It has also been active on the issue of expatriate disenfranchisement in the Australian electoral process, and was the driving force behind the establishment of a broad-based dedicated Federal Senate Committee Inquiry into Australian expatriates held in 2003-2005. The SCG is run by 100 volunteers in 30 countries. It has no formal members or membership fees. People interested in keeping abreast of the SCG's activities are invited to [sign up to its occasional free e-bulletins](#).

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