

A typical road block is designed to keep both yourself and other road users safe.

Drinking and driving do not mix. *Highway* joined Singapore Traffic Police for a late night roadblock and learned the stark truth about the disregard many motorists have for their own safety and that of other road users

WORDS: SIMON HULBER • MAIN PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEX HENG

Driven to Distraction

Those drivers escorted over to the table by the side of the road who appear aggressive or sullen, have, in all likelihood, the most to fear.

They are asked to breathe in and take a long, steady exhalation into a plastic tube that is placed in the hand-held breathalyser, being monitored by a police officer.

This device, about the size of an early-generation mobile phone, simply indicates a 'pass' or a 'fail' on the spot.

None of the people that *Highway* sees taking the test at the side of the road appear unsteady on their feet, but several of them have still failed the breathalyser test.

One thing that soon becomes abundantly clear to us is that being apparently coherent does not necessarily mean that a driver is sober enough to legally operate a vehicle.

Those who fail are ushered to the back of an awaiting police car, and will be driven to the Traffic Police HQ at Ubi, where a second set of tests using a more detailed machine called a Breath Evidential Analyzer (BEA) will be carried out to establish whether they are guilty of drink-driving.



This police specification breathalyzer will tell an officer whether someone is over the drink-drive limit in just a few seconds

Their cars will be towed away. If they are found guilty of being over the legal limit of 34 microgrammes of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood, the owners will also have to pay for the vehicle towing charges.

It is 1.30am. Revellers who have decided to foolishly drink and then drive have plenty to be nervous about as a line of blue flashing lights from a row of Police Subaru WRX Imprezas slow the traffic down to a crawl.

Most taxi drivers are waved through, but car drivers are randomly checked by an officer at the side of the road. He also has the same type of breathalyser as the others at the table on the far side of the road.

The hand-held machine has two functions; firstly when placed next to the mouth of a driver, it can detect any alcohol on the breath. This effectively



End of the line: This driver won't be going home so quickly tonight



If you have been drinking over the limit, then this device will expose you



Senior Station Inspector, Sanuwan Shaari, has heard all of the excuses for drinking and driving during his 28 years with the Singapore Traffic Police

“Every year lives are lost on Singapore’s roads because many drivers have no conception on how even a relatively modest amount of alcohol can impair their judgement behind the wheel.”

caught for drink-driving come from all walks of life. It does not surprise me.”

He adds, “Most people we stop are co-operative. They may say they have had a little alcohol, but they tell us they are still sober. Nonetheless, they are not always capable of handling the steering wheel. They will usually say: ‘I had a little amount of alcohol only – I know my limit.’ This is a very common claim from the drivers we stop.”

Sadly, with his 28 years’ experience on the force, Mr Sanuwan has found this excuse has not changed.

Incidentally, if you feel that you may get off the hook by refusing to give a breath test, then think again. This will result in an arrest, and you will be automatically treated in court as if you have been found guilty of drink-driving.

Even if one does not consider the dangers they are imposing on themselves and others, then try considering the potential loss of your driving licence and even a term of imprisonment...

Mr Sanuwan added, “As drink driving is categorised as a traffic offence, rather than a crime, many people still do not take it seriously enough.”

This view is sharply reflected by the rise in the number of arrests of non-accident-related drink-driving offences in Singapore from 2,379 in 2004 to 3,152 in 2006.

AA President, Mr Bernard Tay, said, “Exercising more discipline, caution and patience when driving can help to keep accident rates down. Drivers need to constantly be reminded on the perils of reckless and drink driving that could endanger not just their own lives but also put other road users at risk.”

‘shortlists’ potential drink-driving candidates directly at the wheel; and after this the selected drivers blow into the machines at the table to confirm whether their blood alcohol levels are over the limit.

The Traffic Police are carrying out regular spot checks, which on average, occurs three or four times a month. You can be assured that these operations will be stepped-up over the festive season.

Every year lives are lost on Singapore’s roads because many drivers have no idea of how even a relatively modest amount of alcohol can impair their judgement behind the wheel.

Says Mr Sanuwan Shaari, Senior Station Inspector for the Traffic Police’s Special Operations Team, “The people

Drink Responsibly, Drive Safe

If you are going out for year-end celebrations, why not book a cab? It really is as easy as that – and one of the safe drinking messages that premium drinks business, Diageo Singapore, is aiming to convey to revellers in Singapore.

Its Diageo Guardian Angel campaign has been launched for the festive season and targets pubs and nightspots with an exotic team of ‘angels’ who are handing out leaflets and other promotional goodies that advise party-goers on responsible drinking.

Diageo owns famous drink brands such as Johnnie Walker, Smirnoff, Guinness and Baileys, and has worked in tandem with Singapore Traffic Police to ensure a mature approach to drinking is instilled in all.

Mr Lin Menuhin, Alcohol and Responsibility Director for Diageo Asia Pacific, said, “We don’t deny that alcohol can be a controversial product that can cause harm if abused. In response, we are running responsible drinking programmes around the world to mitigate alcohol-related harm. Drink driving is one of the most important areas for us to target, and we are focusing on markets such as Korea, Thailand and China to combat the issue. In China we have successfully leveraged on Formula 1 to promote responsible drinking via our sponsorship of the McLaren Mercedes team. As the world’s leading alcoholic beverage company, it is vital that we meet our commitment to Responsible Drinking and Social Responsibility.”

He added, “In Singapore, the campaign’s message is ‘Listen to your Guardian Angel – if you drink, don’t drive’, and we will be using local celebrities as ‘Archangels’ to front the campaign.”



MTV VJ, Ut, and radio personality, Jamie Yeo, at the launch of the Diageo Guardian Angel campaign

You booze, you lose

Failing an alcohol breath test does not bode well for your driving licence or potentially, your career. Mr Foo Cheow Ming, a partner with local law firm, KhatarrWong, who specialises in Criminal Defence Litigation, explains the legal consequences of boozing and taking to the roads

Being breathalysed by the police can be just the start of a long nightmare that can ultimately lead to the loss of not just your driving licence, but your liberty as well.

Defence lawyer, Mr Foo Cheow Ming, gave *Highway* an inside look at how the courts deal with those found over the limit behind the wheel.

Once arrested for drink-driving, the police can arrest and detain you for a further breath test under Section 67 1(b) of the Road Traffic Act.

Mr Foo said, “There is no statutory limitation as to what is the intervening period between your arrest and being tested by the Breath Evidential Analyser (BEA) at the Traffic Police Headquarters at Ubi. Obviously it should be as soon as is practicable. If your reading is under the limit on the second test, then they have to let you go.”

If found over the limit, you will usually be bailed-out from custody on the same evening though.

Sentences for being found guilty of a first time drink-driving offence – provided the offence did not result in an accident – are usually a fine of not less than \$1,000 and not more than \$5,000 plus a driving licence disqualification period of one to three years. Both sentences are dependant on how far over the limit an offender is found to be.

Technically, as a first time offender you could also be imprisoned for up to six months, depending on the circumstances of the conviction. Repeat offenders can be fined between \$3,000 and \$10,000 plus lose their driving licences for an indefinite period and be imprisoned for up to 12 months.

In drink-driving cases that have resulted in a death or deaths, lifetime driving licence bans have been imposed.

Beware though – even if you are still within the accepted legal range this does not always mean you are home free. Under Section 67 1 (a) of the same Act, the police and the courts can still prosecute if they determine that a person is:



“Many people do not regard drink-driving with sufficient seriousness because an automobile can be a one-tonne murder machine on wheels if mishandled. Lives are shattered...”

Unfit to drive in that he is under the influence of drink or of a drug or an intoxicating substance to such an extent as to be incapable of having proper control of such vehicle.

Mr Foo expanded on this, “If a police officer sees a vehicle weaving crazily in and out of lanes, scratching against the road divider or bumping into a few cars, that is by itself evidence that the driver is incapable of operating the vehicle properly by reason of intoxication either due to drink or medication. They both go under the same grouping.”

Mr Foo says the most common mitigation plea from his clients is that they thought they had drunk very little or they had food either before or after drinking, thinking that it would dilute the level of alcohol in their bodies.

“It is a common misconception,” said Mr Foo.

He continued, “In the court, it is very

difficult to challenge the BEA results.

He added, “In order to contest the BEA, the defendant would need to prove that by the means of some inhalant or medication that he has taken has caused the breathalyser to become distorted, or alternatively, you must show that the BEA machine is either poorly maintained, poorly calibrated or otherwise malfunctioning. But to prove all of the above, you will need to get expert evidence. But it is still difficult because the trial may come months, if not years after the arrest, and the machine might have been re-calibrated or repaired since.”

But Mr Foo said he has not represented any clients who had been ‘borderline cases’ (for example, for having exactly 35 milligrammes of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood in their bodies – technically a fail).

“The police are not inhuman – they are reasonable,” he said.

The highest alcohol level found in a person that Mr Foo has represented is 92 milligrams per 100 millilitres of blood. “I was amazed he could still breathe!” he joked.

On a serious note, he cautioned, “Many people do not regard drink-driving with sufficient seriousness because an automobile can be a one-tonne murder machine on wheels if mishandled. Lives can be shattered...”

More than just a habit

Repeat drink-driving offenders could have more of an alcohol addiction than they care to admit, as *Highway* discovered when we spoke to an expert in drink dependency victims

AA member, Professor Kua Ee Heok doesn't like to use the term 'alcoholism' as it often paints the wrong picture of a group of often very well-educated and hard-working people who have fallen into the clutches of heavy drinking.

Like a chain-smoker, those with a dependency on drink can come from any social class or background. They also run the high risk of long-term health damage. Many of these people visit the National University Hospital for treatment for illnesses like liver damage, as a result of excessive alcohol consumption and are often referred to Professor Kua afterwards to help steer them away from heavy drinking.

The Senior Consultant Psychiatrist, who comes from Malaysia, stresses that it is important not to make a patient feel they have a drinking problem, but instead to get to the cause of their drinking. For example, he will sometimes prescribe medication to help those who say they cannot get a good night's sleep without a stiff drink. By cutting down on their alcohol intake before bedtime, it helps address their drinking problems.

He has written a book on alcohol dependency following his time working in Manchester, UK. He said, "It is famous for all the Manchester United fans, who can be big drinkers, and I spent six months working at the Alcohol Treatment Centre there."

When he came to Singapore to work, he teamed up with a liver specialist.

Professor Kua said, "The specialist knew how to treat liver problems, but he knew the underlying cause of liver damage was alcohol dependency."

He has found that his success rate for treating those with drinking problems has been much higher in Singapore than treatment centres in London.

Professor Kua offered, "Part of the reason is that here after treatment, they can go back to their families for support, whereas in London, I would ring up a social worker to find a home for patients to stay in. Especially if they drifted down



to London from places like Scotland, the patients had nowhere to go back to."

He added, "People here see us at very early stages. They might come to NUH for gastric problems. You can't tell them they have alcohol dependency problems, because they will get very angry. This is because this makes them appear to be a 'bad' person, and this is not true."

Heavy drinkers who are denied alcohol often suffer from Delirium Tremens, which can cause hallucinations and 'morning shakes.' This group is often diagnosed after they go to hospital for a certain treatment and then start behaving oddly after two or three days of zero alcohol intake.

Professor Kua said that many Singaporeans start drinking from army days. First beer and then they progress to stronger spirits, like whiskey. This is where addiction can start.

He is remarkably candid about how drinking affects anyone.

"The psychological defence mechanism with everyone is denial. Even doctors who come and see me say 'Dr Kua, I have a liver problem, not a drink problem...' The important thing for professionals like myself is not to label our patients. You must respect them." **HW**

"Like a chain-smoker, those with a dependency on drink can come from any social class or background. They also run the serious risk of long-term health damage."

