

» IAIN MacMILLAN



Learning to drive manual isn't automatic

“You must be pretty confident in your relationship,” a friend commented ominously when I told him what I’d done. “Teaching your wife to drive stick is truly courageous.”

Last summer, coolant leaked into the engine block when the seals cracked in our old red wagon and the resulting mushroom cloud was so white and thick I stopped dead three lanes of traffic behind me. Well, technically two fire trucks managed to get through the smokescreen.

Although we live in the city and were able to get by with public transit for more than a month, being forced into a car purchase is never pleasant. But a deal that was far too good to pass up on a one-year-old VW Passat suddenly presented itself. It had only one catch—manual transmission—and my wife, Ray, had never driven standard. I, on the other hand, had grown up using a clutch but living now in a one-vehicle family, I was resigned to steering a vegematic around town. So when Ray announced courageously that she’d learn, I wasn’t feeling so bad about that puddle of neon-green coolant I left on Lake Shore Road.

If “humbling” describes the process of learning to drive a manual transmission after you’ve driven only automatic, there is no word for teaching said process. I realised quickly that training instinctive movements is a contradiction in terms.

We happen to have an inordinately long driveway and our first lesson never got beyond it—much to the amusement of our neighbours. Lesson number two ended in Ray questioning the possibility of taking the kids to gymnastics and swimming by bicycle and

subway forever. Although the Passat’s clutch is very forgiving, trying to describe in words how to find the friction point and what to do once you’ve reached it is almost as frustrating as understanding my cryptic instruction.

Enter godsend Carlos Tomas. Unbelievably, in a city with more than a million drivers, there’s only one school, Shifters, with one instructor, that teaches on a manual transmission. But what a find.

Gentle, quiet-spoken Carlos promised to have Ray driving the kids to gymnastics and swimming within three lessons. He didn’t lie. Within five lessons, she was comfortable in 18 lanes on the 401, starting on hills—and even correcting my bad habits.

Carlos starts with some theory by showing his students, mostly female, what’s happening under the hood when you put your foot on the clutch. He uses a little mechanical model of the drive train as a visual aid. I played backseat driver for the first lesson, nodding knowingly to things that I was learning, too. I’d vaguely thought of the clutch as a fancier version of my bike’s gears rather than the disc that it is. Clutch manoeuvres were almost fascinating. I would never have thought one could release the clutch past the sweet spot so slowly that you could get into gear, move ever so slowly and never touch the gas.

On Carlos’s website, www.shifters.ca, many common questions are answered, along with useful tips for brave spouses and partners who think they can do a better job than I. And starting on page 22 this issue, 10 topless suggestions designed for making your summer happier—and all available in manual transmission—await your perusal. ❧

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