

UK Motorway Service Areas Still Lagging Behind the European Average

UK motorway service areas have once again compared poorly to those in Europe in a new survey by European motoring organisations.

Combined with tests carried out in 2000 and 2001, the results show that despite clear efforts by operators, prices and overall standards in the UK have barely improved.

Eight UK MSAs were tested out of a total of 62 across Europe. One UK MSA has been tested in all three surveys Woolley Edge on the M1 near Wakefield where there has been no measurable improvement. Sandbach on the M6 in Cheshire has been tested twice, and this time the results were worse than in 2001.

No MSAs in Europe were found to be very good and the inspectors only graded 10 MSAs as good. They found 38 of them acceptable and 13 poor. Only one Sandbach was rated very poor. Bert Morris, deputy director of The AA Motoring Trust, says: These results are very disappointing. Some motorway service areas are poor value for money, poorly managed, and poorly maintained. They give people what they have come to expect, and that is, all too often, a poor standard.

"General cleanliness, food quality, hygiene and prices are the key factors for consumers when they take a break from Britain's congested roads. These need to improve otherwise the UK's MSAs will not match the best in the rest of Europe for quality and value. The inspectors, in their report, said: The UK had the highest percentage of bad results. You could stop for petrol and perhaps buy some provisions but we wouldn't recommend taking a break there.

Motorway Service Area Overall Grade Awarded

M4 Cardiff West Moto off J33 Acceptable
M40 Oxford Welcome Break J8A Acceptable
M74 Abington Welcome Break J13 Poor
M25 Clacket Lane North RoadChef J5-6 Poor
M5 Frankley West Moto J3-4 Poor
M6 Tebay Westmorland J38-39 Poor
M1 Woolley Edge East Moto J38-39 Poor
M6 Sandbach South RoadChef J16-17 Very Poor

The inspectors also said that the UK results fell way behind European competition when it came to catering. Only Oxford service area on the M40 was rated good, Tebay and Clacket Lane were rated average and Cardiff, Woolley Edge, and Frankley were rated poor. Sandbach was rated very poor by the inspectors. The price of a standard meal in UK MSAs was twice what it cost in Italy and Germany.

However, on the positive side, UK MSAs scored well for family friendliness, availability of goods in the shop and friendliness of service by staff. The hygiene standards were poor in four of the MSAs with Clacket Lane on the M25 and Sandbach coming in the bottom three in Europe. However, Cardiff services on the M4 came a close second in Europe overall for the best hygiene standards. The worst overall for hygiene in Europe was the Village Catalan service area in France.

Morris adds: If the staff at Cardiff can provide a well-maintained and clean service area with hygienic toilets and well-looked after mother-and-baby rooms and shower rooms, then it shows it can be done elsewhere.

The AA Motoring Trust believes that in the long term, the only way to reduce prices to high street levels at UK MSAs is to relax some of the regulations the operators have to comply with, which date back to the 1950s. Operators have to fund through high till and pump prices free facilities such as large parking areas for lorries, free toilets, and services 24 hours a day.

There are restrictions on the size of the sales area and products that can be sold at MSAs, which must relate only to travelling. This means that while snacks and drinks can be sold to take away, a wider range of products, such as grocery products, are banned.

Bert Morris says: "While there is no excuse for failing to clean toilets, or serving poor food in messy restaurants, it is clear that operators have to bear some high regulatory costs and don't have the freedom to sell a wide range of goods which might allow them to attract more paying custom and so drop prices."

The highest rated MSA was in Germany. The Vogtland South service area on the A72 (Hof Chemnitz) between Pirk and Plauen South in Germany was praised for its outside facilities, the catering, the friendly staff and the toilet facilities.

The tests, which are funded by the EuroTest consortium of motoring organisations of which The AA Motoring Trust is a leading member, were carried out over the Easter Bank Holiday weekend.

NOTE TO EDITORS

The other nine countries whose MSAs were inspected were Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland. Each MSA was tested twice by independent inspectors from Swiss Gastro Consulting, who are hotel specialists with a detailed knowledge of the hotel and catering trade. The laboratory tests were undertaken by Synlab in Augsburg, Germany. The criteria were based on the needs of a family of two adults and two children including one baby, stopping at a MSA and wanting something quick, good and cheap to eat and drink. The inspectors looked at road safety, the condition of the entire facility inside and out, catering service, hygiene and cleanliness, shopping facilities, communications and prices.

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