

# *GAIMEN KIRIKAE*

(CONVERSION OF A FOREIGN DRIVER'S LICENSE TO A JAPANESE LICENSE)

# IN OKINAWA

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# Outline

- What is “*Gaimen Kirikae*”
- Starting the application
- Paperwork
- Written test (both automatic transmission and manual automobiles)
- Vision screening
- Practical (driving) test (automatic transmission only)
- Other information

# What is *Gaimen Kirikae*?

- *Gaimen* is an abbreviation for “*gaikoku unten menkyo-sho*” (a driver’s license issued in a foreign country).

*Gaikoku* = foreign country

*Unten* = driving

*Menkyo-sho* = license

- *Kirikae* means “conversion” (or switch, or re-issue)

Therefore, *gaimen kirikae* is the process of administratively obtaining a Japanese driver’s license using an overseas-issued license as the starting point, rather than obtaining a Japanese license from zero (extremely expensive and time-consuming) as is the case for most Japanese

# How do I start the application?

- In Okinawa, there is only one place to do this:

Okinawa Prefectural Police Driver's License Center

(沖縄県警察 運転免許センター)

- Tel: +81 (98) 851-1000 (extension 553)
- Address: 3-22 Toyosaki, Tomigusuku, Okinawa 901-0225, Japan

- 1<sup>st</sup> appointment: Call the license center and schedule a **paperwork appointment**

- *You will need to gather all your paperwork in advance and bring it with you on the appointment day*

*\*When I scheduled my paperwork appointment in April 2020, the earliest appointment I could get was for August – four months later. Therefore, call and book this appointment as soon as possible.\**

# Paperwork

- See:  
<http://www.police.pref.okinawa.jp/docs/2015030100253/>
- Everything you need to know is on this website. However, I would also call ten days prior to your appointment and make sure that you have all the paperwork needed. Rules can and do change without notice
  - *“Hello, I have an appointment on (date), can I confirm the paperwork I need to bring with me?”*

# Paperwork (Cont.)

## Required:

- Your actual foreign drivers license (they will probably not accept it if it is expired, But check anyway). Also, if your current license is very new, you should bring your old license as well
- Official JAF (Japan Automobile Federation) translation of your foreign license
  - *You must call or visit JAF and request a translation paperwork for your foreign license*
  - *This will take 7-10 business days to receive, process, and return*
  - 日本自動車連盟 (JAF) 沖縄支部
  - Address: 1 Chome 48-7 Maeda, Urasoe, Okinawa 901-2102
  - Telephone: 098-877-9225
  - Cost: JPY 3500

# Paperwork (Cont.) (Still all required!)

- Passport (also bring old one if the current one is very new)
- Other documents confirming your residence and nationality
- Proof that you stayed in the country that issued you a driver's license for at least 90 days after you obtained that license
- And more... Please call the Center and tell them your own, personal situation so that they can advise you with any additional paperwork. What is required for one applicant may be totally different for another applicant

# Paperwork processing (Cont.)

- Once the Licensing Office approves your paperwork, you can schedule your written and driving tests
- This will likely be 2~5 weeks from the day you schedule it

# Written Test

- You can schedule the written test and practical (driving) test for the same day
  - *Written tests start at 10 a.m. and take about 15 minutes (you are given 1 hour)*
  - *They ask you to be at the Center by 9:30 a.m. to check-in*
- 2550 yen on the day of the test
- The written test is not difficult
- Study these:
  - *<https://japandriverslicense.com/written-test-practice/>*
  - Also know that... the general speed limit (which you must assume if it is not posted otherwise) is 60 km/h (37 mph) - except on national divided highways (freeways) where the limit is normally 80 km/h (62 mph)

# Licenses issued in “Special Areas”

- If you have a driver’s license issued in a Special Area (27 countries, 1 region, 4 U.S. states), you are EXEMPT from both the written and practical tests. The conversion process is for the paperwork only!

As of November 2020, these Special Areas exempt from knowledge / skill confirmation were:

- Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, South Korea , Taiwan, United Kingdom, and the four U.S. states of Hawaii, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington State

# Written Test (Cont.)

- You should find out in 30~60 minutes if you passed the written test or not
- You need 7 correct questions out of 10 to pass (70%)
- Of the ten test takers on the day I took the test, all ten passed on the first try (both for ordinary automobiles and motorcycle tests)
- Once you pass the test, you go back downstairs to sign up for your practical (driving) test
- If you don't pass the written test, you must reschedule for a different day (Wednesdays and Fridays only)

# Vision Screening

- Before your driving test, you will complete a vision screening
- This is a simple test where you point or say the directions of any “C”s you see, and they also check for color perception
- The vision test is not especially strict. Many people who only wear glasses or contact lenses occasionally can pass the vision test without them
- If you wear contacts, please tell the examiner – and it may be best to check without glasses or contacts first, and then put them on if you are unable to pass the test without them

# Practical (Driving) Test

- Ordinary Autos – Wednesday afternoons and Friday mornings only (for *gaimen kirikae*, same for the written test)
- Cost: JPY 1450

# Practical (Driving) Test (Cont.)

- No joke. Very difficult to pass on your first try
  - *I took the test for automatic cars. Manual car driving test is stricter and harder to pass (per people working at the center)*
  - *All practical driving test tips were taught to me at the driving school*
- What they look for in the practical driving test:
  - *Anzen Kakunin* (overall safety awareness, also known as “situational awareness”)
  - Signaling
  - Road/car position when turning
  - Steps to getting into the car
  - Following instructions (may not always be clear, if not, slow down or stop and ask the examiner to repeat)

# Practical (Driving) Test Step by Step

1. When the examiner calls you, you walk towards the back of the car and check the back
  - *This is to make sure there are no kids, toys, pets, etc.*
  - *\*You do not have to kneel down to check, just a quick head tilt will do\**
2. You then walk around to the front of the car (on the left side of the car) and go around the front bumper to get into the vehicle
3. You tell the examiner “Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.” (“Best regards” or “Thanks in advance”)
4. You adjust your seat
  - *Pump the brakes and make sure your knees are not fully extended. Make sure there is a bend in your leg even when you press on the brakes all the way. (They do not want to see your knee locked out when breaking)*
5. Put on and adjust seat belt. Make sure the examiner and any **passengers** have done so as well. If there are several drivers on the same day, you may get to ride as a passenger before you drive
6. Adjust the rearview mirrors and side mirrors. Turn on the ignition (without starting the engine) if you need to

# Step by Step (Cont.)

7. Turn on the engine
8. Once the examiner says “hai” or “go,” you check your rearview mirror, turn your signal on (going right), check left mirror, right mirror, and right blind spot, put the gear in drive, take off the emergency break, and go
  - *Emergency break is the last thing to do before you begin to move the car*
9. If you have a practice round before the test actually begins, they are still looking at you closely and I would treat it as a test. Watch their body language for signs of approval or disapproval
  - *Your hands should be in the 10/2 position. No underhand grip at any point*
10. If you do a practice run, you will return to the beginning and then the test will begin

# Step by Step (Cont.)

11. When turning a corner, pump the breaks 2 times to slow down to 20km or less
  - *Be sure to take your foot entirely **off the pedal when pumping**. They have an electrical light indicator to see if you are pumping too much or not enough*
12. After the second corner, the examiner will ask you to speed up to 40 km. It is important to speed up to exactly 40 km
13. When turning right, check your rearview mirror, turn your signal on, check left mirror, right mirror, and right blind spot, move to the right side of the road and turn.
  - *You must turn your turn signal on 30 meters prior to turning (it is safe to do it as soon as the instructor tells you to turn)*
14. When turning right into a double lane, **be sure to drive into the left (far) lane. This may be different from other countries, that teach you to drive into “the nearest available lane”**
15. When making a hard left, you must stay within 1 meter of the curb

# Step by Step (Cont.)

16. When driving through the Z and S curbs, the slower the better. They will not deduct points for being too slow

- *Z/S curb – these are the only required special courses you will need to drive for “Gaimen kirikae” (as of October 2020)*
- *If you hit/get on the curb: stop immediately. Check your rearview mirror, check left mirror, right mirror, and look back as you reverse (if you follow the proper protocol to correct a minor mistake, the deduction will be much less)*
- *If you get on the curb and fall off, it is an automatic fail*
- *If you have to correct more than 3 times, it is an automatic fail*
- *\*driving VERY slowly is the key\**

# Step by Step (Cont.)

17. When turning hard left, stay close to the curb (1 meter)
18. When turning left, check your rearview mirror, turn your turn signal on, check right mirror, left mirror, and left blind spot, move to the left side of the **road**, 30 meters prior to turning
19. Check your blind spot one more time just before turning left
20. When crossing a train track (or just a train sign), look both directions before crossing (unless there is a stop sign, there is no need to stop)
21. When crossing an intersection with no lights or stop lights, **slow down** and look in both directions before crossing
22. When crossing an intersection with no lights or stop lights, but there is a wall and you cannot see the road well, stop. Move up slowly looking both ways. When it looks clear, go

# Step by Step (Cont.)

23. You will need to complete 2 lane changes (as of October 2020) from the left lane to the right to turn right. Check your rearview mirror, turn your signal on, check left mirror, right mirror, right blind spot, and move to the right side of the road
  - *You must complete it **before the solid line***
24. When turning right after the lane change, you do the same thing again. Check your rearview mirror, turn your signal on, check left mirror, right mirror, right blind spot, and move to the right side of the road
25. When you are coming into the parking rows or area, the examiner will tell you to park at a spot (number 1-6)
26. You will drive up to that number, with **your tires about 30-50 cm** away from the curb
  - Think: 1 large foot length
27. Drive so that the front of the car (hood) lines up with the number sign

# Step by Step (Cont.)

28. Put the car into park. Turn off the engine

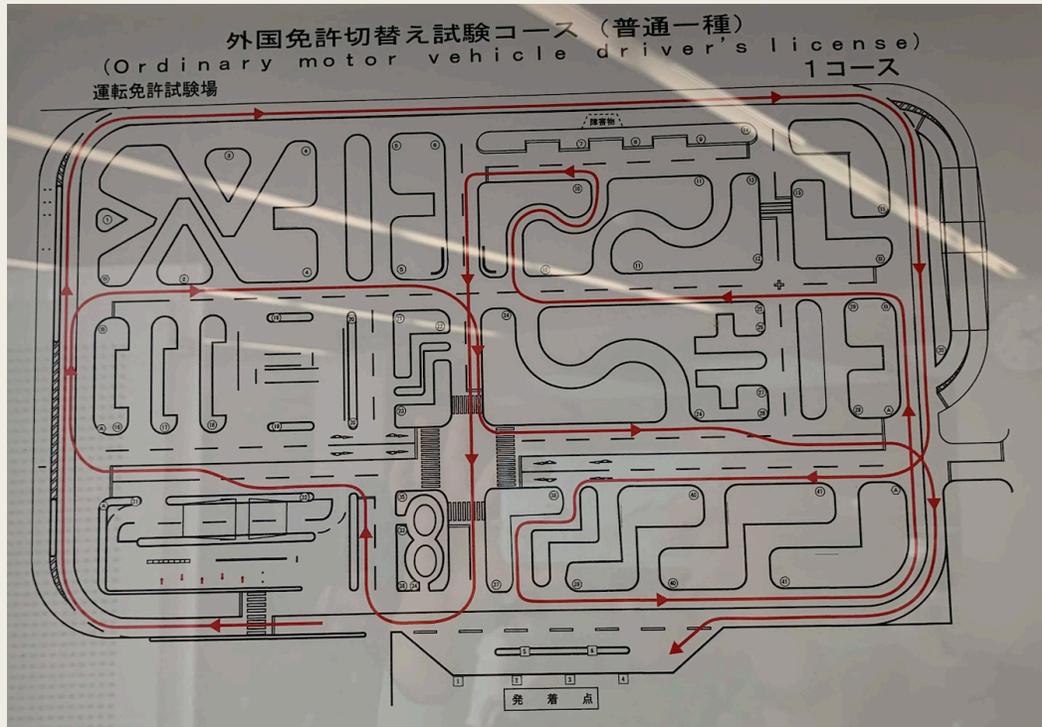
29. The examiner will ask the passenger to leave (the person who is taking the test next) and tell you some, but not necessarily all, of what you did wrong -- or if you have passed

- *During the test orientation, the examiner stated that this was “not a driving school.” Example: If you make 5 mistakes, they will only tell you about 1-2 mistakes. Even if you correct the 1-2 mistakes, **you will still have 3 other mistakes that can cause you to fail the second test***

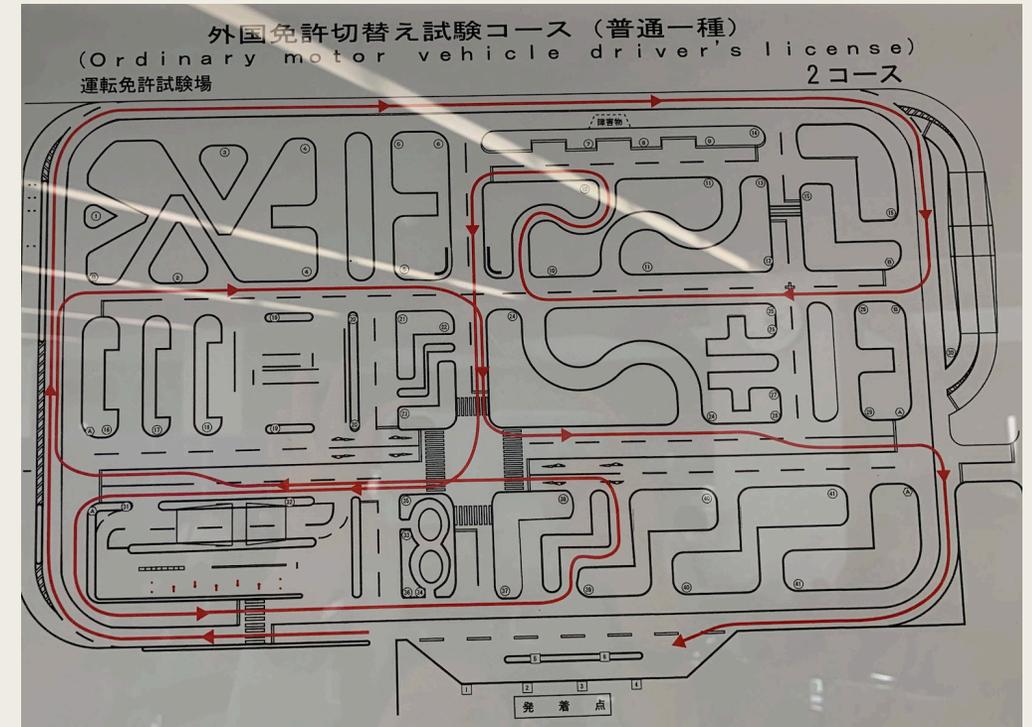
30. Before exiting, check your right blind spot to ensure no car is coming. Exit and walk around the back of the car and head back to the building

31. You go back to the check-in desk and receive further instructions to obtain your license if you passed, or schedule another test 1-3 weeks out if you did not

# Other Information: Driving Courses



Course 1 - as of 10/2020



Course 2 - as of 10/2020

# Other Information

## Driving Courses (Cont.)

- If the examiner tells you that you will be driving Course 1, they will score you based on the directions listed for Course 1 on the day of the exam. However, mistakes are possible
  - *What I saw happen: An examiner said “turn left (hidari)” when the course said to turn right (migi). Remember that the examiner does this 20x times a day and they do make mistakes. Confirm the direction “Koko, migi de ii desu ka?” The examiners DO NOT determine the course themselves. They are supposed to follow what the course layout is supposed to be*
  - *I saw or heard of at least two people who made this mistake on my driving day: they followed the examiner’s directions, turned the wrong way, and the examiner didn’t notice his mistake (and he probably deducted points)*

# Other Information

## Driving Courses (Cont.)

- If you do make a wrong turn by mistake, the examiner will reroute you to continue the drive. This is not a point deduction in of itself, however, they are scoring you at all times, even during the rerouting, so you don't want to drive more than you have to
  - *Driving longer than you need to may cause you to make more mistakes*

*Examiners' not telling you all the reasons why you fail is a major reason why some people have to take a driving test a dozen times or more (the average is 3~4). In this way, the driving test is designed so to make it almost impossible to pass on the first time. This is why Japanese students go to driving schools for \$5000~10,000 – and gaimen kirikae applicants are strongly advised to practice at least once at a school if they want a chance to pass on the first try*

# Other information

## “*Anzen Kakunin*”

- *Anzen Kakunin* (overall safety awareness, also known as “situational awareness”)
- This is a very important portion of your driving test. When checking the mirrors and checking the blind spots, it is important to physically turn your head to look
- Be obvious
- If you just use your eyes to look, the examiner might miss it and deduct points
- When in doubt, do it again!

# Other information

## “*Kyanseru Machi*”

- Cancellation Wait (キャンセル待ち- *kyanseru machi*)
  - *If you are scheduled for months in advance and need to complete the paperwork sooner, you can try “kyanseru machi”*
  - *Steps:*
    - Call: +81 98-851-1000 at 8:30 a.m. everyday
    - Provide them with your account #
    - You are then put on a waiting list for that day and if there are any cancellations, they will call you in the afternoon to tell you the new date and time
    - You must do this **everyday**

※沖縄県公安委員会指定の自動車教習所が県内に21校あります

## 沖縄本島



## Other Information Driving School

I recommend practicing at a driving school

*I practiced 2 times (once two weeks before and once the day before my driving test, 5400 yen each time) and passed my test the first time*

Most places charge 5400 yen to 6000 yen per course

*I took my classes at the Miike Driving School (美池自動車学校)*

X	Does not take GK clients
O or Δ	Takes only "kyanseru machi" clients

# Other Information

## Driving School (Cont.)

- All driving schools have mostly students who are currently learning how to drive from zero to obtain their license
- For that reason, it is not possible for "Gaimen Kirikae" people to schedule driving classes in advance, like regular students
- You need to go to the school 30 minutes – 1 hour prior to whenever they do their driving classes, and wait to see if there are instructors available for you that day
  - *I waited total of 5 hours to drive twice (on two separate days)*
- Remember that everything related to driver's licenses in Japan is run by the Japanese police (or agencies run and staffed by the police). Many or most of the examiners and staff may be ex or retired police officers. Be friendly and polite, but serious at all times

# Thank you!

- I hope this helps you obtain your license.

I hope to create a YouTube video soon. Stay tuned!

- Good luck and safe driving!