

Barrie driving school offers high-tech road test

Simulator can duplicate all kinds of weather

BY MICHELE HENRY

When his tire blew, Joe Rubino gripped the steering wheel tightly and swerved across two lanes of traffic. After recovering, he hit another obstacle – a patch of fog blocked his view of the road and Rubino nearly slammed into a stopped car.

The instructor for DriveWise, a new driver training school launched in Barrie yesterday, narrowly avoided being seriously hurt.

He doesn't owe it to his expertise as a driver. Rubino wasn't actually in a car. In fact, he was sitting indoors in a driving simulator – the first of its kind in Canada used for driver training.

"The same technology that's in this machine is used in flight simulators," said Rubino, from the plush driver's seat. "It can do almost anything a car can do and we can simulate any kind of scenario; black ice, rain, accidents, even potholes."

Lesley de Repentigny, president of DriveWise, said the \$100,000 mobile machine is an unparalleled tool for teaching safe, defensive driving, and is the best preparation for being behind the real wheel.

She said that in the United States, training with the device has reduced police accidents by 25 per cent – imagine what it could do with novice motorists.

"Before getting into a car for the first time, students can build up some skills, their decision-making capabilities, and confidence," she said, explaining that in regular driving school students get 25 hours of



MARK WANZEL PHOTO

David Maxwell sits behind the wheel of a driving simulator, Thursday, while visiting the DriveWise instruction facility in Barrie. Designed to train both new and experienced drivers, the simulator is the first of its kind in Canada.

in-class training and 10 hours of in-car practise.

DriveWise has permission from the Ministry of Transportation to be used as a teaching device during the 25 hours of in-class time.

"So, students essentially get 16 hours of driving time," de Repentigny said, adding studies show people better retain skills they practise as opposed to ones they learn about through lectures.

With the safe environment of the simulator, students learn how to cope with almost any scenario they encounter while driving, said de Repentigny. With only 10 hours of in-car practise driving schools generally offer, it is unlikely students would come across that range of situations, she said.

"They can learn how to drive in winter weather even if they take the course in the summer," she said.

The 1,500-pound simulator sits in the corner of the DriveWise office at 237 Mapleview Dr. East.

The machine looks like a large video game, but Rubino and de Repentigny say the simulator is no joke.

Three wide screens depicting the roadway envelope a realistic dashboard, console and driver's seat. The front screen has a rear view as well. Rubino says from the driver's seat, it's tough to tell you're not on the highway.

"When you're immersed in the situation, your adrenaline starts going, your heart palpitates," said de Repentigny.

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