

WINTERIZING YOUR RIDE

The days are getting shorter which means that before we know it, winter will be upon us yet again. It's never too early to make sure you're ready for the colder weather; the last thing you want is to be stranded somewhere unprepared or caught without required equipment for driving in winter weather.

RULES FOR WINTER TIRES

Germany - All motor vehicles and motorcycles must have clearly marked winter (snowflake) or all-season (M+S) tires for winter conditions. Specific dates are not cited for the use of winter tires, but Germans typically follow the rule of "von O bis O," meaning from October to *Ostern* (Easter). Regardless of the time of year, if you are caught driving in winter conditions without appropriate tires, you will be fined. And if you are in a traffic accident without winter tires in winter conditions, you can be held responsible by authorities, and your insurance company may deny coverage.

Italy - Winter or all-season tires are required on most autostradas and mountain roads as noted with signs along the roadway. Date requirements vary by thoroughfare, but usually winter tires are required from Oct. 15 to April 15 on mountain roads and from Oct. 15 to April 15 or Nov. 15 to April 15 on autostradas.

Belgium, The Netherlands and U.K. - In general, winter tires are not required in these countries unless directed by signs or authorities. But keep in mind that as the temperature drops below 7° C, standard tires can harden, creating less traction while driving. Winter tires provide better vehicle control and can improve your car's performance and fuel efficiency during the winter. It's also better to be equipped for more extreme conditions than what is forecasted; you don't want to wake up to several inches of snow and be unprepared.

BUYING WINTER TIRES

You may opt to buy tires on your local economy, on your installation or online. Keep in mind that if your tires have to be ordered, it could take four to 12 weeks for them to arrive, and you don't want to be caught without the right tires when the temperature drops. A popular choice for purchasing online, www.tirerack.com provides the option to ship priority, so your tires may arrive more quickly, though the price of shipping will be higher.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

The required tire tread depth varies by country, though 4mm is recommended. Winter tire regulations are also different across Europe, so do your research before traveling during the winter. Snow chains are not generally mandated unless directed by signs or authorities. And studded tires are prohibited in a number of European countries. If you rent a car, ensure that it meets the country's legal requirements for winter weather.

OTHER WINTER CHECKS

Make sure your windshield wipers are in excellent shape and top up with windshield washing fluid that has an anti-freezing additive. Check your lights weekly to ensure that they are all working. If your car battery is showing any signs of problems or is more than five years old, it's probably time to have it replaced. Also make sure your engine's anti-freeze level and strength are adequate.

If you're driving a diesel, be aware that it is sensitive to cold conditions and can actually "gel," or turn into a solidified state, which can cause your engine to malfunction. Block heaters help warm the engine when not in use. If your car does not have a block heater installed, talk to a trusted mechanic about the cost of installing one on your vehicle. Or, you can buy a portable heater to help keep the



diesel fuel at a safe temperature. Many European countries set standards for fuel stations to switch to a blended "winter diesel" with additives to help slow the solidifying process, but during extremely cold conditions the fuel may still thicken.

Make sure you have cold weather basics in your car in the event that you are stranded. Items such as a flashlight, blanket, granola bars and bottled water can help keep you comfortable and safe while waiting for rescue. Keep a cellphone charger handy in the event that your phone battery starts running low. And if you haven't done so already, look into automobile associations such as the U.K.'s AA, Germany's ADAC and Italy's ACI. For a reasonable annual fee, you can receive 24-hour roadside assistance, much like with AAA in the United States.

Make sure you have an ice scraper and insulated gloves for removing snow and ice from your car. Driving without clearing your entire car limits your visibility, can create a hazard for other motorists, and is illegal in some countries.

FOR MORE ADVICE

For more questions about winter driving requirements, contact your local vehicle registration or inspection offices. And remember to give yourself more time to get to work and appointments during the winter — burning rubber is a bad idea. ■