



Snow Going: Winter Driving Tips

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Expert advice for hitting the road in snowy, slick conditions.

Sometimes, there's only one way to get where you're going: through a snowstorm. When your destination is a ski mountain, winter driving skills are especially critical. We asked the experts from Colorado's driver safety program, the [MasterDrive Experience](#), for their advice on driving in winter conditions.

The first thing to remember, says MasterDrive's vice president of training, Mark Stolberg, is that a burly four-wheel-drive vehicle doesn't necessarily keep you safer on gnarly roads, especially in the high country. "It's like giving someone the best skis on the market," Stohlberg says. "It's not going to make them a good skier. You have to train the *driver*, regardless of what the equipment is."

Here, what to keep in mind when you hop behind the wheel in the winter.

Before You Go

Get your car serviced before winter weather hits. "Breakdowns are more common this time of year," Stolberg says, "particularly when snow and ice strike." You never want to find yourself on the side of a slippery road in freezing conditions, tinkering under the hood or changing a tire while oncoming traffic barrels by.

Pack a winter emergency kit in case you get caught in unexpected weather or stranded.

"Prepare for the worst and hope for the best," Stolberg says. Stash the following items somewhere easily accessible in your car: Shovel, ice scraper, jumper cables, tire chains, and tow rope; extra windshield washer fluid; flashlight or headlamp and extra batteries; bag of salt, kitty litter, or carpet scraps for traction; first aid kit, wooden matches, a candle, reflective triangles, and brightly colored cloth; non-perishable, high-energy snacks like dried fruits and nuts; extra layers for warmth, such as mittens, socks, a hat, a blanket, or a sleeping bag.

Plan wisely. Always tell someone where you're going, what route you're taking, and when you expect to arrive and return. Build in extra travel time, and warn the necessary people that you may be late—put safety before punctuality. Travel only on routes you know well and main roads, even if a back way may have less traffic. If you're heading to more remote high-country destinations, check avalanche conditions (try the [Colorado Avalanche Information Center](#) or the [Utah Avalanche Center](#)) along mountain passes and plan an alternate route in case yours becomes impassable. Clear the entirety of your windshield from snow and ice—not just a portal on the driver's side—and brush all snow off the top of the car so it doesn't slide down the windshield and obscure your view. Make sure your cell phone is charged, but don't rely on cell phone communication for an emergency, especially in the mountains where coverage is spotty.



Colorado Mountain Express

While You're Driving

Following distance: “Remember, double double,” Stolberg says. Three seconds is standard in ideal conditions. Double that to six for wet conditions. Double *that* to 12 seconds between you and the car in front of you on a snowy day.

Visibility: Keep your lights on when it's snowing, even during the day. It increases your visibility to other drivers.

Stop lights: If you're approaching a light that turns yellow, check your rearview mirror to gauge the distance to the car behind you. It may be safer to run the yellow than to brake hard in slick conditions. When a light turns green, look before you accelerate. Some vehicles may be running the light for the aforementioned reason, or unable to stop and sliding into the intersection.

Don't assume: Even if the temperature is above freezing, you can still hit ice on exposed roadways, overpasses, or bridges, which freeze first. Pay careful attention in these areas, especially shady spots.

Passing: Don't pass snowplows or sanding trucks. Visibility is limited for these drivers, and the road in front of them is likely worse than the road behind.

Wind: High winds often accompany heavy snowfall, and high-profile vehicles (even with four-wheel-drive) are more susceptible to dangerous gusts. Be aware of the drivers around you in SUVs, trucks, buses, or anything towing a trailer. Heavy vehicles also take longer to slow and stop, so avoid changing lanes and driving in front of them.

Hills: Avoid stopping partway up a hill by waiting until it's clear of most other cars (if possible) or leaving plenty of room in front of you. Maintain a constant speed, and change gears before you hit the hill so shifting doesn't disrupt your progression. On a downward slope, check your speed before the descent and downshift to a low gear, always staying well behind the car in front of you.

Stay alert: Winter driving is much more fatiguing than normal travel. Make frequent rest stops to

stretch your legs, grab a snack, and re-energize. “It only takes five minutes to significantly improve your level of alertness,” Stolberg says.

Pulling away from a stop: Use second gear, and ease your foot off the clutch gently to avoid wheel-spin.

Getting stuck: Shovel as much as you can and pour your sand/gravel/kitty litter under the wheels, or use floor mats or carpet squares for traction. Do not spin the wheels, as it will only melt the snow, which could turn to ice. Give it gas very gently, and carefully rock the car back and forth with a second person.

Getting stranded: If you cannot move the vehicle, place your reflective triangles outside the car, tie a bright cloth to the antenna or door handle, and call 911 or other roadside emergency assistance if you have reception. “Stay in your car,” Stolberg says, “unless you know exactly where you are, how far you have to go to get help, and you are certain you will improve your situation. Walking in a storm can be very dangerous.” He also warns against overexertion. “Don’t work enough to get hot and sweaty. Wet clothing loses insulation, making you more susceptible to the effects of hypothermia.” Run the engine in 10-minute intervals for heat only if you’re certain that blowing or freezing wet snow hasn’t clogged the exhaust pipe, which could force dangerous carbon monoxide into the vehicle. Turn on the dome light at night while the engine is running for visibility. Do all you can to stay warm until help arrives.

Express Delivery

Not up for braving the roads behind the wheel? Colorado Mountain Express will get you safely to the slopes.

If you're flying into Colorado for that long-awaited ski trip (and the snow this season is worth it!), tackling the snowy mountain roads yourself may not be on your vacation to-do list. Luckily,

[Colorado Mountain Express](#) (CME) has a fleet of more than 250 vans and cars that provide hourly shuttle service between [Denver International Airport](#) and every Vail Resorts mountain in Colorado—that's [Breckenridge](#), [Keystone](#), [Vail](#), and [Beaver Creek](#). CME will also collect you from the [Eagle-Vail](#) airport for a shorter shuttle ride to your favorite resort.

Even better, CME is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year by reducing its environmental footprint. The company is adding 20 new fuel-efficient Mercedes Benz Sprinter vans with clean diesel technology that will cut down on emissions. Passengers aboard the 12-person shuttles will enjoy a quieter ride, more comfortable seating, and larger windows for taking in the alpine scenery. Sound better than fighting the roads on your own? We agree. Learn more [here](#), then sit



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