

Winter wheels

Motoring journalist Tim Barnes-Clay looks at the 'ABC' of winter driving for those of us who are not James Bond, and checks out the best 4x4s for the season ahead



AS temperatures start to get lower and the nights draw in, it means one thing is certain: winter is only around the corner.

Unfortunately, there are car accidents on Britain's roads every time there's a cold snap – so anything you can do to help avoid any heartbreak has to be a good

thing. The most important message is to err on the side of caution and not get behind the wheel if it's snowing or a flurry is forecast.

In rural counties you can find yourself in remote areas, and for that reason it's always best to be prepared. Listen to forecasts, and make sure your vehicle is

properly maintained and kitted out. If you get caught in bad weather the most critical thing is to slow right down and keep your distance, taking into account it will take you much longer to stop in an emergency.

With that in mind, it's time for us to start thinking about the 'ABC' of winter driving.

Avoid driving in snow and other perilous conditions. Never set off when it's snowing or forecast to, and avoid driving if you possibly can in other bad conditions like fog, heavy rain and ice. Consider alternatives such as walking or using public transport if available. Speak to your employer about working from home when weather is very bad, especially if you live in a rural area prone to snow or floods.

Be prepared. Make sure your car is well maintained, and tyres have a tread depth of at least 3mm. Check forecasts and plan your route to avoid roads likely to be more risky and allow plenty of time. Pack a winter driving kit in case you're caught out. This should include: an ice scraper or de-icer; torch; cloths; a blanket and warm clothes; food and drink; first-aid kit; spade; warning triangle; and a high-visibility vest. Always take a fully charged phone in case of emergencies, but don't be tempted to use it when driving.

Careful and cautious driving. If you do get caught out driving in hazardous conditions, you need to slow right down to increase the distance from the vehicle in front. In snow or icy conditions stopping distances increase by as much as ten times so you need to drop right back. Keep a careful look-out for people on foot and on bikes who may be harder to spot.

Not surprisingly, the Arctic weather that goes with the UK's winter can set the cash registers ringing in car dealerships. Indeed, many of us will now be eyeing up 4x4s for their ice and snow beating skills. So, here are some of the best all-wheel drive vehicles for you to peruse.

The new Range Rover Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) has a more self-assured exterior and lavish interior than the old model Range Rover Sport. It's also more

flexible as it now comes with the option of carrying seven people.

The comfy cabin mixes style and luxury with elegant lines, top quality materials and spoonfuls of sporting character. The athletic air of the car's cocoon is also reflected in the smaller steering wheel, higher centre console and generous seat bolsters.

The Range Rover Sport's high driving position instils a sense of confidence and the steering feels light and direct.

Maximum ground clearance has been increased and the air suspension system automatically varies between ride heights, while Land Rover's Terrain Response 2 gadgetry chooses the most appropriate programme for whatever the wheels are driving over – or through.

The Range Rover Sport will certainly defy the white stuff – and much more, but you'll pay through the nose for it.

The more reasonably priced Volvo XC70 looks at home in any environment, whether it's in the middle of the open country or at your place of business.

As with its V70 estate car cousin, the XC70's rear bench can be folded down in three 40/20/40 sections. Collapse all of the seats flat and the load space swells from 575 litres to 1,600 litres.

The Volvo's seats are certainly amongst the most comfortable and the XC70 feels one of the best rides for keeping you protected. Everything about the vehicle feels solid – from the reassuring 'thud' the closing doors make to the quality cabin materials. Off-road, it's not as gallant as a pure mud-plugger, but the XC70 will shepherd the family safely along snow-covered roads with aplomb.

If you're after a cheaper, tough-as-old-boots workhorse then look no further than the Isuzu D-Max. The 4x4 pick-up is available with a car-like four-up cab, meaning you can actually use the vehicle as a tool as well as family transport.

The Isuzu still offers respectable equipment. This includes air conditioning, daytime running lights and electric windows. The diesel-powered D-Max is propelled by a farm-machinery sounding 2.5-litre twin-turbo lump, and is available with a six-speed manual or five-speed automatic transmission. The motor has a 'shift-on-the-fly' system, allowing you to adjust between two and four-wheel drive modes while travelling at up to 60 mph. That's impressive, not to mention convenient, but its ace card is its load-lugging talent. The towing capacity of the D-Max has been increased by 500 kg, adding to its already colossal three tonne pulling power.

Above, **How not to do it, unless you are James Bond in Die another Day.** Below, left to right, **Range Rover, Volvo and the Isuzu, some of the best all-wheel drive vehicles**

