



Ross Bentley's High Performance Driving Tips - #11

DRIVING IN ADVERSE CONDITIONS

When was the last time you drove in the rain? Yesterday? Today? It does seem to rain every now and then, doesn't it? You would think with all the practise we get, we would be good at it. And some of you probably are. But, there are a lot of drivers out there who still need improvement. I'm sure you can point them out next time you're out driving in the rain.

Driving in any adverse condition, be it rain, fog, night time, sleet or snow, obviously creates greater hazards than in perfect conditions. Driving smoothly and with full concentration is absolutely critical, and cannot be stressed enough.

Modern radial-ply tires, correctly inflated, give excellent grip in rain most of the time. But dirty, oily or worn road surfaces can create slippery patches, which can catch you off guard. For this reason, some cornering speed reduction is obviously required.

In the rain, to maximise traction, you want to drive where everyone hasn't driven in the dry. Through years of cars driving over a particular part of the road, the surface becomes polished smooth and the pores in the pavement are packed with rubber and oil. That is exactly where you don't want to be. You want to search out the granular, rough surface, even if it means driving around the outside of the corner - not driving what is normally the ideal line.

At a certain water depth and speed of vehicle, a tire can no longer remain in contact with the roadway, and rides up on the water being built up in front of the tread. This is known as aquaplaning.

Under normal conditions, such as a level road with constant rain, your front tires will aquaplane first. The rear tires are riding in an empty wake made by the fronts, and therefore will remain in contact with the road longer. If you attempt to travel at a rate of speed far greater than is necessary to aquaplane, then both front and rear tires will ride on the water and you will lose total control of your car.

Since aquaplaning normally starts with only the front tires, it should be relatively easy to get away from this condition. If your steering feels a bit light, or uncontrollable, ease your foot off the throttle just slightly, and do not turn the steering wheel. Do not take your foot completely off the throttle, as the compression braking effect of the engine and forward weight transfer may cause your rear wheels to slip. Under no circumstances should you hit the brakes. This will only cause you to slide even quicker.

Turning the steering wheel while aquaplaning can be very dangerous. Imagine "skating" across the top of a puddle with the front wheels turned at an angle (as if trying to corner). When you reach the other side of the puddle, the front tires will regain traction, while the rears are still on top of the puddle with no traction. The front-end of the car is going to follow the front tires, and the back-end is then going to skid sideways, causing you to spin out. Therefore, whenever you begin to aquaplane, make sure your steering is pointed straight ahead.

A few more tips for rain driving: Because water runs downhill, it's especially important to drive around the top of a banked corner. Do not drive in the wheel ruts of a well-worn road, which are full of water. Avoid the little rivers where the water runs deeper. Be very smooth with your shifts, and generally run one gear higher than normal. Be careful of pavement changes and painted road markings as they are much slicker than the surrounding asphalt.

After passing through deep water, drive slowly for a short distance keeping your left foot firmly on the brake pedal to dry them of water, then check to ensure that they are working properly.

When driving in the rain, make sure you have good visibility. De-fog and clean your windows before driving. Driving in the rain can be enjoyable, as it is an extra challenge, as long as you slow down, concentrate on the conditions and drive smoothly and precisely.

Some of the most serious car crashes occur at night as a result of drivers falling asleep at the wheel. The early warning signs of sleepiness are the fixed stare, the sensation of driving down a tunnel formed by the light of your headlights, yawning and, less commonly known, a tendency to touch your face or back of your neck. There is only one answer - STOP!

When driving in fog, use your low-beam headlights day and night. Your point of visual focus should be as far as you can see up the edge of the road on your side. And most important of all, look at what you can see, rather strain your eyes into the murk where you can't see anything. Eyestrain in fog or driving snow can quickly turn into drowsiness.

Once again, if you're well prepared for it, you can really enjoy the challenge of driving in adverse conditions.

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