

Tahoe tow driver offers some advice for winter travel

By Bill Donahue, Via

Black ice, fog, snowbanks, sleet—dangers are ever present on winter roads. So slow down, use extra caution, and keep your car in tip-top shape. AAA tow truck driver John Baker, owner of Emerald Bay Towing in South Lake Tahoe has been rescuing members in the state's snowiest highlands since he was 16 years old. He shares more winter wisdom.

Q I'm headed out on a winter road trip. What are my first steps?

A Check the weather conditions. If there's a pending storm, wait. Know your route and let someone else know it too.

Q A flashlight, a charged phone, extra clothing and blankets, water and food—anything else I need in my emergency road kit?

A An ice scraper with a brush.

Q Why is that so important?

A You have to clear all the snow off the car's top and hood, not just the windows. People drive with four feet of snow on top. The heater will turn that into an ice ball. When you hit the brakes, it'll fall forward, completely blind you, and tear the arms off your wipers.

Q Any recommendations on tires and chains for bad weather?

A People think tires labeled mud and snow are fine. But the question is, is it a traction tire? Get the right chains for your car. Don't get the big beefy ones you see on trucks for a small car. Check with your manufacturer. And remember, the speed limit for driving with chains is 25 mph.

Q Besides staying in the car, what else should I do while waiting for a tow to arrive?

A If the car is running, don't run the heater full blast. The battery can't keep up. Be patient. People panic—a minute can feel like two or three hours.

Q What was your most intense rescue?

A A friend called to tell me that my wife got buried in an avalanche while driving. She went from 35 mph to zero within 10 feet; the snow busted out her passenger window and cocooned her in darkness. It took 10 of us to dig her out. She was fine. Luckily, she had made a point of driving with a pack of cars, so people could call for help right away.

Q Advice for ski vacationers?

A Always put your key in a zippered pocket or keep it in a locker while you're skiing. There's a lot of snow up there – drop your key and it's lost forever.