

SUMMER DRIVING: THE RMI WAY

Summer has arrived, and for many motorists this means it is time for a road trip. Vehicles that have only been used on short hops since last year will be put through their paces on the main traffic arteries of the UK and Europe and in the hottest weather conditions. It can be an exciting prospect, but things could go wrong if a car is not properly prepared.

Sue Robinson, Director of the Retail Motor Industry Federation (RMI), explains: 'After months of winter driving, when trips in the car are often short, long summer journeys can be hard for a car. If a vehicle has not been properly looked after, problems could arise.

Hot weather can put extra strain on the engine and cooling system of any vehicle, and can lead to overheating

- Modern air conditioning systems are designed to operate all year round, yet many drivers who choose to switch their refrigeration system off during the winter will experience problems when it is brought back into use during the summer months. This can cause leakage of the fluorinated gasses with heavily detrimental effects on the environment.
- Make sure your system is fully charged with refrigerant and that any changes are done in line with the car manufacturer's instructions.
- The electrical system, especially the battery, must be able to take the full brunt of the fan system at full blast on its coolest setting.
- Anti-freeze becomes very corrosive when it reaches the end of its lifespan, you should have the coolant tested and the cooling system 'flushed,' and replenished should it be needed. Cooling hoses and drive belts should be checked as well to avoid roadside failures.

TYRES – YOUR SAFETY FOOTPRINT

Tyres need to be checked as the warmer weather approaches. During the winter months, wear and damage to tyres can go unnoticed. Drivers should always ensure that their tyres are safe and legal, and ready for possible higher cruising speeds and mileage.

Robinson said: 'As the weather improves, motorists may drive more often, and this puts stress on tyres. Heavy use on damaged tyres could be dangerous. Worn tyres add considerably to braking distances especially after summer showers.'

The legal requirement for tyre tread depth is at least 1.6 mm across the central three-quarters of the breadth of the tread and around the entire circumference. However, motorists may not have thought to check this during the winter months, and they may be driving with illegal tyres without realising.

Here are some things to think about:

- Long road trips with heavier-than-normal loads and very warm temperatures can stress tyres.
- Cracks could have appeared over the winter. These in turn can be aggravated by hitting a pot-hole or knocking the curb when parking. If cuts are made in the tyre wall, the tyre can be weakened, making it dangerous. This could necessitate a replacement tyre.
- Make sure you have the recommended pressure in all your tyres including the one you should store in your boot for emergencies.

- In the event that you need to use the spare, make sure that the pressure is set to the highest level used on your car, so that you can deflate the tyre to the required pressure. It is advisable to check this with a gauge as soon as possible.
- It is vital not to over or under-inflate your tyres as this may cause the car to handle and brake badly, it can also cause uneven wear.
- Have wheel alignment and tracking checked at least once a year to try and ensure even tyre wear.
- The new 'run-flat' tyres still get punctures and drivers are advised, more so than ever, to have these inspected regularly by their garage especially prior to a long journey or sustained high speed.

WINDSCREENS

Windscreens should be kept as clean as possible. Robinson explains: 'Empty washer bottles, fly stains, low-level sunlight, and dust can all combine to impair vision for the motorist. Air conditioning can also cause a 'haze' on the inside of the windscreen. It is absolutely vital that windscreens and mirrors are kept crystal clean at all times. The washer bottle should be checked regularly, and a new set of wipers should mean better vision and less streaking as well.'

Basic tips for a clean windscreen include:

- Check front and rear blades for wear. If you do a great deal of driving, they may need replacing quite frequently.
- Blades should be cleaned regularly to remove ground-in dirt, pine needles and insects etc. This helps to prevent damage.
- Streaky screens can be caused by the rubber losing its flexibility. If this occurs the blades must be replaced.
- Check the angle of the wiper arms - worn pins will spoil their action; cause them to judder or, at worst damage the screen.
- Check washer bottle levels. Add screen wash and dilute according to instructions. Always keep spare fluid in the boot. Ensure that the washer spray holes are clear of blockages.
- Insects and grit can be easily removed with a sponge and warm water. For more stubborn dirt, use a screen clean paste to tackle the job effectively but do not use the same cleaning cloths that you have used for the car bodywork on the windscreen - they may leave contaminants on its surface.

'However, the windscreen is not the only part of the car that may need a clean,' said Robinson, 'so an overall wash is an excellent idea.'

'Dried-on dirt may lodge in the underside of wheel arches, and should be removed to prevent corrosion and possible future expense. If paintwork is damaged by stones, give it a touch-up or have it repaired as soon as possible to prevent rust from forming and reducing your car's value.'

OUT AND ABOUT

'Many people do more motorway driving in the summer than at any other time,' said Robinson. 'By following a few guidelines, those who are unused to motorway driving should be able to travel in safety.'

- Ensure you get a good night's sleep before a journey. If you can, avoid long journeys between midnight and 6am when your alertness is likely to be at a

minimum. A heavy meal before driving is not advisable, as it may induce drowsiness

- A break every two hours is recommended, if you feel sleepy, stop in a safe place such as a service area.
- Traffic on motorways usually travels faster than on other roads. You have less time to react, so use your mirrors continuously, watch your distances and look much further ahead.
- Heavy summer traffic can delay your journey, so make sure your passengers have drinks and snacks to hand. Avoid distractions as taking your eyes off the road for even a few seconds can increase the risk of accidents. Try to keep children occupied with games, books etc

ALL ABROAD!

Many motorists will be taking their cars overseas in the coming months, or hiring a vehicle once they arrive at their holiday destination. Using vehicles abroad brings with it some regional requirements such as the need to carry a container of fuel and even in some countries the need for two warning triangles. General guidelines can be obtained from organisations such as the RAC and the AA, but according to Robinson, there is still much that motorists can check themselves: 'Basic tips would include checking that any hired vehicle is roadworthy.'

When using your own car, carry a breakdown kit, in case of emergencies. This could include:

- jack
- spare wheel
- jump leads
- spare fuses
- torch
- first aid items
- warning triangle

Those motoring in most European countries will need to consider their headlights. Do not forget when driving on the opposite side of the road you will need to ensure that headlights have been suitably adapted to redirect the light pattern. Newer vehicles especially those fitted with Xenon lights cannot have adaptors adhered to the outside of the lights as with some of the older cars. Due to the extreme voltages of these new lights adaption to left hand driving should be done by your garage.

You may also require spare bulbs, fuel and 'high-visibility' jackets' to conform to local motoring regulations. It is your responsibility to be aware of these requirements.' High-visibility jackets must be available to the driver and all passengers from inside the vehicle so that they can be put on before leaving the vehicle— storage in the boot is not acceptable and would render the driver liable to a fine.

Other tips for driving abroad include:

- Take extra time to familiarise yourself with the routes you will be using.
- Familiarise yourself with road signs and driving protocols such as priority from the right.
- Observe normal road courtesies.
- Inform your insurance company if you intend to drive your own car abroad.

Motorists who feel that they could use some professional help when preparing their car for the warmer weather should visit an RMI member garage.

Robinson commented: 'Businesses that belong to the RMI are bound by the conditions of their membership to provide a good service to their customers.'

'When having a service or any form of work carried out on your car use a reputable garage, be it the dealer who sold you the car or, a local independent garage .If the supplying garage is too far away for such jobs, a local RMI member would be happy to support you with service.

'A member will be able to advise you on the type of service you need, and will be able to point out potential problem areas before they arise, or become serious. In fact, whether you want to buy or sell a new or used car or motorcycle, service or repair your existing vehicle, find an auction house, or a cherished number plate dealer, the RMI will be able to help you.

'If you have a complaint against an RMI member garage, the RMI's National Conciliation Service should be able to help you to seek redress, if the problem cannot be solved in direct consultation with that member.'

To find a garage that is a member of the RMI, visit www.rmif.co.uk and use the 'Find a Service' function,.

You will also find details of RMI members that sell new and used cars or motorcycles, provide vehicle servicing and repair, run vehicle auctions, sell petrol, and deal in cherished number plates.

Robinson concludes: 'With a little preparation you will be ready to get onto the roads to enjoy a trouble-free summer.'