

Northgate Vehicle Hire's safety-focused, cash-saving maintenance tips

More people are killed and injured on Britain's roads in the winter, which makes it imperative that vehicles are maintained in tip-top condition.

With the onset of darker evenings, freezing driving conditions, fog and wet roads, the safety of drivers, passengers and other road users is therefore even more at risk.

Northgate, the UK's largest vehicle rental business, has a UK-wide reputation for promoting health and safety with a record that includes:

- Being one of just 29 'business champions' under the Government-backed 'Driving for Better Business' campaign, which is delivered by RoadSafe
- Winning in 2009 a prestigious Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents' Occupational Health and Safety Gold Award for the first time

Not only is it vital from a road safety point of view that all vehicles are kept in tip-top condition, but maintaining vehicles in accordance with best practice will save money.

KEEP IT CLEAN

1. Regular washing of the vehicle will protect paint work and ensure road salt and other contaminants are removed – particularly bird droppings. Soak with hot water first and then rub off. Only use shampoos designed for vehicle paintwork – not washing-up liquid
2. And don't forget to thoroughly clean inside the vehicle to ensure the 'right' appearance inside and out
3. Smoking in a vehicle not only damages your health but the vehicle's re-sale value too. At disposal time presentation is not just about how a vehicle looks, but also how it smells. The law also bans smoking in many vehicles
4. Clean up spilt drinks and sweets stuck on vehicle upholstery by using upholstery cleaner
5. Check and clean headlights and indicators before journeys – you need to see and be seen
6. Check that your front and rear windscreens are clear and your wipers work and mirrors are clean – poor visibility could mean you miss potential hazards

VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

1. Ensure all fluid levels are checked regularly - engine oil, engine coolant, power steering, brake fluid, antifreeze and screen wash levels
2. Always ensure manufacturer service interval schedules are followed. A failure to do so could prove costly and impact on warranty cover
3. Tyres should be regularly checked and maintained – at least monthly but more frequently if high mileage – to extend tyre life, improve fuel economy and maximise safety
 - Visually check the general state of tyres for cuts, bumps and uneven wear: worn shoulders indicate under-inflation; wear in the centre indicates over inflation; and wear on one side indicates wheel misalignment; and remove any stones and other objects embedded in the tread
 - Under-inflated tyres affect road grip, increase fuel consumption and tyre wear

- Tyre pressures are best checked against the manufacturer's recommendations when tyres are cold (when you have travelled less than 2 miles)
 - If you are carrying a full load of passengers or luggage or will be towing a trailer or caravan, tyre pressures should be increased in line with the vehicle manufacturer's recommendations. Details can be found in the handbook.
 - While the legal minimum tread depth is 1.6mm, consider replacing the tyres soon after the tread depth reaches 3mm, and always replace them once the tread is down to 2mm
 - Don't forget to also check the spare tyre is in good condition and correctly inflated if one is fitted
4. If the windscreen is frozen or covered in snow: use de-icer and a scraper to fully clear; don't use hot water; and don't use the wipers without first freeing them as you could burn out the electric motor

SAFE DRIVING

1. Drive smoothly, accelerate gently and brake sensibly – its safer and will conserve fuel and reduce wear and tear
2. Anticipate conditions and plan your journey. Allow additional time if weather conditions are poor and traffic congestion a possible issue
3. Keep your distance – only a fool breaks the two second rule. Tailgating the car in front and harsh braking could prove fatal
4. Do not exceed the speed limit
5. Don't use the gears as an 'engine brake' this can put strain on the clutch and transmission
6. Take a break from driving every two hours
7. Position head restraints correctly - the top of the head restraint should be level with the top of the seat occupants head to give them head protection and to stop their neck 'hyper-extending' backwards in a crash
8. Keep warm clothing, a torch and a blanket in the vehicle in cold weather
9. Check the effectiveness of brakes when safe to do, particularly after travelling through standing water

Northgate's UK Marketing Director Ross Clarkson said: "Vehicle maintenance and safe driving is crucial all year round, but even more so in the darker months.

"We ensure that all of our vehicles are fully maintained in our own network of workshops, so that when they go out on hire we know they are in tip-top condition.

"Ensuring vehicles are in sparkling conditions and maintained in accordance with manufacturer recommendations is a crucial part of safe driving and keeping running costs under control. We hope you follow our advice."

Further information:

The Highway Code – www.direct.gov.uk/highwaycode

Driving for Better Business Campaign – www.drivingforbetterbusiness.com

RoadSafe – www.roadsafe.com

RoSPA – www.rospa.com/roadsafety

Brake – www.brake.org.uk/advice

Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders – www.smmt.co.uk

The AA- www.theaa.com/motoring-advice/index.jsp

RAC – www.rac.co.uk/know-how/index.cgi

Ends