

Germany tightens laws defining winter tire requirements

HEIDELBERG, Germany – A new law passed by the German parliament that more clearly defines the use of winter tires in Germany went into effect Nov. 29.

U.S. Army Europe Office of the Provost Marshal officials said the law now states that motor vehicles, including motorcycles and four-wheel-drive vehicles, must have clearly marked winter or all-season tires when there is black ice, snow, slush, ice or frost on German roads.

“A winter tire is any tire marked by the manufacturer with the snowflake logo or M + S symbol, which stands for mud and snow [matsch und schnee],” said Tom Lorenzini, of the USAREUR Vehicle Registry. Even all-season tires can have this M + S symbol, he added.

The German automobile association ADAC recommends tires bearing the snowflake logo at right -- sometimes also called the “three-mountain” logo -- because those tires meet the highest standards for winter driving.



The minimum legal tire tread depth for Germany is 1.6mm, although ADAC recommends 4mm for winter driving. Other countries have more stringent requirements – Austrian law mandates 4mm minimum tread depth for winter tires, and other European countries have distinct winter driving laws as well. OPM officials said drivers should check with local authorities before crossing borders.



In some areas of Germany snow chains may be required during winter, but only as directed by police or road signs such as the one at left. The maximum speed limit while driving a vehicle with chains is 50 kilometers per hour.

While the law does not mandate calendar dates during which snow tires are required, German drivers often use the helpful rule of thumb “von O bis O” – “from O to O,” meaning snow tires should be put on in October and remain on until Ostern (Easter).

Under the new rules, fines have been doubled. Drivers caught using summer tires in ice, snow or slush will be fined 40 euro -- up from 20 euro in previous years, and those who cause an accident or obstruct traffic because they used inappropriate tires during winter conditions will be slapped with an 80 euro fine – up from 40 euro. In addition, some insurance companies may deny coverage to motorists driving with summer tires on wintery roads.

Safety experts warn, however, that winter tires are no magic potion against accidents and that drivers should always drive at reasonable speeds and keep a safe following distance from other vehicles.

Drivers who are unsure about winter tire requirements can contact their local vehicle registration or safety office. A list of vehicle registration locations and other information for U.S. forces personnel who drive in Europe is available at the USAREUR Registry of Motor Vehicles website at www.hqusareur.army.mil/rmv/default.htm.

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This piece was compiled from a report by Robert Szostek of the USAREUR Office of the Provost Marshal and other sources.