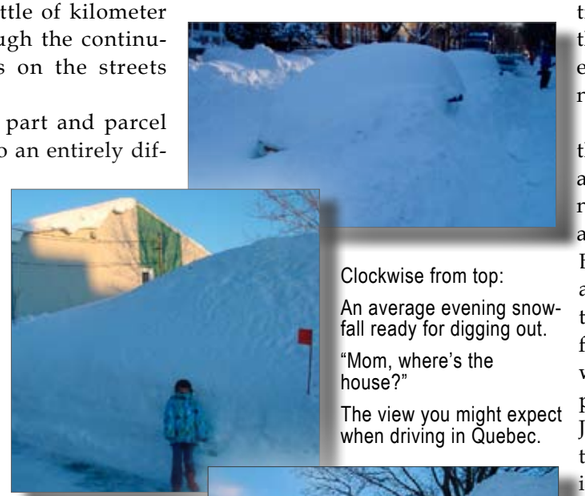
You call this Snow? now this is Snow

Canadian Yankee by Benjamin Hunting

When I moved down here to Massachusetts this summer from Montreal, I knew that there would be somewhat of a culture shock, a period of adjustment, if you will. From an automotive perspective, I realized that it would take time to get used to rotaries, drive-through banking and a strange lack of stop signs. The fact that BMW decided that Canadian cars had no use for MPH increments on the speedometer of my 5-Series also meant that I would have to engage in a constant mathematical battle of kilometer conversion as I drove through the continually changing speed zones on the streets surrounding my house.

These small changes are part and parcel of picking up and moving to an entirely different country, and by and large the transition has been relatively painless. In fact, there is one hugely positive difference between my new home and my old stomping grounds that I am greatly looking forward to: the almost complete lack of winter.



Clockwise from top:

An average evening snowfall ready for digging out.

"Mom, where's the house?"

The view you might expect when driving in Quebec.

Now, when I mention the fact that the upcoming months to me seem like a definite vacation from what I have experienced over the last quarter century or so, I often get strange looks or protests that it's going to 'get cold' and there will be 'snow'. Having traveled to Boston extensively in January and February in years past, I am not ignorant of the fact that yes, this part of New England does see its share of nippy temperatures and occasional precipitation. But in contrast to what I have had to deal with in Quebec, it is all t-shirts and daiquiris. For example, while the occasional blizzard in Massachusetts may drop around 3 or 4 feet of sudden snow, accumulation is typically measured in single-digit inches. Last year in Montreal we received over 13 feet of accumulated snowfall. 13 feet. The snow banks on either side of my driveway were over 7 feet tall, so large that when I had to shovel out my car – which was every day – I could no longer reach up over my head with the shovel and deposit new snow. Everywhere you looked were equally huge snow-bergs blocking roads and snarling traffic, and when you add in the -40º Fahrenheit temperatures, you have a recipe for general misery. For me, the final straw was driving past the city yards in the moving truck on the way out of town in June and seeing the still 3-story high hills created by snow-removal operations standing tall, defying the summer sunshine. Not even the awesome power of nature could kill this snow.

Now, despite the fact that Boston's winters don't approach the fury of their northern equivalents, there are still a number of steps BMW owners and indeed all drivers should take to prepare their vehicle for travel during colder weather. With average temperatures of around 28º F in January, being stranded in these conditions or getting into an accident because of them can be a very unpleasant experience.

Tires are often the most overlooked aspect of winter driving. Having run winter tires my entire life, I am often surprised by the number of people who feel that all season tires will be enough to get them through the colder months. These drivers most often point to a lack of snow accumulation as being the greatest argument for why winter tires are not necessary. After all, aren't they designed exclusively for those poor souls in Canada and perhaps Vermont who have to forge through 3 foot snowdrifts on the way to work in the morning?

Actually no. In fact, when it comes to tire performance it is temperature, not the presence of snow that is the key factor. All season tires are at best a compromise. They are designed to be merely adequate during the summer, and passable at temperatures that flirt with freezing. Drop below the freezing point, however, and the traction of an all season tire is seriously compromised. At 30º F, the rubber in an all-season tire loses so much elasticity that stopping distances are generally 30 percent longer than with a winter rubber compound. At the temperatures typically seen in January and February, that distance can increase to over 50 percent as the rubber gets so hard you might as well be driving around on hockey pucks. Obviously, handling and ride comfort are also adversely affected.

From a safety and performance perspective, winter tires are the clear winner for cold weather driving. While it might seem expensive to purchase an extra set of tires for your car, think of the wear you will be saving on your all-seasons as they sit in the basement for 5 months – or of the possible costs associated with repairing accident damage caused by a lack of grip when you needed it most.

Over the next couple of months as I enjoy the balmy New England weather from a deck chair on my porch, I'll be offering more tips and advice on how to deal with the worst that winter can throw at drivers, along with some of the more exotic winter driving activities and adventures that come hand in hand with an endless snowfall. ♦

Editor's Note: Benjamin Hunting is a professional Canadian writer who divides his time between Boston and Montreal. When not training his team of sled dogs back home, he enjoys participating in BMWCCA events in his E34 and covering the automotive and music industries for a variety of publications.