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Mountain Driving Tips for Truck Drivers

Whether you are a seasoned veteran or an inexperienced driver, driving in the mountains presents its own unique challenges to professional drivers. Weather, road conditions, and vehicle maintenance are all factors that the driver needs to consider to successfully navigate up and down steep grades. There is nothing scarier than a tractor-trailer combination hurtling down a mountain grade with brakes smoking and no way to stop it. Following are some tips that all drivers, regardless of experience, should remember when venturing into mountainous areas of the US.

- Watch the weather** – Prior to your trip into the mountains, know the weather along your intended route. With the weather technology available today, not knowing is no longer an excuse. Weather conditions can change dramatically with a change in altitude. If your company allows you to drive with tire chains, make sure you have the correct number and size of chains, and know what the chain laws are in the state(s) you will be traveling through.
- Vehicle preparedness** – A properly maintained brake system (including the engine brake) and tires are critical maintenance items to successfully travel in mountains. Most major roadways will have brake check areas for drivers to pull over to check/adjust their brakes before descending a steep grade. Take advantage of it! Make sure you have plenty of fuel and personal supplies in case you get stuck or the roads close.
- Slow and steady** – There are no prizes for racing up or down steep grades, but there can be consequences if you lose control. Pay attention to grade signs, they are there for your information. Never assume you can judge a grade just by looking at it. The general rule of thumb is to travel down the grade in one gear lower than you traveled up. When ascending, choose a gear where you can pull the grade without needing to constantly downshift and maintain a steady mid-range RPM. When descending, take it slow ALL the way to the bottom. Use the engine brake and foot brake as needed to slow momentum. Don't rollout too soon, as conditions may change unexpectedly.
- Maintain traction** – When ascending in snowy conditions, lock in the axle differentials for all wheel traction. Take it easy on the throttle as to not break traction while accelerating. Attempt to NOT travel in other vehicles tracks, as packed snow can be more slippery than fresh snow. When descending, again, slow and steady wins the day. In icy conditions, stay put! Do not attempt to drive on ice-covered roads. Wait until the road crews have done their work.
- Don't tailgate** – Maintain a generous following distance from the vehicle in front of you. If they lose control, you will want to have enough space to bring your vehicle to a stop, if necessary. If you lose control, you want to have enough room to regain control.
- Use runaway lanes** – As a last resort, if you are losing or lost control on descent, do use the runaway lanes. They are there for your safety and the safety of other drivers. Runaway lanes are designed to slow a heavy vehicle as it sinks into soft sand or pea gravel. Unfortunately, it will likely do damage to the undercarriage of your vehicle.
- There may be other tips and tricks that you have learned or were taught that were not included here. Hopefully, the tips included here will provide a good foundation from which to build a good strategy for driving in the mountains.