

AUTOSOCK

SUN, SNOW AND SOCKS

Figuring There Had To Be An Alternative To Heavy, Cumbersome Snow Chains, Andy Enright Tried Out The AutoSock

Admissions time. When asked if I wanted to guinea pig the AutoSock, I thought I was the victim of some elaborate practical joke. Knowing that I was about to drive a car down to the snowy French Alps, the Editor had decided I was the perfect candidate to put the latest automotive product to come across his desk through its paces. When he showed me what I had to do, I was deeply sceptical.

The AutoSock is a tyre cover that has been developed in Sweden as a way of assisting traction on icy and snowy surfaces. Knowing a thing or two about such conditions, the developers realised that for years drivers had used textiles, often in the form of mats or blankets carried in the boot to help them out of a slippery situation. What if the additional grip afforded by textile was always present? That's the logic behind the AutoSock.

Although many cars, especially those fitted with special winter tyres, can perform adequately on loose snow, even winter tyres struggle to find traction on ice. Statistics had shown that in winter, far more accidents were attributable to loss of control on ice than snow but the problems faced by many tyre manufacturers testing at Sweden's VTI Tyre testing facility was that improving ice grip often decreased snow performance and vice versa. AutoSock had the germ of an idea but approached the problem in a very different manner, recruiting specialists in ski technology.

Dr Dag Anders Moldestad and Professor Sven Loset have worked on mechanical sliding projects for Olympintoppen and Madshus Ski, both of them experts in snow, ice, water and friction. Realising what makes a given material slide on ice and snow is a great start in establishing the opposite and the result is a true multinational affair. The textile partner is KoSa from Germany, while the manufacturer of the woven fabric is Norway's Teletxtile, weaving the AutoSock in a Lithuanian factory. Styled by Einar Hareide, the man responsible for much of the Saab 9-3 and 9-5 product design, the AutoSock is a very neatly packaged product.

Unlike snow chains, which are usually packaged in a bulky plastic box. The AutoSock appears very user-friendly. A slim soft plastic sleeve contains a pair of the AutoSocks and a pair of plastic gloves if you don't fancy getting your hands cold, wet or dirty. We had managed to get our Mercedes Vito thoroughly stuck after parking it off the main road in the southern French Alps and the AutoSock was about to be put to the test. Unlike snow chains, there are no fussy links to make up. Instead, you just stretch the elasticated part of the AutoSock over the top of the tyre, roll the car back and fit the rest to the driven wheels. Of course, it's easier if you're on a slight gradient, because we found that when the car was on the flat, there was the propensity for the driven wheels to spin and flick the AutoSocks off during fitting.

A driver who is light on the throttle pedal is the key here and it's easier for two/three people to fit than one. The company quote a maximum speed of 50 km/h and when the socks are in place, there's none of the clank and vibration that snow chains cause. In fact, it's easy to forget they're on. The units self centre as soon as you reach a reasonable speed and they can't damage your car or pedestrians if they come off. Getting a snow chain wrapped around your driveshaft is one of the less enjoyable winter motoring experiences.



Unlike snowchains, the AutoSock is not designed for driving considerable distances. The normal driving distance for the AutoSock is assumed to be around 30 to 50 kilometres with the average distance assumed to be 0.5 to 3 kilometres when conditions are snowy or icy. There are no limits to the amount of times the sock can be mounted or dismounted and it's also machine washable. Fully TUV approved, the AutoSock has been shown to be about 8 per cent more effective than snow tyres and around 20 per cent more effective than normal summer tyres on ice and slush.

If you live in a snowy environment, there's still little that can touch a top notch set of chains but for most of us, the weight, hassle and expense just doesn't make them worthwhile. We usually need something that can get us out of a snowy rut or which can run us the final few kilometres up the hill to the ski resort without white, or indeed skinned, knuckles. The AutoSock seems to be the solution. It packs down small, is easy to fit and is attractively priced. I know what I'll be throwing in the back of the car next season.

<http://www.autosock.com>

<http://www.roofbox.co.uk>