Vehicle Emergency Survival: What to Do When Your Car Becomes a Crisis

A vehicle breakdown on a remote road or in extreme weather is one of the most common real-world survival scenarios — and one that most people have never thought through beyond calling roadside assistance.

Introduction

The vast majority of survival emergencies that affect ordinary people happen not in wilderness settings but in vehicles, on roads, in transit between home and somewhere else. A breakdown at night on a motorway, a car that slides off an icy road in a rural area, being caught in a flash flood while driving, or becoming stranded in a sudden blizzard — these are not exotic scenarios. They happen to ordinary people every winter across Europe and North America.

The common thread is that your vehicle transitions from transport to problem within seconds, and your options contract to what you have with you, what you know, and how clearly you can think. This guide addresses all three.

The Vehicle Emergency Kit

Your PREPORA backpack is your primary emergency resource in any scenario. Additionally, keep the following items permanently in your vehicle:

- **Warning triangle** — legally required in many European countries and critical for motorway breakdowns. Place it 45 metres (motorway) or 15 metres (regular road) behind your vehicle.
- **High-visibility vest** — wear before exiting the vehicle on any road. Keep it in the cabin, not the boot, so it is accessible without getting out.
- **Jump cables** — a flat battery is the most common vehicle emergency. Keep quality copper jump cables (at least 4 metres) or a compact lithium jump starter.
- **Tow rope** — for vehicle extraction from soft ground or ditch scenarios.
- **Torch with fresh batteries** — separate from your PREPORA kit flashlight; leave one permanently in the glove box.
- **Water (2 litres minimum)** — for occupants if stranded, and for minor cooling system emergencies.
- **Energy bars** — if stranded for hours, having something to eat prevents decision-making degradation from low blood sugar.
- **Blanket** — one thermal or space blanket per occupant. Cold vehicle cabins kill. Your PREPORA emergency blankets serve this role.
- **Phone charger (12V/USB)** — keeps your communication device powered from the vehicle battery as long as the engine runs.
- **Paper map of your region** — if navigation fails and you need to direct emergency services to your location, knowing where you are on a physical map is essential.

Breakdown on a Road

A controlled breakdown response takes under two minutes and dramatically reduces your risk.

1. **Activate hazard lights immediately** — the moment you feel something wrong, before you stop. This signals other drivers to give you space.
2. **Pull off the road completely.** Get as far from the travel lanes as physically possible. On a motorway, exit the vehicle via the passenger side away from traffic. On a rural road, get the car entirely off the paved surface if possible.
3. **Place your warning triangle.** On a motorway, walk along the barrier side (not the traffic side) to place it at least 45 metres behind your vehicle. Do not stand in the travel lane.
4. **Put on your high-visibility vest before exiting.** Then grab your PREPORA kit from the boot or rear seat.
5. **Call for assistance.** Roadside assistance, emergency services (112), or a contact who can reach you. Give your location precisely — road name or number, direction of travel, nearest junction or kilometre marker. If you don't know exactly where you are, describe what you can see.
6. **Decide inside vs. outside.** On motorways and fast roads: stay in the vehicle only if you are in the travel lane or risk being struck from behind. If safely off the road, waiting outside (away from the vehicle, behind a barrier if available) is often safer — a stationary vehicle on a motorway can be hit.

Stranded in Extreme Cold

Being stranded in a snowstorm or sub-zero temperatures in a vehicle is a manageable situation if approached correctly. The vehicle is your primary shelter — it insulates significantly better than being outside.

1. **Stay in the vehicle.** A stationary car in a storm is a far safer shelter than attempting to walk for help in blizzard conditions. People who leave their vehicles in severe cold rarely reach their destination.
2. **Manage heating strategically.** Run the engine and heater for approximately 10 minutes every hour. This conserves fuel while maintaining a survivable cabin temperature. Do not run the engine continuously for hours — this depletes fuel faster and creates carbon monoxide risk.
3. **Carbon monoxide is the critical risk.** Before running the engine, clear snow from around the exhaust pipe. CO poisoning from a blocked exhaust in a stationary vehicle has killed entire families. Crack a window a small amount on the downwind side to maintain fresh air circulation.
4. **Layer up immediately.** Put on every item of clothing available, wrap in your PREPORA emergency blankets, and share body heat between occupants. Hypothermia begins at 35°C core temperature and progresses faster than most people expect.
5. **Signal continuously.** Turn on hazard lights when running the engine. Tie a bright item of clothing to the aerial or door handle. At night, use your PREPORA flashlight strobe aimed at passing vehicles or aircraft.
6. **Stay awake if temperatures are life-threatening.** Assign watch shifts if multiple people are present. Take turns sleeping to ensure someone is always alert to monitor temperature, engine status, and the arrival of help.

Flash Flooding Near a Vehicle

Floodwater and vehicles are a deadly combination. More people drown in vehicles during floods than on foot — the car creates a false sense of security that delays critical decisions.

1. **Do not drive into water of unknown depth.** The standard guidance is: if you cannot see the road surface, do not proceed. Just 30 cm of fast-moving water can move a small car. 60 cm will float most vehicles.
2. **If water is rising around a stationary vehicle, leave immediately.** The decision threshold is: water reaching the door sill. At this point, opening the door while the car is still on firm ground is straightforward. If you wait until water is above door-handle height, the pressure difference makes it nearly impossible to open doors manually.
3. **If doors cannot be opened, use your PREPORA tactical pen to break the side window.** Strike firmly at the corner of the window, not the centre — glass is weakest at the edges. Do not attempt to break the windscreen — it is laminated and will not break the same way.
4. **Once out of the vehicle, move away from it perpendicular to the current.** Do not try to swim upstream. Move sideways to the flow, toward higher ground. In shallow but fast water, face upstream and use a sturdy object as a pole for stability.
5. **Do not return to the vehicle for possessions.** Your PREPORA kit should already be with you or grabbed in the first exit moment. Nothing in the vehicle is worth re-entering floodwater for.

Navigation When Lost on the Road

A specific vehicle emergency scenario that receives insufficient attention: you are driving in an unfamiliar area, your phone dies or loses signal, and you are no longer certain where you are.

1. **Stop and establish your last known position.** Think backward: where were you when you were certain of your location? How long and in what direction have you driven since then? Estimate your approximate position.
2. **Your vehicle is a navigation aid.** Your odometer tells you how far you have travelled. The dashboard compass (if equipped) tells you the direction. Road signs — even in an unfamiliar language — often include distances and directions.
3. **Pull out your paper map.** This is why it is in the car. Identify the nearest town name from a road sign, find it on the map, and re-establish your position. This takes under five minutes with a physical map.
4. **Manage fuel consciously.** In an unknown area, treat a quarter tank as empty. Do not pass a filling station hoping for a better one ahead. Running out of fuel while lost in a remote area converts a minor navigation problem into a genuine emergency.
5. **Ask at a petrol station or farm.** Human navigation assistance is still the most reliable technology available in rural areas. Stop and ask. Most people are helpful.

Key Takeaways

- Keep a permanent vehicle emergency kit (warning triangle, hi-vis vest, jump cables, blanket, water, paper map) separate from your PREPORA kit.
- In a winter stranding: stay in the vehicle, run the engine 10 minutes per hour, clear exhaust of snow before every engine start, and layer up immediately.
- Abandon a vehicle in rising floodwater before water reaches the door sill — waiting longer makes door opening physically very difficult.
- Your PREPORA tactical pen's glass-breaker tip is a literal exit tool for a vehicle with jammed or pressure-locked doors and windows.

> ***Your car is a comfort object in normal life and a survival tool in an emergency — knowing the difference, and knowing what to do, is what this guide is for.***

Part of the PREPORA Survival Guide series. Download the full guide at prepora-gear.com/guides.