

# ON THIN ICE

*It's mid-winter in northern Sweden and you're behind the wheel of a 450-horsepower Mercedes AMG driving on a frozen lake with an instructor reaming at you to go faster. Welcome to ice-driving LUX-style*



“Where are your eyes?!” A voice shouts over the radio as I plough a Mercedes AMG C class into yet another snow drift. Looking directly at the drift I hit, that's where my eyes were. And that's the problem. One of the things I have learned from the voice is that wherever I'm looking, that's where I'm heading – and the car with me. This voice belongs to Thomas Jäger, racing driver for Mercedes Benz, winner of the Porsche Carrera Cup 2009 and my instructor for this weekend of high-octane, low temperature driving.

This is the Mercedes Benz AMG Winter Driving Academy in Arjeplog, northern Sweden, 60 miles south of the Arctic circle. The weekend began in a classroom, where Thomas was joined by Bernd Maylander, F1 safety car driver, and Hari Proczyk, another of Mercedes' drivers, each of whom will take a group of ten driving enthusiasts through three full days of track driving, drifting and slalom on specially prepared, icy courses.

Classroom theory is just a small part of the programme. Barely have we arrived at the cosy AMG lodge than we are in the cars and driving to the lake. For most of the participants, this is what they came for. I, on the other hand, am petrified. It's dark, I have never driven on the left hand side before and the roads are coated in a thick layer of ice. This apprehension is only magnified when we reach the lake and Thomas instructs “ESP off”. I feel

completely out of control as I swerve left and right. But therein lies the fun.

Naturally I am the first person to crash. But the atmosphere is one of friendly camaraderie, and even Thomas is on hands and knees with his shovel to dig me out of the drift. After the first time it becomes easier. The snow banks lining the track are soft, and I realise that if I'm not brave, I won't learn anything. I have always been told to keep my hands at 'ten to two', to thread the wheel through each hand, and never cross my arms. Thomas tells me to forget that. My hands are in the 'quarter to three', racing position, and they are not to leave it. That way I have more chance of avoiding under and over steer, and better control over the car on the ice.

Gradually I gain a sense of how the car is moving. With Thomas's instructions coming over the radio, I learn how speed affects cornering and drifting, when to speed up (“gas, gas, GAS,” he shouts) and when to slow down to take a smooth corner, and how to use the skid and slide that previously perturbed me to keep the car on the track.

Yes there are crashes, but there are also small victories. As we practice a slalom course I execute what my car-mad co-driver describes as “a perfect Scandinavian flick”. I have no idea what he's talking about, and I'm pretty sure it was an



accident, but I am ridiculously proud of myself and return to the lodge surprisingly excited and exhilarated. I can't wait to do it again.

The majority of participants are pretty competent, looking to push themselves and the cars on the track. As one of the Swedish participants, a man who regularly drives on ice and snow, remarks, “whatever your level, you feel yourself growing throughout the weekend”. Of course, if you're a little less capable, then sometimes group radio instruction just isn't enough. Thomas hops into my car to give me some one-on-one tips, pointing out where I should be focussing, when I should

accelerate (on the straights), and how quickly I should be moving the wheel – “don't steer more than 100-degrees or you can't recover”. If you're more advanced, he'll give you hints on how to get faster and keep control longer.

Suddenly it's Sunday and the weekend is scheduled to end with a series of timed laps. My co-driver has decided he wants to take some pictures and so I am sitting on the start line alone. Despite everything I have learned, and the confidence I have built up, I am nervous again. My heart is pounding and I've started talking to myself, repeating the mantras Thomas has drummed into us

over the past few days. I go as fast as I dare, skidding, sliding and drifting, but, crucially, staying on the track. The concentration pays off. My time isn't the slowest: I'm not last – I'm not last! When Thomas hands me my certificate over the final group dinner, telling me how much I have improved, I am so happy I could hug him.

The champion of the event is resident Aussie and keen amateur track driver, Lew Fellowes, who never sees icy roads back home, where his C63 shares a garage with, amongst others, an Evo 9 and a Subaru truck. His prize for winning the event is €1000 towards another Mercedes Academy. Will he go? “You betcha!”

As we head back to the lodge for the final time, someone says I look sad. I am – sad it is over, I've pushed my driving, learnt a lot and had a huge amount of fun with my instructor, my teammates and the cars. I leap into the driving seat of the E class my co-driver and I are taking back from the lake without asking whether he wants to drive. Next time the roads ice over and everyone else is staying home, I'll be out there, whispering to myself “where are your eyes?” as I wind along the frozen lanes.

Ice driving courses run in January and February every year. Visit: [www.mercedes-amg.com/driving-academy](http://www.mercedes-amg.com/driving-academy) for details.