

At left is a roadway lit by standard halogen lightbulbs in a vehicle's headlamps. At right, Xenon lights replace the conventional bulbs, illuminating a much broader area of the road.

JUSTIN PRITCHARD



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# Shedding light on driving after dark

BY JUSTIN PRITCHARD  
FOR NORTHERNLIFE.CA

Xenon lights are those fancy-looking, often-colourful lights you see on high-end cars. But they're far from a cosmetic-only feature.

Your writer has tested hundreds of cars over countless thousands of kilometers through a variety of weather across central and northern Ontario after dark. I have a conclusion: xenon lighting is better. Much better.

It lets you see more clearly with less strain, it projects light farther up the road, farther to the sides, and makes halogen lighting systems look dull, dim and yellow by comparison.

Halogen headlights work like the incandescent lightbulb you'll find in a household lamp. An electric current passes through a filament, making it very hot and lighting it up.

Conversely, xenon lighting works with gas discharge. An "arc" is generated within a quartz cylinder that contains a mixture of gasses when electricity is passed through it.

Xenon engages reflective surfaces (like signs and cyclist safety-vests) from farther away, too. After a few hours of nighttime driving with xenon illumination, this writer's eyes prove consistently less tired and worn-out. Yours will, too.

"The key benefits of xenon headlamps versus halogen headlamps include outstanding brightness compared to conventional headlamps, longer service life, significantly improved lighting range and broader illumination of the edges of the road," Mercedes-Benz's David Sherrard explained.

Trouble is, xenon is a relatively new lighting technology that's only started becoming popular on affordable cars in recent years. But the automotive aftermarket has picked up on the benefits of xenon lighting, and numerous companies offer xenon retrofit kits.

One such company is Lumens. For between \$100 and \$200, they'll sell you a xenon kit to replace the bulbs in virtually any vehicle. The kit typically includes xenon lamps that install in place of the standard halogen bulbs, wiring harnesses, and a set of "ballasts."

Your writer recently picked up a Lumens H7 xenon kit to replace the low-beams on his father's 2006 Subaru Legacy GT Wagon as a birthday present.

This is a popular style of light bulb — and Sudbury Custom Auto on The Kingsway had the kit in stock. After picking it up and "stealing" dad's car for the evening and arriving at my friend's garage, we started the install.

On the Legacy, the airbox and washer fluid filler neck require removal to access the factory bulbs. These came out in a minute or so, and we separated them from their wiring harnesses.

Those harnesses plug into the Lumens ballasts (voltage transformers) which ramp up factory wattage to power the xenon lamps. We mounted the ballasts using zip-ties near the headlight housings and away from moving parts. Wiring built into the ballasts then plug back into the Lumens xenon lamps, which fit back into the headlight socket just like the standard bulbs. In effect, you're basically inserting a ballast between the factory headlight switch and the new xenon lamp.

The Legacy uses a screw-on cap to seal moisture out of each headlight housing. For this install, we needed to drill a 3/4-inch hole into each cap to run the modified wiring through, though Lumens included a rubber grommet to maintain the seal after doing so. No wiring diagram was included with the kit, though the connections were straightforward. No splicing, soldering or electrical tape required. We finished up in about 90 minutes.

A quick before-and-after nighttime drive revealed a brighter, lighter and cleaner looking light discharge from the Legacy's projector-style housings, thicker light saturation ahead of the car, and a notable improvement in light dispersion to either side. Translation? More high-quality light was cast ahead of the vehicle, as well as off to the sides to help reveal any roadside animals.

Dad commented "the new bulbs provided significantly improved night driving visibility on our dark northern roads. Driving in drifting snow was more comfortable knowing I could be seen by oncoming traffic earlier, and the low beams provided significant power to cut through the snow. This gave me an overall improved feeling of safety. Overall, conversion was a huge improvement over the originally installed headlight system."

Dad liked his present, and agreed that the Lumens bulbs improved his Legacy's looks and safety at the same time. Not a bad deal for \$130.



Shoppers looking for Xenon lighting kits, such as Lumens, will need to visit an aftermarket retailer, like Sudbury Custom Auto on The Kingsway. JUSTIN PRITCHARD

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for the month of January 2012

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