

ROAD TRIP

Vacation season is almost here and many of you are no doubt itching to get out of the house for a few days and do some serious relaxing. But not everyone can afford a cruise or book a flight to Europe or the Caribbean. For the rest of us, that leaves the ever-reliable American method of travel -- the **road trip**.

But how best to prepare for your trip so you don't curse at yourself (or your travel companions) because you're stuck in traffic or lost?

We talked to travel experts to get the lowdown on how to make your car trip a memorable one -- in a good way.

Before the trip

Prepare: "Some people like the kind of a **road trip** where they just get in the car and go," said Megan Edwards of the website RoadTrip America. "They get a feeling of freedom."

But if that doesn't describe you, and the possibility of staying in a run-down hostel or sleeping in your car gives you the shivers, you'll want to make your hotel reservations early.

"There's nothing worse than to arrive at your destination and discover there are no vacancies," said radio host and Patriot-News travel columnist Sandy Fenton.

What's more, Edwards said, preparing helps you savor the anticipation of the trip.

Try to get the best rate: Ask the hotel if it offers special packages. Do they have AAA discounts? Do they offer better deals on the weekends or during the week? Can kids eat free?

Keep reservation number: Once you make your reservation, print out and take your confirmation number **with** you, just in case.

Make sure the car's in shape: Check your car's oil level, transmission fluid, coolant level and brake fluid. Check your tires. Make sure they're properly inflated. In fact, consider taking your car in for a tune-up before you travel.

Keep everyone's feelings in mind: If you're traveling **with** friends or family, find out what they want to get out of this trip and what they want to do. "You want it to be everybody's trip and not have one person in charge, calling all the shots," Edwards said.

Share itinerary: Give it to friends and family for safety reasons.

Packing

Pack light: Less is best, according to Fenton. "The last thing you want is a bag filled **with** shoes," she said. Plus, all that excess luggage will weigh down your car and hurt your gas mileage.

Clothes to take: Make sure everyone has a pair of comfortable walking shoes. Also, keeping in mind the pool suggestion, pack two bathing suits.

You'll also want a change of clothes. "Part of the trip is going out to a nice restaurant as a couple or a family," Fenton said. "You don't want to walk in wearing a T-shirt and jeans." That doesn't necessarily involve packing a coat and a tie, but you want to dress appropriately.

Safety first: Pack a first aid travel kit that contains bandages, prescription medication, sunscreen, insect repellent and anything else you might need.

Pack a cooler: Fill it **with** fresh vegetables and fruit. You can drastically cut down your food expenses if you hit a grocery store instead of a roadside eatery on your travels. Make sure you have plenty of bottled water, too.

Pack a pillow: If you're staying in cheaper accommodations and are concerned about comfort or cleanliness, take your own pillow and pillowcase.

Take your laptop: If you plan to make reservations as you go, surf the Internet via your iPhone or laptop to get a great last minute deal.

Other things to take: A flashlight, tire pressure gauge, emergency tire inflation and sealer, car charger for your cell phone and a GPS navigation device.

ON THE ROAD

Don't do too much: Don't try to hit too many attractions in one day or cover too many miles in one stretch. Overextending yourself is one of the biggest mistakes travelers make, according to Mark Sedenquist, managing editor of RoadTrip America.

Take a break: If you're traveling **with** kids, it's good to stop every 2-3 hours. Even if you just get out for 10-15 minutes at a rest stop to stretch your legs and play a game of catch, taking a break will help recharge your batteries. Even without kids, you want to keep it well under 500 miles a day (FYI: That's about 10 hours of driving).

Go **with** the flow: You're going to hit traffic jams, weather delays and possibly even a mechanical problem or two, so don't take it out on your travel companions.

Take your time: Let the drive be part of the vacation. Depending on where you're going, you might pass by breathtaking scenery.

Breaker, breaker: If you're traveling **with** two or more cars don't rely on cell phones. Get a CB radio or good pair of walkie talkies to communicate between vehicles. Also, mix and match passengers throughout the trip so you're not spending the entire time in the same car.

Be safe: If you're getting out of your car for a short hike in the woods or walk around the city, put an index card in your glove compartment that says who you are, any contact info and where you went. Along the same lines, fill out the In Case of Emergency (or ICE) info on your cell phone so paramedics can contact your friends or family if you're injured.

Visit a welcome center: Even if you don't need to, these tourist stops are usually staffed by local volunteers who frequently have discount coupons and good advice on where to go and what to do.

Traveling **with** kids

Pack a fun kit: Once the trip starts, hand your kids a backpack or bag filled **with** little gifts and activities. Try to have a surprise for each child that they can unwrap each day of the trip. Make sure it's age specific and, if you can, try to tie it into your vacation.

Keep kids involved: The more you can include your kids in the planning stages of the trip, the more they'll enjoy it. "The child's goals need to be factored in and given as much weight as the adults," Edwards said.

Pool it: Look for places **with** a swimming pool, preferably an outdoor one. "It's an easy way for kids to get their energy out," Fenton said.

RVs

Pros and cons: Although they might seem expensive at first, RVs can be a travel bargain, as they eliminate the need for restaurants and hotels. Many come **with** a kitchen, bathroom and sleeping quarters installed. For older travelers, they offer a way to travel conveniently and affordably. If that's not enough, RV parks and campgrounds are plentiful and often located near popular tourist attractions and historical sites, according to the Pennsylvania RV & Camping Association. "If you're going to a national park or camping, then an RV makes a lot of sense," Sedenquist said. **Rent before you buy:** Owning an RV is a big commitment, as they require a lot of effort to outfit and maintain. Renting, therefore, is usually the best option. Rental rates vary by season, region and size, but most motorhomes cost between \$90 to \$200 per day, according to the PRVCA. Folding camping trailers and travel trailers run from \$28 to \$85 per day. Package deals are often available.

Because of the demand for RVs, the PRVCA suggests making reservations well in advance.

Check out gorving.com for more information.

Sources: visitpa.com, roadtripamerica.com, AAA, prvca.org, gorving.com.

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