

Planning a Road Trip

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Planning a Road Trip

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Road trips are not unique to the United States. However, when planned properly, they can be the perfect window into the American experience.



Introduction

Road trips aren't for everyone, but if you have ever wanted to know more about the world around you and were limited in time and perhaps money, road trips are a great way to experience a lot with a little.

Up until the 1920s, the United States (U.S.) highway system was a patchwork of roads with inconsistent signage and surfaces. Two significant acts passed by the U.S. Congress in 1921 and 1956 created what we know as the Interstate Highway System. They allowed for full freeway interconnectivity between major population centers, north to south, east to west.

With these throughways between cities, suburban areas could grow, and people could travel with ease across the country, bringing businesses to places once at the edge of civilization.

Though united, the states of the U.S. are very diverse with many cultures, climates, and landscapes. Being able to experience so much with such ease is worth taking advantage of as a citizen or visitor.

What you'll need for the trip

In addition to having some type of motor vehicle* for transportation, you should also bring:

- **Phones** You will need to have a way to contact emergency services and make reservations while on the road.
- **Emergency Car Kit** Having charging cables, a basic first aid kit, blankets, and emergency snacks is essential for any long trip in the car.
- **Tents/camping equipment** Tents and camping equipment (sleeping bags, mats, headlamps/lanterns) are only needed to save money on lodging.

- **Cooler** A cooler is only needed to save money on food.

* Bicycles are also suitable but are not recommended because they cause different restrictions in terms of range and capacity and, for the most part, cannot be used on urban interstates.

Plan Ahead

It is crucial to acknowledge that not everything will go as planned. While you cannot be prepared for every possible outcome, there are several events you can be prepared for.

- **Illness and Injury** In case a passenger gets sick or hurt, bring acetaminophen, ibuprofen, Pepto Bismol, antacids, anti-diarrheal medicine, allergy medicine, anti-itch cream, ointment, aloe, bandages, sunscreen, bug spray, tweezers, ace bandages, wet wipes, cotton balls, cotton swabs.
- **Car trouble** Before leaving on your trip, be sure to have your vehicle serviced or check the fluids, oil, and air in the tires yourself. Your oil should be changed before leaving if it is a journey longer than 5,000 miles. Also, getting an emergency car service such as AAA is highly recommended. Their network makes getting help or a car tow easier when you are somewhere unfamiliar.
- **Weather** Depending on the time of year, different weather conditions may arise. It is best to carry jackets, rain jackets, hats, gloves, a mylar blanket, hand warmers, extra blankets, and extra water.
- **Be prepared** Whether you signed up for something new like white water rafting or you plan on camping and have never set up a tent before, it is highly recommended you do your research and practice whenever possible before starting your trip.

Planning the Trip

Though arduous, following these steps will make planning the trip less of a burden.

1. Determine the length of the trip

Road trips can last from days to months but are easier to plan for and more successful when there is a definitive length.

2. Assess the resiliency of the passengers

Considering the drivers and their ability to be behind the wheel for hours at a time is crucial, but so is the comfort and happiness of the passengers. Do their ages require frequent bathroom breaks? Will stiff limbs require frequent walking breaks? Are you the only one driving?

Depending on the answers to these questions, you may need to plan for stops every hour with no more than four hours of driving a day, or you could stop as infrequently as only when you need to fill the gas tank. Generally, planning for a stop every two hours is ideal to maintain comfort and increase enjoyment.

3. Where would the passengers like to go?

Do they want to go to several beaches? Do they want to visit theme parks? Do they care about the temperature or the weather? Do they want to go to a particular state? As the planner, draw up three to four focuses—beaches, Great Lakes, New England—and see which interests your group the most.

4. Assemble a preliminary itinerary

Once you have a general idea of what the group wants to do, you must plan your stops. While there may be a focus, like beaches, for your trips, finding fun and exciting things to do in between will keep it interesting.

Before you can pick your spots, you need to determine your range. Your number of days on the trip and the resiliency of those journeying with you will determine the maximum mileage.

Max Mileage If your trip is going to be seven days and you are traveling with two children between 4 and 8 years and three other adults (including yourself) in their 40s, the children's resiliency will likely limit your days to 4 hours at a time. A good average speed for planning purposes is 60 mph (interstate speed limits in urban areas range from 55 to 70, and in rural areas, 65 to 85mph).

$$7 \text{ days} \times 4 \text{ hours/day} \times 60 \text{ miles/hour} = 1680 \text{ miles}$$

Once you know your max mileage, pick one or two areas of the country you'd like to visit and plan out possible routes using Google Maps or a similar program, keeping that max mileage in mind. There are likely a few obvious stops along the way, like capitals and landmarks, but sometimes the stops aren't as obvious.

5. Finding the special spots

Historical markers and cities are exciting and should be a part of a road trip, but there is so much more to see. Suggestions for expanding your search:

- **Movies and shows your family likes** Have any of your favorite movies been filmed in the areas you are visiting? Some websites are devoted to movies and shows and will tell you exactly where you can go to relive some scenes. A few examples are *Breaking Bad*, *The Office*, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.
- **Do you like to eat?** Would you be surprised to hear that your favorite packaged food might offer a tour? It doesn't happen as often as it used to, and sometimes it is just a museum rather than a factory, but it is still fun! Hershey's Chocolate, Jelly Belly jellybeans, Tabasco Sauce, and Cape Cod Kettle Chips are just a few.

Also, if you are a fan of shows like *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives*, you can visit some of the restaurants featured on the show on your trip.

- **Unique Stops** Biggest ball of yarn, tallest filing cabinet, Corn Palace, World's Tallest Thermometer. Wherever you plan on going, there are unique stops for you.

- **Best Lists** Typing in “Best places to visit in _____” will provide ideas you never would have thought of.

With your maximum distance and list of stops, use a program like Google Maps to plot your course. In addition, you can use some artificial intelligence options to assess the most direct route for reaching all potential stops.

When your map, complete with points of interest, is done, ask for feedback from your passengers to ensure it isn't too much or too little to keep them interested.

6. Plan end-of-day stops

Based on the passengers' feedback and considering their resiliency, plan the ending location for each day. Using your assumed maximum traveling time and 60 mph for speed, you can approximately determine when you should stop each evening. However, usually it isn't as simple as that. If you are in a more rural area, you may need to drive longer to get to the next hotel or campsite. Or if the day's events were very exhausting, maybe it makes sense to only travel for three hours that day and five the next.

7. Make Reservations

The shorter the trip, the less flexibility you need, so making reservations for parks and restaurants before leaving on the trip is suggested. However, more factors are at play for longer trips with longer projected driving times, and having more flexibility is ideal. In those cases, it is recommended that you make lodging reservations the night before. *

Though making reservations the night before your stay at a hotel, it is important to have selected possible locations before leaving on the trip so that you aren't wasting time looking for hotels or campsites to call instead of spending time with your fellow road-trippers.

*Exceptions to this suggestion are places where reservations need to be made months in advance to have access, like with National Park lodging and permits.

Final Note

You have a planned itinerary—you are in an excellent position to have a very enjoyable trip! However, keep in mind that things happen. Being prepared as suggested in the **Plan Ahead** section and being flexible when the unexpected occurs, you take a wrong turn, or decide at the last minute to go to a baseball game instead of the scheduled theme park will make this the most fun and memorable trip for everyone. Happy road-tripping!