Getting Your Car Ready for a Road Trip

Summer is finally here, and families across the country are ready to hit the road and get away from it all. Make sure your car is ready for the journey, too. A pre-trip auto checkup could make all the difference. Take good care of your car before you leave, and it will take good care of you out on the road. We've put together this handy list of car-care tips to make sure that your road trip is a great one:

An Ounce of Prevention

The easiest way to safeguard your road trip is to let a mechanic perform a full safety inspection on your car a week or so before your trip. Having a mechanic look at your car the day before your trip is not a good idea. If there's a problem, it could take some time to fix. A big, last-minute auto repair could really throw a wrench into your vacation plans or force you to delay your trip. Or you may even have to rent a car at the last minute, and that can get expensive!

So let a mechanic give your car the once-over a week or two before your trip. In a safety inspection, a mechanic will check everything from fluid levels, belts, and hoses to lights, tires, and brakes to make sure your car is ready for the road.

A safety inspection should cover the following things:

1. Check the fluids. This includes oil, power steering fluid, transmission fluid, antifreeze, windshield washer fluid and brake fluid. If you have not changed your oil in the last 3,000 miles, now would be a good time to change it.

2. Top off any fluids that are low. Buy extra bottles of each type to keep in the trunk, in case you should need them and are not near a service station.
3. Do your wipers give you a smear-free view when it rains? If not, replace them before your trip.
4. Make sure your car's battery and cables are securely attached and free of corrosion. Car batteries typically last three to five years.
5. Check the brakes. Make sure your brakes are at least 50 percent. If they are lower than that, and you are driving more than 1,000 miles round trip, or if you plan on driving in mountains, have the brakes changed.

6. Make sure all shocks, struts and springs are in good working order. If not, now would be the time to replace them.
7. Do a tune up. If it has been a while since your last maintenance update (more than three years), do the recommended maintenance for your car. If you have a timing belt and you are within a few thousand miles of the replacement time, have the timing belt replaced.
8. Check to make sure all lights are working. This includes brakes, turn signals, headlights and taillights. If you are driving a truck with running lights or a motorhome, make sure all running lights are working.
9. Check the tires. If the tires are showing any tread wear, replace the tires. If the tires have uneven tread wear, check the alignment too. Make sure all four tires and the spare are inflated to proper tire pressure.
10. Make sure the service engine soon light and any other “dummy lights” in the dash are not lit. If they are lit, fix the problem before you leave (even if the car seems to be running properly)!

Download Our Preparing For A Road Trip Checklist

Prepare for the Worst

No matter how much maintenance you and your mechanic do on a car before a trip, there's no guarantee that you won't have auto troubles out on the road. Having a roadside survival kit at the ready will make an unexpected breakdown a lot less stressful. Make sure your kit includes (at a minimum) a blanket, a flashlight with fresh batteries, and some extra food and water.

Keep a copy of your car's warranty, insurance and contact information for your emergency car care service in the glove box. Whether you have roadside assistance through your car's warranty or insurance or you belong to an auto care club such as AAA, make sure you have the emergency contact number with you at all times. We recommend keeping these documents in a poly project jacket or travel organizer for extra protection from accidental spills and damage.

Lastly, bring along a spare set of keys to your car and put that spare key in a magnetic car key hider somewhere on your vehicle in case you lose your keys.

Few things spoil a family vacation more quickly than car trouble far from home. Following these pre-trip maintenance tips will ensure that your car is ready for the long road-trip ahead!

Resources: TripAdvisor.com, eHow.com, Bankrate.com