

# 25 Ways To Cut Costs On A Road Trip



**By Diana Kelly Levey**

An impromptu road trip can sound exciting and spontaneous. But if you're wondering how to save money on a road trip, a little bit of planning can go a long way.

While a road trip can be a low-cost way to travel, keeping expenses in check often means deciding where you want to go, the vehicle you'll take, where you'll be stopping on the road trip, and your overall budget.

Here are some easy ideas for road tripping on the cheap.

## **1. Choosing a Fuel-Efficient Car.**

If you have a choice of cars to take, you may want to go with one that is large enough to be comfortable, but also gives you the best gas mileage.

You can use FuelEconomy.gov's Trip Calculator to determine which car will cost you the least in gas. This tool helps estimate fuel consumption and how much it will cost for a particular route using a specific car.

## **2. Driving at or Below the Speed Limit**

This cautionary measure can help you save money in two ways. For one, you'll be less likely to get pulled over and slapped with an expensive speeding ticket.

For another, observing the speed limit can actually reduce your gas consumption. In fact, you can save 17 cents a gallon on highways for every five miles per hour you slow down.

## **3. Packing your Car Wisely**

You can also cut your gas costs by placing items inside the car or trunk rather than piling them on your roof. By reducing drag, this move can increase your fuel economy by as much as eight percent in city driving and up to 25 percent on highways.

If you're out of room in the car, using a rear-mounted cargo box or tray instead of a roof rack can improve your fuel economy by up to 12 percent.

## **4. Setting a Road Trip Budget**

When you first start talking about the road trip, you may want to roughly map out where you want to go, how long it'll take to get there, and if you'll need hotels or motels. From there, you can calculate the approximate cost of gas (FuelEconomy.gov can help) and tolls (try Tollsmart ), as well as food and fun.

Once you've established an overall budget for the trip, you start creating a travel fund.

## **5. Bringing Your Own Food and Supplies.**

Packing a cooler with water bottles, drinks, hand-held snacks, and sandwiches before leaving home is proven frugal traveler trick. You can end up saving a sizable chunk of cash by not having to buy drinks and snacks at rest stops, vending machines, and drive-throughs.

You'll also have a quick solution the next time someone in the car wants to pull over because they're hungry.

## **6. Signing up for an Electronic Toll Account**

Depending on which state(s) you are traveling through, you may be able to save a fair amount of money on tolls by getting the region-appropriate quick pass (or transponder) for your car. In New York, for example, drivers with EZ-Pass can save about 30 percent on tolls.

## **7. Avoiding Tolls Altogether**

When your road trip isn't on any set schedule, you may want to take the scenic route and completely avoid tolls. You can do this by setting your GPS app to "avoid tolls."

If you're in a location with pricey bridges and highways, your savings could really add up. You may want to make sure, however, that avoiding tolls doesn't take you so far out of your way that you're spending a lot more on gas.

## **8. Looking for Hotels that Offer Free Breakfasts**

If you're comparing two hotels in a similar price and quality range, one way to save on road trip expenses is to choose the hotel with a free breakfast.

Not only will you probably get a large, filling meal, but you might even be able to take a piece of fruit or cereal box as a snack for later on in the trip.

## **9. Packing Reusable Water Bottles for Everyone**

You'll no doubt get thirsty while driving and sightseeing, and buying water or drinks can put a major dent in your road trip budget.

Making sure everyone in the car has a large reusable water bottle (or two) to fill up at rest stops and in restaurants can help you avoid spending money on drinks, and also create less plastic waste.

## **10. Buying a National Park Pass**

If you're going to be road-tripping across the U.S. and visiting a few National Parks, you may want to consider getting an America the Beautiful pass.

The pass (which costs \$80 per year and \$20 for seniors) covers entrance, standard amenity, and day use fees for a driver and all passengers in a personal vehicle (up to 4 adults) at more than 2,000 federal recreation sites.

## **11. Hitting the Grocery Store**

Once you've run out of your cooler meals and snacks, consider re-stock up at a local grocery store while en route so you don't have to resort to rest stops and fast food for the rest of your trip.

This is also a good strategy if you're going to be staying at a hotel for a few nights. Making good use of a hotel kitchenette and fridge can help you avoid having to eat out for every single meal.

## **12. Pre-Booking Your Hotels**

Spontaneity is great, but if you're looking to save money on accommodations, it can be wiser to book ahead of time and stick to your plan. You can often secure a better rate by booking in advance (and online), than by showing up without a reservation or booking last minute.

## **13. Looking Beyond Hotels**

Your first thought when looking for roadside accommodation may be cheap hotels or motels. But you sometimes find a better deal (or a nicer option for the same price) using a home rental site, such as Airbnb, VRBO, HomeAway, or FlipKey, especially if you're staying for more than one night.

You could even explore the CouchSurfing Travel app, or let friends on Facebook or social media know you're going to be traveling to their area to see if they have a recommendation on where to stay for a good price.

## **14. Planning to Visit Free Attractions**

Part of the fun of a road trip is to enjoy the journey and scenery while en route to your final destination.

As you travel (or before you go), you may want to research free attractions, such as a hike, walk on a beach, or a free museum, on your route for times when you need to stretch and take a driving break.

You can also look for festivals and local events by checking out the online events calendar for the towns you'll be visiting that day.

## **15. Planning Gas Stops in Advance**

Getting stuck in a big city with the tank close to empty can be costly. To avoid overpriced gas, you may want to use a gas app like Gas Guru or Gas Buddy, which can help you compare prices and find affordable gas no matter where you are.

## **16. Setting a Daily Spending Limit**

You can use your overall budget to get a rough idea of how much you can spend on the road trip each day. This can help you avoid blowing through your whole travel fund before the end of the trip.

A spending plan can also let you know when you can splurge a bit and when you'll have to reign it in with a meal, activity, or lodging. You may also want to set aside some of your budget for the unexpected, such as the car getting a flat and needing to be towed, or discovering the cheap hotel you planned to stay in is a total dump.

## **17. Entertaining the Kids on the Cheap.**

Kids have a tendency to get bored, tired, and antsy on a road trip. To avoid giving in to impulse toy purchases, you may want to bring along their favorite toys and also pick up a variety of new ones at the dollar store before you leave.

Good choices include coloring books and games they can play in the car that won't create a mess. You might also consider borrowing audio books or DVDs from the library to give yourself an hour or so of peace and quiet.

## **18. Searching Online for Local Coupons and Passes**

It can be worthwhile to research online coupons and discount codes for local attractions and restaurants at some of your scheduled stops.

Consider checking Groupon or LivingSocial for deals and steals. Sometimes booking online ahead of time saves you money and it'll give you a reason to try to reach a specific destination by a certain day.

## **19. Saving on Alcohol**

Sipping a cold beer or glass of wine at a local bar at the end of your long drive might sound like the perfect way to unwind.

But alcohol costs can quickly add up on a road trip vacation. Consider buying a few local beers or a small bottle of wine that's native to that area to enjoy in your hotel room. You'll save money on tipping too.

## **20. Volunteering at a Festival**

Yes, you read that correctly. Some festivals and special events offer discounts or free admission to volunteers. You can look up events taking place in the town you'll be visiting and reach out to the event organizer to see if they need help.

## **21. Signing up for a AAA Membership**

An auto club like AAA can save you time, money, and hassle should you run into car trouble during your trip. What's more, a membership (often around \$4 to \$7 a month) gives you access to discounts at hotels, restaurants, and many retailers nationwide.

## **22. Traveling During the Off-Season**

Visiting National Parks when the kids are back in school can often help save money on lodging and activities. Planning a road trip to a destination like Disney World or Disneyland? You'll likely find better deals if it's not during a spring break or other school break.

You can often also save money by visiting warm weather locations during "shoulder seasons." This is the

period in between a destination's low and high seasons of tourism, when prices for hotels tend to be lower, and crowds tend to be smaller, at popular attractions.

## 23. Doing Some Camping

Outdoorsy road trippers might enjoy setting up a tent at a free or low-cost public campsite (You can find out more on the Bureau of Land Management site.)

This can end up saving you a lot of money on hotel costs, provided you don't go out and buy a lot of expensive camping equipment.

If you don't have any camping gear, you may want to consider renting equipment from an outdoor specialty store or asking a friend who regularly goes camping if you can borrow their equipment.

## 24. Eating Out for Lunch Instead of Dinner

If there are special restaurants you want to try without breaking the bank, consider going there for lunch. You might get a slightly smaller portion than you would if you ordered it off the dinner menu, but the price will likely be more affordable.

## 25. Taking Advantage of Loyalty Programs

Booking with the same hotel chain as often as possible and signing up for their member loyalty (or "points") program may net you a free night after a few stays.

Travel booking services, such as Expedia, Travelocity, or Hotels.com, may also offer discounted rates and free nights for loyal customers.

## The Takeaway

A car trip might sound much more affordable than traveling by plane. However, gas, food, and accommodations can add up.

One of the best ways to cut road trip expenses is to plan out your trip and research deals, coupons, and discounts ahead of time. Packing wisely and loading up on drinks, snacks, toys, and activities can also help cut costs once you're out on the road.

Ready to start planning—and saving for—your next road trip? Consider signing up for a SoFi Money® cash management account.

SoFi Money has a special "vaults" feature that allows you to separate your savings from your spending, while earning competitive interest on all of your money. You can even set up a separate vault for your travel fund.

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