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Hitting the road, en famille

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Before embarking on a road trip with children, it pays to be prepared so that you don't have to endure the timeless refrain of "are we there yet?"

Photograph by: Ian Smith, Canwest News Service

To prepare for our 1,900-kilometre marathon family trip from Montreal to the beach paradise of Hilton Head, S.C., a couple years back, I trained for a week. Deciding, not too intelligently, that we would make the trip in one 24-hour shot to save valuable vacation time (who wants to take up four days of a 14-day trip trapped in a car?), I figured the best tack would be to start in the early evening and drive through the night, giving myself 10 hours of blissful quiet as my spouse and our two boys, then 10 months and 3 years old, respectively, slept.

It turned out I should have put as much work into pre-road trip maintenance and in-car activity planning. But as a new father with little experience in travelling with infants, who knew?

To train myself to stay awake, I volunteered for a week of the dreaded evening reporting shift that ends at 12:30 a.m. known as "Night Cops," normally reserved for hapless interns and eager newbies with no choice in the matter. Every night at shift end, I went to my mother-in-law's house to paint her bathroom as a surprise (she was away) till 4:30 a.m., then limped home, bleary-eyed, at 5 a.m. to sleep till noon. By the end of the week, I was a night-owl.

We packed the Honda Odyssey to the rafters with coolers, boogie boards, shovels and toy backhoes and dump trucks for beach construction projects, affixed the bicycle rack and set off at 8 p.m.

My pre-trip maintenance consisted of checking the tire pressure.

The trip went pretty well, and the kids were remarkably well behaved, as they tend to be when they're firmly strapped down. Two-hour picnic breaks for breakfast and lunch and much running around were our salvation.

But when we arrived in Hilton Head, I discovered to my horror that I hadn't properly affixed the bike rack, which could have popped off at any time on any number of interstate highways, causing tragedy. And it wasn't until we returned, having driven more than 5,000 kilometres, that I found out that while the tires were well inflated, the wheels were out of alignment on our 5-year-old van. It meant three of our tires, which run for about \$200 a pop, were dangerously worn on one side and had to be replaced. More disturbingly, they could have blown out.

The near-misses taught me the importance of the car-care experts' advice: have your vehicle checked out for road-trip worthiness at least two weeks before your journey, allowing time for any required fixes, or run the risk of a breakdown at the worst possible time.

If you're the type to have regular maintenance done and are somewhat car-savvy, you're probably going to be okay with the 10-minute quick inspection Car Care Canada says you can do yourself (see sidebar at left for website). If you're not, a visit to the garage is a good idea. Mechanics will check for tire pressure and alignment, including the spare; see if the air filter is clogged; check oil, transmission and anti-freeze fluid levels; verify belts and hoses; and probe for any leaks that could cause a lengthy detour en route. Brakes, windshield wipers, the cooling system, battery, alternator and spark-plug wires also need to be verified, and if you're going to be driving in hot temperatures, make sure the air conditioning is working. (See sidebar for websites that provide a good maintenance checklist or suggestions.)

Also important are emergency supplies, including a flashlight, pen, paper and camera to record details in case of an accident. Extra antifreeze, engine oil, transmission fluid and windshield wiper fluid are also suggested. A small tool kit with a screwdriver, pliers, electrical tape, jumper cables is a good idea, too.

The sanity of the driver and his or her co-pilot is paramount, and nothing will erode one's patience quicker than bored, trapped children sitting in close proximity. Experts offer several tips, chief among them scheduling long breaks so the little darlings can stretch their legs; like dogs, an exhausted, energy-depleted child is a much happier child. Subjecting kids to a 24-hour marathon is begging for trouble. Better to break up the trip into manageable distances, interspersed with trips to a park or pool.

In its tip section on how to survive a family road trip, the Canadian Automobile Association has the following sage advice: Seat siblings with some space in between, so they can't reach each other; have them switch seats from time to time to avert fights; stop often; and bring along some sports equipment.

For meal breaks, a picnic where the children can run is a far better, cheaper and healthier option than sitting in a crowded and grimy fast-food restaurant. Bring plates, cups, bowls and cutlery. A cooler with ice is a great mini-fridge to hold food.

Give each child his/her own backpack loaded with kids' books, games and drawing materials, and prepare a few new games or toys as welcome surprises. Books on CD and music can offer welcome distractions. For the most part, we've fought against the use of a DVD player so far,

hoping that it will drive our sons to read later on out of sheer desperation. But we do so at our own peril; in-car DVDs can provide hours of blissful distraction essential to child and parent.

And finally, the Internet, god bless it, offers a wide variety of sites that suggest dozens of games that can be played in the car. Many sites include printout games like connect the dots or licence-plate bingo.

A well-prepared trip is a happy trip.

Now just make sure that bike carrier is properly attached.

Useful Web Sites to Check Before Your Trip

Below, a random selection of Internet sites that offer basic maintenance information on what you and your mechanic should check before a trip, and items you might want to bring along:

www.caamagazine.ca - The Canadian Automobile Association's magazine website offers a wealth of automotive and trip-planning information. Type "How to survive a family road trip CAA" into Google to find a brief but all-encompassing article on ways to preserve happiness and sanity on a long trip. The site also has links to articles detailing how to keep the car in good shape, how to save money, and how to "greenify" your ride. (You might also want to check www.caaquebec.ca for info.)

www.carcarecanada.ca - Brought to you by the Be Car Care Aware organization that advocates for better vehicle maintenance and is sponsored by the automotive industry, this site offers maintenance tips, a downloadable family road trip guide, and a quick 10-minute road-trip checkup you can do yourself.

www.samarins.com/longtrip - Samarins.com is an illustrated guide for car buyers and owners. In its long-trip maintenance section, it suggests several items that should be checked (oil, transmission, radiator fluids, struts, battery, etc.) and has pictures detailing where to look under the hood if you're less maintenance savvy. It also suggests a handy basic car emergency kit.

www.trustmymechanic.com/newsletter8.html - Good common-sense advice on trip preparation and checkups, as well as all the spare items to bring along to avoid a nightmare on the road.

The Internet has a wealth of sites offering suggestions for in-car activities, to keep the passengers busy. A few good ones include:

www.momsminivan.com - Subtitled 101 Car Travel Games and Road Trip Ideas for Kids, this is an exhaustive collection of ideas, games activities and, most important, printable sheets of bingo, connect the dots, tic-tac-toe and even Battleship that can be used in the car. There are also instructions for string figures, card games like Crazy Eights, aluminum-foil sculpting and printable pages for colouring. With links to sites where you can purchase magnetic games for the car, and travel activity books.

27 Free Games - The actual URL (website address) is too long to insert here, but type "27 free games to keep kids occupied" into Google and it's the first site that pops up, offering written descriptions of 27 classic car games like licence-plate bingo or the geography game (name any place in the world; next player has to name a place that starts with the last letter, and so on), counting cows, I spy, rock-paper-scissors, etc.

www.radroadtrips.com - Good explanations of several games, road-trip song selections with lyrics (Warning: this could backfire terribly after 450 km of Apples & Bananas), and activities like printable Sudoku puzzles, mental math games and storytelling templates.

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