

Gas up! It's time to hit open road

The Toronto Star
Sat 30 May 2009
Page: W02
Section: Wheels
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Remember this time last year, when gas prices crept up to \$1.50 a litre? Well, the good news is this summer they're practically giving the stuff away! Pack up the cooler, dig out the water wings and round up the kids, mother - we're going on a road trip!

I love long road trips. There is no earthly reason why I should - the ones of my childhood are a series of flashbacks of hot cramped station wagons, my sister barfing on anyone within range and a Styrofoam cooler squeaking rhythmically in my ear. And yet the promise outweighs the pain and, if you're hesitating before embarking this summer, the consumer education program Be Car Care Aware has lots of tips.

It may seem obvious, but get your car checked out before you leave. Tell your mechanic your intentions so he or she can check fluid levels, hoses, belts and lighting systems. Make sure your tires are set for the journey and your spare is ready to be called up. The only thing worse than a long traffic snarl on a hot day is being the cause of that snarl.

Don't believe all the hype about in-car entertainment systems: you're the entertainment system!

This is a fabulous time to discover more about each other, and trust me, no teenager can sulk forever. It just seems that way.

Contrary to popular belief, iPods and cellphones are not permanently attached to people. Encourage your kids to use them less - explain how lucky they are to play the Licence Plate game with vanity plates. Look! You can actually find a Z! And an O and a zero!

Remind them that when you were young, you had to play the fake licence plate game, skipping over the letters your mother had to point out didn't exist. Which was very confusing for a 5-year-old who had recently spent a whole year in kindergarten believing in Zs and Os.

Be Care Care Aware wants you to remember to slow down a little. Driving 100 km/h will use 20 per cent less gas than driving 120 km/h. This will also help kids who are counting cows or roadkill.

Plan ahead. Pack snacks that are healthy and manageable. Remember there will be garbage (I pack a couple of Ziploc bags for messy stuff), and that what goes in, must come out. Pace yourself with enough pee breaks.

Be Car Care Aware spokeswoman Kelly Williams gave my van the once over. And then a twice over.

"You know, you have to clean all this, er, stuff out," she said, holding a snow shovel. "Everything turns into a projectile in the event of an accident."

I do know this. But watching her pull out running shoes, a snow brush, Gatorade bottles and a textbook, I remembered that the winter is over, and it's time for a little spring cleaning.

Williams also reminds travellers to make sure they have a first-aid kit in the car. You can put one together yourself (ever wonder what to do with that Dora the Explorer lunchbox your child outgrew?), or purchase one. Go to their website (carcarecanada.ca) for a comprehensive list of what you should include. With Father's Day coming on June 21, this makes a great gift - and every car should have one.

So, prepare your car, round up the kids, pick a destination - be it for a day or a week - then tell the GPS lady to shut up and go have yourself an adventure.

Lorraine Sommerfeld's column appears Saturday in Wheels and Mondays in Living. www.lorraineonline.ca

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