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Tech to take along on your next road trip

Road trips hold a special place in many people's hearts. The open road and the freedoms it represents have been romanticized by writers and travelers since automobiles became accessible to the masses.

While many drivers still take to the road looking for adventure, road trips have changed considerably since Jack Kerouac penned his seminal novel "On the Road" in the 1950s. The spirit of the open road is still there, but the way travelers approach road trips has changed considerably, most notably with regard to the technology that motorists now take along for the ride. Drivers about to embark on a road trip, whether it's their first such venture or their fiftieth, can make trips even more enjoyable by taking along the right tech.

- **Navigation system:** Many vehicles are now equipped with built-in navigation systems. But drivers whose vehicles are older or not equipped with such technology should consider purchasing one before embarking on trips. Though some travelers may feel navigation systems go against the adventurous spirit of road trips, it's easy to get lost on the open road, especially in an era when many people have grown accustomed to round-the-clock

access to information, including maps, on their smartphones. Even if you have no set itinerary in mind, a navigation system can ensure you spend more time enjoying the open road and less time trying to figure out just where you are at any given moment.

- **Chargers:** Many people feel their devices are extensions of themselves, but such devices won't be of much help if they are routinely running out of power. Bring along several chargers that can be plugged into your car so you and your passengers can keep your smartphones and other devices running throughout the trip. Though the idea of going off the grid might seem enticing, leaving the world behind is less romantic when you need roadside assistance or are in search of a restroom or a place to pull over and grab a meal. If you want to disconnect from the world, you can always switch your phone to airplane mode. But keeping the phone charged can help in case of emergency.

- **Apps:** The right apps can make all the difference, especially for travelers whose road trip itinerary is not set in stone. The smartphone app GasBuddy can help drivers find the cheapest gas near them, while an app like AroundMe helps travelers find the nearest restaurants, pharmacies, banks, gas stations,



and hotels, among other things. And don't forget to download a music app like Pandora or Amazon Music (available to Amazon Prime subscribers) so you and your fellow road warriors can be entertained as you travel far and wide.

- **LED road flares:** Traditional road flares tend to burn out rather quickly, with some lasting as little as 15 minutes. That can be a problem for travelers who experience car trouble and end

up stranded far away from auto body shops. Some flameless LED road flares can last for hours on end off of a single charge, providing drivers with some peace of mind should they be stranded and forced to wait awhile before a tow truck or mechanic arrives.

The spirit that inspires travelers to take to the open road still exists, but nowadays drivers can make their road trips even more fun by taking along the appropriate tech.





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Prepare vehicles for harsh weather

As the seasons change, motorists must take steps to safeguard their vehicles, especially when the season changes from fall to winter. Each winter, many vehicles are subjected to sub-zero temperatures, snowfall and icy roads, and such conditions can take their toll on vehicles over time. Taking steps to prepare vehicles for winter weather is a vital step that can make cars and trucks safer for drivers and their passengers.

Battery

Old batteries should be replaced before winter begins. Without a strong, properly functioning battery, engines cannot turn over. Most batteries last between three and five years. However, extreme cold can compromise batteries, especially those that have been around awhile. Batteries are made up of acid and water, and cold temperatures can freeze the

water, thereby affecting battery performance. According to AAA's Automotive Research Center, at 32 F, the average battery loses 35 percent of its strength.

Newer batteries can be protected by starting the vehicle each day to warm up and recharge the battery. Let the car run for at least 10 minutes if you cannot take an extended drive.

Exterior maintenance

Keeping a car waxed and sealed can help maintain a durable exterior finish. This includes not only the paint, but the rubber and vinyl parts of the car's exterior.

Winter is a good time to switch to a heavy-duty synthetic wax that can shield against water and road salts. High-quality sealants can be used on bumpers, trim and rubber door seals as added protection. Speak with an automotive retailer or even the car

dealership if you are unsure which products will make your car's parts most durable for winter weather.

Do not stop washing your car just because the weather is cold. Slushy, wet roads and snow-melting salts can speed up the formation of rust or other decay on the undercarriage of the vehicle. These materials will need to be periodically cleaned off. Flush the underside of the vehicle whenever possible, taking advantage of any dry, slightly warmer days.

Tire pressure

According to the automotive retailer Pep Boys, vehicle tires lose a pound of air pressure for every 10-degree drop in temperature. Many modern cars will alert to changes in air pressure, and drivers should be diligent in maintaining the proper tire pressure. Fuel economy as well as handling ability can decline when tires are not inflated

properly. Tires can be refilled at many gas stations for little cost.

Wipers

Visibility is key in hazardous weather conditions, and keeping the windshield clean is a priority. This means ensuring there is enough windshield wiper fluid in the car and that it is a product that will not freeze.

Wiper blades can freeze and crack in the winter. Older blades may be more susceptible to damage. It's a worthy investment to replace existing wiper blades at the start of each winter.

When vehicles are parked, pull the wipers off of the windshield to safeguard them from sticking and cracking.

Cold weather requires drivers to amp up their vehicle maintenance routines. Consult with a mechanic or automotive retailer for more ideas and products that can help your vehicles operate safely and efficiently this winter.



Replace existing wiper blades at the beginning of each winter so driver visibility is not compromised.



Ridesharing safety tips

Ridesharing is a growing trend among travelers from all walks of life. Some proponents of ridesharing support the concept because they feel it's an eco-friendly means of traveling, while others find it's a great way to save money. Still others employ third-party ridesharing services as a responsible, affordable way to travel when going out for a night on the town.

With a greater number of people sharing rides and interacting with strangers than ever before, safety while ridesharing is an issue to take seriously. While ridesharing trips often occur without incident, there have been some instances of violent altercations involving drivers and passengers. For example, in February 2016, a driver from Kalamazoo, Mich., while working for a popular ridesharing service, admitted to killing six people after going on a shooting rampage.

According to the Taxicab, Limousine and Paratransit Association, ridesharing companies use a background check service to confirm criminal convictions and to make sure drivers are legally able to drive. However, these services may not perform FBI fingerprinting checks conducted by law enforcement officials, whereas taxi drivers are subjected fingerprinting. So some ridesharing drivers who have committed crimes in the past but have never been caught may pass ridesharing background checks, but they might not pass tests that taxi companies would insist they submit to, such as fingerprinting tests.

While ridesharing, whether it entails carpooling or using an established ridesharing service, can be convenient, passengers must take steps to ensure their own safety when sharing rides.

- **Confirm insurance coverage.** All drivers need to be insured in case of an accident. Passengers are well within their rights to request proof of current insurance before agreeing to carpool.

- **Confirm vehicle maintenance and inspections.** Private individuals and some smaller ridesharing services drive fewer hours per week than many taxi companies. That means personal vehicles may be in better shape than taxis. Drivers must maintain their vehicles and have them inspected according to local regulations. Passengers can ask to see service records and should only accept rides in vehicles that appear to be in good repair.

- **Confirm the driver and car before traveling.** Before accepting a ride from a ridesharing service, passengers should confirm that the driver, vehicle and license plate number matches the notification that has been sent through the service's app. Passengers also can track the progress of the car's arrival. All details should be verified before stepping into the ridesharing vehicle.

- **Ride in the back seat.** Many of the criminal incidents associated with ridesharing have involved passengers riding in the front seat next to the driver. Maintain a safe distance by riding in the back, which enables passengers to exit the vehicle more readily.

- **Ride with a friend.** Safety comes in numbers, so don't hesitate to share rides with friends or close colleagues if you are worried about riding alone.

- **Avoid cash exchanges.** Many ridesharing services automatically charge rides to passengers' credit cards. Chip-in arrangements for other carpooling can be made via PayPal or other methods that do not involve cash. Avoid getting in a car with a driver who asks to be paid in cash.

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How to safely navigate wet roads

Fall is a great time of year to hit the open road, as fall foliage is colorful and provides a wonderful backdrop for weekend getaways, while the mild temperatures of fall make this an ideal time to enjoy the great outdoors.

Though autumn is often a mild time of year with regard to weather, fall foliage enthusiasts can still encounter adverse conditions on road trips. According to the automotive group AAA, wet pavement contributes to nearly 1.2 million traffic accidents each year. When combined with fall leaves, wet pavement poses an even greater threat to drivers and their passengers.

Autumn and precipitation do not necessarily go hand in hand, but drivers should still exercise caution during the fall road trip season so they can better handle roadways that are wet and covered in fallen leaves.

- Do not use cruise control. Because fall foliage can be so stunning to experience, many drivers are tempted to use the cruise control feature on their automobiles so they can pay more attention to the array of colors at their disposal. But cruise control should never be engaged when driving on wet roads or roads that may be cov-

ered in leaves. Such conditions require drivers to focus their undivided attention on the road ahead of them. When drivers suddenly encounter slick roads, easing off the accelerator rather than quickly applying the brakes can be the safest response, but such a response is impossible when cruise control is engaged.

- Drive slowly. Many fall road trippers are already driving slowly so they can fully enjoy the fall scenery. But it's important that drivers slow down even more when encountering wet roadways, as driving slow can reduce the risk of a vehicle hydroplaning. When vehicles hydroplane, they slide uncontrollably on wet surfaces as the tires rise up on the water covering the roads. AAA notes that tires on vehicles driving as slow as 35 miles per hour can still lose some contact with the road, so drivers should maintain low speeds when driving on wet roads and reduce their speeds even further during heavy rains.

- Resist the urge to brake quickly. When drivers feel themselves losing control, many respond by braking quickly. But hard braking and quick turns can increase the risk that a vehicle will hydroplane. And even if the vehicle does not hydroplane, motorists



Wet weather can quickly compromise drivers' visibility, and it's imperative that drivers know how to safely navigate wet roads.

may have a hard time controlling it when slamming on the brakes. When encountering wet roads, brake slowly and maintain low speeds until the roads dry off.

- Leave ample room between vehicles. Because braking quickly on wet roadways can increase the risk of accident, it's important that drivers leave ample room between their

vehicles and the vehicles in front of them. Afford other drivers the space to brake slowly just like you hope the drivers behind you are doing. Avoid overcrowded roadways during especially wet weather.

Wet conditions during fall road trip season can be dangerous, and it's important that drivers learn to navigate wet roadways safely.



Simple defensive driving techniques anyone can employ

Driving defensively is a great way for motorists to reduce their risks of accident, maintain their vehicles over the long haul and save money on their auto insurance. But driving can be habit-forming, and over time many drivers develop habits that can compromise their safety on the road.

No driver wants to make roads less safe, and many may just need to reacquaint themselves with the following defensive driving techniques they learned way back when they first started driving as teenagers.

- Avoid distractions. Older drivers didn't have too many things to distract them from the road, but nowadays it's easy to be distracted whether you're driving alone on an empty road or sitting in rush hour traffic with dozens of your fellow commuters. That's because today's vehicles may be equipped with televisions, smartphone hookups and high-quality sound systems that can take drivers' attention away from the road. Drivers may even be bringing additional distractions with them into their vehicles. When getting behind the wheel, keep your stereo speakers low and turn off all of your devices so you aren't tempted to check emails or text messages while driving.

- Don't be in such a hurry. Perhaps the most effective defensive driving technique is to slow down when on the road. That's easier said than done, especially for commuters who are running late and trying to get to the office on time. But making a conscious effort to slow down, even if you are a few minutes late for work or running late for an appointment, can mean the difference between getting into an accident or staying safe on the road. If you know you are running late, don't try to compensate by driving fast. Instead, call ahead to let whoever might be waiting for you know that you will be a few minutes late.

- Don't lane hop. Frequent switching between lanes can make other drivers nervous, increasing the risk of an accident. In addition, sudden or frequent lane changes can make it difficult for drivers to maintain their focus on the road and see more than a few cars ahead of them. Drivers who have been on the road for a long time may feel confident in their abilities to quickly switch between lanes, but fellow motorists may find such shifting distracting and begin to drive erratically as a result. Stay in one lane as long as possible, and only pass cars on the left.

- Don't respond to aggressive drivers. If a fellow driver is driving aggressively, slow down and let them pass or pull over and let them get far away from you before you return to the roadway. Studies have indicated that road rage incidents escalate when drivers make eye contact with one another. Even if you are not at fault, it's up to you to avoid a potentially dangerous situation and protect yourself and your passengers.

Defensive driving techniques reduce the risk of accidents and help to keep cars running strong over the long haul. Drivers can benefit from periodically revisiting such techniques and practicing them on roadways.





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Make driving after dark more safe

Traffic accidents can occur at any time of day. But while many drivers are comfortable driving during daylight hours, that comfort level drops considerably when the sun goes down and driver visibility is reduced.

According to a 2016 analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Fatality Analysis Reporting System, 43 percent of motor vehicle crash deaths in the United States in 2014 occurred between the hours of 6 p.m. and 3 a.m. While various factors contributed to those deaths, poor visibility was certainly among them, as many drivers simply don't see as well when driving at night as they do when driving during the day.

Some motorists who are uncomfortable driving at night avoid the roads altogether once the sun goes down. But that's not an option for the millions of drivers across the globe who must drive at night for personal or professional reasons. Remaining alert at all times and obeying traffic laws are great ways to stay safe when driving at night, and the following are some additional strategies that can help motorists make nighttime driving more safe.

- **Test your headlights.** Many drivers go years without inspecting or replacing their headlights or headlight bulbs. Conduct routine inspections of headlights and turn them on at night to determine where the lights are pointing. Drivers of older vehicles with plastic lens covers may notice the covers have become cloudy or yellow. Such covers should be polished or replaced. If light from the headlights is being aimed too low or unevenly, adjust their aim on your own or ask your mechanic to do so.



- **Adjust your interior lighting.** Dashboard lighting can sometimes affect driver visibility if the light is too bright. When vehicle dashboard lighting is too bright, the resulting reflection can affect and distract drivers' eyes, compromising their ability to see the road. Dim dashboard lighting to a level that does not adversely affect your ability to see the road at night, and do the same with GPS systems if they are reflecting too brightly as well.

- **Don't allow smoking inside your vehicle.** Smoking inside a vehicle can affect driver visibility in various ways. When drivers or their passengers smoke inside a car, the smoke that lingers can dry out drivers' eyes, making their eyes tired and forcing them to work harder to stay open. In addition, smoke, especially smoke from vaping, can cloud up quickly, making drivers feel as if they're looking through dense fog just to see the road. Finally, smoking inside a vehicle can stain the interior of vehicle windshields, making it harder for drivers to see out of the windshield to the road ahead.

- **Schedule routine vision checkups.** Nighttime drivers are sometimes betrayed by their own eyes. If it's been awhile since you have had a vision checkup, schedule one. A new eyeglass or contact prescription may be just what you need to start seeing things more clearly at night.

Nighttime driving can be difficult, but drivers can take steps to make themselves more comfortable when driving after dark.



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