

Tips for vehicle care or rentals when taking your spring road trip

BY GAYLE CRAMPTON
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Not long ago, my idea of preparing for an extended drive meant selecting the right road music. While I still feel this task is key to a worthwhile road trip, I now consider more mundane factors — such as reviewing the condition of the car — before hitting the road.

And aren't we supposed to do something to the car when the weather gets warmer? These days the concept "tune-up" seems touchingly old-world, like mending the harness on the oxen before pointing the Conestoga westward ho. Most of us still know how to check the oil and the transmission fluid — although not all of us understand how to replenish these substances.

Gary Gorton, general manager at Goodyear Auto Service Center in Traverse City agreed that both a language and a technology update are in order.

"It's an old term — nothing really gets 'tuned' anymore," he said.

According to Gorton, the most important pre-trip evaluation your car needs is a safety inspection by a certified mechanic. The suspension, as well as all belts, hoses, fuel and exhaust systems, should be checked for dangerous corrosion or wear.

"You also want to get your tires checked for unusual or uneven wear, and it can be a good time to rotate them or to change out any special winter tires you use," he said.

Gorton also points out that before you take to the open road you'll want to consider the basic "drivability" of your car. Things like dirty fuel filters, which should be changed every 36,000 miles, can greatly affect the performance of your car. And if you're headed for warmer climates, Gorton said, "Don't forget to see if your air conditioner's working."

It can be problems just like that — the AC's busted, or your car sucks up gas like a Shop Vac, or (like my beloved vehicle) its door-open-lights-on chime is prone to ding steadily — that cause one to consider renting.

Chuck Williams, area manager of Traverse City's Enterprise Rent-A-Car, made it sound easy: "Really, if you have a valid drivers' license and a major credit card, you'll have no problem."

If you're in a hurry, it's a good idea to call ahead with questions. (You can usually plan on getting a car easily if you call 24 hours ahead to reserve one, although a larger car might need 48 hours notice.)

There are some issues that each rental company handles differently. Driver age, for instance, is relative. Some agencies require that renters be over 18, some 21. Some require a larger deposit or additional insurance for renters under 21.

Companies may also differ over deposit amounts and type. Some will accept cash, for instance, and some won't. If you don't plan to use a credit card, Williams recommended contacting the local office of whatever rental company you intend to use.

In Traverse City, all the rental companies serving the area have offices out at the airport.

"The people handling the 800 numbers may not know the specifics about what's acceptable," Williams said.

Rental car prices vary depending on where you want to go and what you want to drive. For a 10-day round trip

to Atlanta, Williams offered ballpark figures of \$450 to \$700, depending on preference for a subcompact or a large SUV. If you have an insured car of your own, you should talk to your insurance company before you rent. Many drivers are already insured when using a rental car, and there's no point buying extra coverage you don't need. Also, some credit cards automatically supply insurance when they're used to purchase a car rental.

What's the most important thing for a renter to remember?

"It's really good to be open and honest with your rental dealer," Williams said. "If you get to Atlanta and decide you've got to see the Outer Banks, that's fine. Just stop into the Atlanta office of your dealer, and they can usually get the right paperwork faxed down in just a few minutes."

It might add a few bucks to your bill, but if you get stopped by the cops and you're out of the area stipulated in your rental agreement, they may just impound the car and ask questions later.

"That document you sign when you rent a car is a binding legal agreement. The cops expect it to match with your location and who's driving," Williams said.

Gayle Crampton is a local freelance writer.

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