

Living Frugally on the Road

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With gas prices nearing all time highs in many parts of the nation, RVers feel understandable trepidation about the cost of their summer travels. Though you may have little control over the rising cost of fuel, you can alter other aspects of your travels in order to achieve a fabulously frugal summer vacation.

First of all, let's address the elephant in the room. We all know that RVs aren't the most fuel-efficient vehicles on the planet. But you can take the following steps to maximize your RV's gas mileage:

1. Begin the mileage maximization before you ever leave home by ensuring that your RV is properly maintained. An improperly tuned engine burns more gas. Tires that are not fully inflated contribute to poor gas mileage. Be sure to check the headlights, fluids, brakes, wipers, and horn for proper function before you hit the road. Seeking emergency maintenance while on the road is often a costly venture. Instead, take care of routine maintenance yourself while still at home.
2. Drive in a fuel-efficient manner. This means maintaining a consistent speed as well as avoiding accelerating quickly or braking sharply. Use cruise control to your advantage. Gas mileage usually decreases significantly once you surpass a speed of 60 miles per hour.
3. Fuel up at the best price possible. Use websites such as www.gasbuddy.com (which provides gas prices for locations across the United States and Canada) or apps on your phone to obtain the best fuel price in a given area. But don't drive out of your way just to save a few cents on gas. You'll spend more on fuel during your drive to an out-of-the-way station.
4. Don't leave your engine running when you're parked for lunch or other stops.
5. Pack efficiently. Take what you need and will reasonably use in order to avoid emergency purchases on the road. However, try not to over pack because the heavier your RV is, the more gas it will require.

Another way to save on your gas bill is to limit the number of miles that you travel. This doesn't mean that you have to cut down on your total vacation time. Just choose a destination that's a little closer to home. Consider exploring an area of your home state that you've never seen. Often, marvelous surprises wait just beyond our own backyards.

Carefully mapping out your route can have a significant impact on the number of miles you travel. Getting lost or taking lengthy detours eats up time and fuel. Plan your journey before you leave, and bring along a GPS as well as paper maps to ensure that you stay on the right track. Organizations such as AAA will provide members with maps free of charge.

In addition, consider the time of day that you'll travel through major cities. During the very congested periods in the morning and evening, heavy traffic may leave you idling in a sea of cars for lengthy periods of time. Try to plan your travel so that you drive through major cities mid-day, at night, or on the weekend.

After fuel costs, the road tripper often ranks eating expense as the costliest part of a vacation. Of course, the RVer has an advantage in this regard thanks to the RV's built-in kitchen. Though it's tempting to seek the convenience of fast food and restaurants when on the road, cooking in the RV can save you a bundle. Here are some tips for making the most of your RV's kitchen:

1. Stock the kitchen before you leave home. Pack plenty of pantry staples such as dry and canned goods as well as condiments. Consider buying heavily used items, such as coffee, in bulk.
2. Stock a reasonable amount of produce and other perishables (enough to last a week or so). Purchasing an excessive amount of perishables before you begin a trip will only lead to spoilage and wasted food. Instead, restock on these perishable items throughout your trip.
3. For a fun and frugal way to obtain fruits and vegetables, visit pick-your-own farms and farmer's markets along your route. Check www.pickyourown.org to find these farms in the areas you'll be visiting. Often, farmer's markets sell cheeses, breads and jams in addition to produce.
4. Outfit your RV's kitchen with reusable tableware. Though paper plates and plastic utensils cut down on dishwashing time, they create a significant amount of waste, in both environmental and financial terms. Instead, stock up on reusable tableware at garage sales or thrift shops. It doesn't matter if all your pieces match. An assortment of patterns creates a fun, eclectic look that's just perfect for a vacation.
5. Pack a picnic blanket, picnic basket, and cooler. This way, you'll be able to prepare meals in your kitchen but enjoy them in the great outdoors. Take advantage of scenic parks where you can picnic during pleasant weather.

Though cooking in your RV is usually the most economical way to eat, sometimes you'll yearn for a change of pace. And in fact, it is possible to eat out even on a budget. Visit restaurants' websites and facebook pages for coupons. Often, eating lunch rather than dinner at a restaurant makes the meal much more affordable. Consider splitting a large portion or taking half of your portion to go in order to stretch one big meal into two smaller ones.

Choose budget-friendly places to stay. Research options on websites such as www.freecampgrounds.com, which provides a list of campsites that cost \$10 or less. Instead of splitting your vacation between a string of campsites, choose only a few, and stay at them for longer periods of time. Some campsites may even offer discounted rates for extended stays. And most Wal-Marts allow a free overnight stay (review the Wal-Mart Atlas for specifics).

When visiting attractions, check the local visitor's bureau for coupons. Always ask for any applicable discounts, such as a senior discount or reduced rates for AAA or AARP members. In addition, some attractions offer discounted admission on certain days of the week or at certain times (for example, theme parks often offer discounted admission in the afternoon). Also, it never hurts to simply enter the name of the attraction along with the word "discount" into a Google search. You can find a surprising number of coupons that way.

While these cost-saving strategies may take a little extra effort, they'll help you enjoy your summer vacation without breaking the bank. Most importantly, don't forget to relax and have fun while you're on the road. After all, laughter is free.