



Inspections and proper maintenance can help you prepare for most any type of vacation driving situation. Above, a driver guides a Dodge Magnum down from the summit of Pike's Peak near Manitou Springs, Colo.

Vacation beckons, but is the car up to it? Inspecting the tires, battery, and radiator can prevent a breakdown far from home

By Chandra Orr, Copley News Service | June 4, 2006

When planning a big road trip for the family, a simple vehicle inspection can save you from getting sidetracked along the way.

“Cars have become a lot more reliable, but there are certain things that are still incredibly important and are up to the driver. In the summer, you’re talking about temperature-sensitive problems -- things like flat tires, dead batteries, and overheating radiators,” said Philip Reed, consumer advice editor for Edmunds.com, a top source for automotive information.

“Think through where you’re going and what you may encounter,” Reed said. “Now is a good time to check your maintenance schedule. If you have anything coming up, you might want to take care of it ahead of time.

“Frequently, people will travel long distances on summer road trips. You might drive 3,000 miles, which will put you over the point where you need to have an oil change -- or even new tires, a new battery, or a cooling system check.”

So plan ahead, think proactively, and put your mind at rest before heading out on a well-needed vacation. After all, a detour to the local auto repair shop is no fun for anyone.

Tend to your tread

“If you’re thinking of things that can leave you stranded, tires are at the top of the list -- so money spent on tires is money well spent,” Reed said. “If you’re anywhere near needing new tires, this is the time to do it.”

Before taking to the road, take a look at your tires. Check for cracking, which could mean your tires are weak and vulnerable to a blowout. Test the tread depth, as poor tread can put you at risk for hydroplaning during summer storms. Don’t forget your backup. Make sure your spare tire is

fully inflated and double-check the trunk to be sure you have all the tools needed to change a flat tire.

Check your charge

“Batteries tend to go with very little warning, but if your battery is more than three years old, you may be getting close,” Reed said.

If the ignition is slow to turn over when starting the car, drivers need to keep an eye on the battery. Pick up a hydrometer at your local auto parts store. They cost just a few dollars. The hydrometer measures the charge left in the battery, which will give a good indication of whether or not you need a replacement before the big trip.

“If the battery goes out, you're dead on the road. Then you are in a position where you have to buy whatever is available -- and you're likely to spend too much money. It's much better to get the battery changed proactively,” Reed said.

At the very least, stash a set of jumper cables in the trunk.

Keep your cool

Overheated radiators also top the list of summer car troubles. Modern vehicles are more immune to such problems, but plenty of older models may be at risk.

“Overheating depends on where you drive and what you drive. Cooling systems these days are extremely efficient. However, if your car is fully packed, it's an extremely hot day, and you're driving up a mountain, you should keep your eye on the temperature gauge,” Reed said.

Before hitting the road, make sure all of the car's fluids are topped off. It's also not a bad idea to pack extra coolant, though you can add water to the radiator in a pinch.

“If you put plain water in the cooling system, over time it will rust, so you will need to have the mixture adjusted when you return home,” Reed said. “It's important to have coolant in the mixture because it raises the boiling point of water and adds additional cooling ability. Plus, if you add plain water improperly, you can crack the engine block.”

Watch the windows

It's a good idea to pack the car the night before leaving. Packing the morning of the trip can add extra pressure, and packing in a panic may leave drivers without a clear view of the road.

“When you're packing, make sure your visibility is preserved,” Reed said. “Make sure you have access to your rearview mirror, and make sure you understand your blind spots. If you've cut out the use of your rearview mirror by loading your back seat to the ceiling, what has that done to your visibility?”

After loading up your luggage and gear, take a few minutes to check your mirrors and repack the car if necessary. ■