

One happier situation for road trippers this year is that the cost of gasoline has dropped significantly. However, if you're on a budget, it's still a significant part of the overall cost. The simplest way to cut into that expense is to travel with another two to four companions in the same car.

The savings can be hundreds of dollars when costs are pooled on a long road trip, money better spent on lodging, food, excursions, entertainment and souvenirs to take back to the family. Additionally, with four or more in the car, driving duties can be divided to avoid fatigue and potential dangers, especially during long night hours on the road.



It's a great convenience to take along portable entertainment items, such as a DVD player with a stack of movies, and/or CD player for music. With earphones, they can be going night and day on the road without disturbing sleepers or the driver. Additionally, if you don't already have one mounted in the car, be sure to bring one of those miraculous little GPS gizmos, so you'll always know just how lost you are at any time.

On our most recent road trip, each driver was at the wheel for three-hour shifts. Another rode "shotgun" in the next seat, to read maps and tourist brochures about interesting sights and towns along the way. The off-duty passengers snoozed stretched out on air mattresses, because the back seat of the big '07 Corolla folded down flat. A Queen Mary luxury stateroom couldn't have been any more comfy.

We recently drove from Houston to Phoenix to Los Angeles, then up the California coastal highways to Santa Barbara and San Francisco, with lots of off-major-highway ramblings. For instance, we decided to divert from the main coast to visit Solvang, a charming little tourist trap near Santa Barbara that is all quaint Danish tradition and fantastic food.

It took us 24 hours for the total journey, and we stopped just for gas, potty breaks and meals. We would have spent at least a night at one of California's cozy little motels or bed'n'breakfasts along the Pacific Coast. However, one couple was in a hurry because they had a family wedding to attend in San Francisco. Maybe next time.