

Poor driving, going long hours without rest, booze, cell phones and stupid decisions can cut the cross-country trip short and send you to the hospital, or on that final journey heavenward (or to that other place).

I've driven the 3,000 miles many times from US coast to coast, often alone and on several trips with family and/or friends. Of course, if another driver is with you, the ordeal is not only easier by half, but can be almost pleasant. There's companionship and conversation that help pass the hours and miles away. That will help preserve your sanity. Also, while one is driving, the other can snooze. use noise-cancelling earphones to listen to music, do laptop computer work or watch a DVD.



However, the most important tip a veteran driver can give to someone who's about to take the first 3,000 mile journey is to use common sense. In my experience, a basic mistake is to keep tooling along for more than four hours at a stretch. No matter how good you feel, you absolutely need a rest break at that time or earlier. Then, after stopping, as you're pumping gas, do some stretch exercises. If necessary, curl up somewhere for a quick nap. Eat a spare, but nutritious meal. Walk around. Use your cell phone to make any necessary calls, because you should absolutely NOT use it nor any other electronic device when at the wheel for long stretches.

By far the worst mistake, other than drinking alcohol at any time during the trip, is trying to drive without rest. The only time I almost bought the farm was when I had to be at a destination within two days of when I left Pennsylvania for Southern California. The fact that I was alone compounded the mistake. After getting some sleep at home, I started out early in the morning, and except for several stops, I drove throughout the day and into the night.

By about 9 pm the first night, I began to drowse and feel my head droop. But I was aware of it, and every few minutes, I slapped my face and was alert again. Then, I began to see the road and the trees on the side roll up toward me. I swerved to prevent being hit by the ghostly shapes ... which didn't really exist. Although I've never tried marijuana, I had similar illusions of whirling bright colors and flashing stars. I wised up in time to pull off the road into an all-night station and beanery. Within seconds I was fast asleep, stretched out in the back seat.

I hope my few tips for the cross-country driver can be of help. Get plenty of rest, stay away from booze, don't use your cell phone while driving, take at least one other driver along, and when

you feel even slightly drowsy, get the hell off the road. Do it for my sake. You never know. I may be driving toward you from the other direction.