

Now that you've settled in from your summer vacation or unpacked your 317th box from your recent PCS, it's time once again to think about traveling—for the holidays.

Even with the country's economic hardship, many people choose to spend the time and money to visit loved ones during the Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays, according to the U.S. Travel Association, which credited four significant reasons to visit friends or family during the holidays: creating memories, maintaining traditions, reconnecting and building relationships, and improving a person's sense of overall well-being. "All indicators point to the fact that people feel the enriching experiences that holiday travel affords and the opportunity to share time with loved ones is of great value to their life," said Dr. Suzanne Cook, Senior Vice President of Research for the Travel Industry Association. "Most people appear to be unwilling to give up what and who they love, even in more stressful times."

Military families, in particular, use the liberal leave policies often associated with December to go home and visit loved ones, citing a desire to keep themselves and their children connected with their extended families. And with more service members than ever deployed during the holidays, many military families take extended vacations to visit their families, to help keep

# On the Road Again

By Jennifer G. Williams


their holiday traditions going, even with the absence of a parent.

## Car versus Plane

There are two main ways to get from point "A" to point "B" these days—by automobile or airplane. Each method comes with its own pros and cons. Considering what may be best for your family and budget may determine when, if and for how long you can spend time at home with your family and friends.

Many people these days choose to drive their cars on vacation. Especially if you have children or pets (or both!), driving may be the best (although not the favorite) option. If you have pets and choose to fly home, factor in the cost of a pet sitter or kennel while you are gone. I checked on kenneling my two dogs for two weeks this summer while going home on vacation, and was shocked to find it would be roughly \$700 to kennel them together. I chose instead to drive the two days home and back, and took my travel-seasoned pups with me—I also extended my trip to four weeks, giving me more opportunity to see the people and do the things I'd want to do.

Military children are often very used to traveling, and have developed their own favorite vehicle pastimes. My girls, ages 5 and 7, like to watch movies and listen to music. I bought them each a set of headphones, so they can enjoy their entertainment without disturbing each other—or me!



**If there's ever a time to make sure your vehicle is in tip-top shape, it's right before a big trip with the family.**

*Of course, everyone knows to change the oil and check the tire pressure, but other maintenance can be just as important. You can take your car to a trusted mechanic for a good checkup, or just have one of the oil change chains check your fluids and such for you when they change the oil. But here's an idea of the things you need to do before the trip.*

**Check Your Tire Pressure**—yes, it's worth mentioning twice. Not only does it keep you safe while driving, it also can improve your fuel economy. Your ideal tire pressure should be on a sticker on the inside of your gas door and/or in your vehicle's manual. It's a good idea to keep a small tire gauge in your glove compartment and check your tires regularly when they are cool.

**Check Your Battery**—especially if you are going to or coming from a cold climate this winter. Test the battery to see how much juice is in it—you can take it to a car care center, where they can check it for you inexpensively (if they charge at all). The last thing you want is a dead battery in the middle of nowhere.

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Now that fuel prices have come back down, you can use a little more of your travel budget for snacks or food on the road. If you are still on a tight budget, bringing a cooler with snacks, drinks or sandwich fixings can be light on your wallet, while allowing you to take an extended break at those revamped rest areas across the nation—some even have mini-dog parks, along with playgrounds and picnic tables.

More and more hotels and motels allow pets these days. You can even search for pet-friendly accommodations on websites including [www.pets-allowed-hotels.com](http://www.pets-allowed-hotels.com), [www.petswelcome.com](http://www.petswelcome.com), [www.dogfriendly.com](http://www.dogfriendly.com), [www.bringfido.com](http://www.bringfido.com) and <http://pet-friendly.com/travel>. Travel sites including [www.hotels.com](http://www.hotels.com) and [www.priceline.com](http://www.priceline.com) offer search features that allow you to find hotels that accommodate pets. Some places charge a pet fee for your stay, which can be refundable or not, and others charge a per-night premium for your room. Some hotels have weight limits, so if you have a medium or large-size dog, be sure to check ahead.

### Tips for Car Travel with Kids and Pets

- Let your kids pick their own snacks and drinks (no red or purple drinks, please), as well as coloring books, video games and movies they may want for entertainment on the road. If they pick what they bring, there's less chance of arguing or complaining on the road.
- I always buy and save a new movie or game my girls have been wanting and bring it out as a surprise if or when the "same old stuff" gets old.
- Be sure to bring your pet's favorite blanket and a toy or two for the trip. I have a collapsible kennel for the dogs to stay in while traveling—it's perfect in a motel or at Mom's house.
- One good idea is to put a piece of

masking tape with a local number on your pet's ID tag while on vacation. It will increase the chances of reuniting with your pet if he gets lost on the road. I just keep my cell phone number, which hasn't changed with four moves, on my pooches' tags.

- Take your own pet food! A jug of water from your tap, even. You don't want a doggie with an upset

tummy in your car trucking down the interstate!

- Always bring a copy of your pets' vet records, just in case something happens while you are away—because you know that if something happens, it will happen between late Friday afternoon and Monday morning.

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If you just cannot stand the thought of being in a car for an extended period of time, you found a great airfare home, you don't have to worry about any pets or you just don't have that much time off to spend driving, flying home may be your best bet. Look to travel on Tuesdays or Saturdays for the best fares, or sign up for a low-fare alert on your favorite travel site. Booking early or at the last minute can garner you the best deals.

Just think: you can fly home in a few hours, whereas it may have taken a whole day or two of driving to get there. If you fly, you can spend more quality time with those you love.

And if you have kids, you can check more bags without penalty and take one of the clear, quart-sized bags with liquids for each passenger. The only down side is that you basically have to pay full-price for each seat you occupy.

But even with its advantages, flying with children isn't always a picnic. Ears tend to pop during takeoff and landing, so try and feed babies at these times or give children who are old enough gum to chew, so their discomfort is at a minimum.

Those portable DVD players, music players or even laptops are priceless entertainment on long flights, so let your children pick some movies or games (and don't forget the headphones!)

One tip I have for enjoying drinks past the security checkpoint is to bring empty water bottles in my carry-on bag, then fill at a water fountain. When the girls travel with me, I always bring a few tubes of the instant-drink powder to mix in and voila! Instant fruit punch or lemonade! It usually gives the screeners pause when they see the bottles in the luggage, so I've started just putting them in the bins with my purse, so they can clearly see the bottles are empty.



Some people like to take their chances with Space-A travel during the holidays, but if you are on a tight schedule, or if you have kids to cart around, it may not be your best option. Also

keep in mind that holiday flight schedules are usually cut back, so more service members can spend the holidays with their own families. And keep a backup plan, just in case. But if you have the time, and you're flying home to California from Japan, the cost savings alone may be worth the extra day or two you have to spend waiting for a flight. For more information on Space-A travel, visit the Air Mobility Command website at [www.amc.af.mil/questions/topic.asp?id=380](http://www.amc.af.mil/questions/topic.asp?id=380)

No matter where or how you plan to travel this year, plan ahead, look for deals and have a fun and safe trip! ●

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**Check Your Windshield Wipers**—make sure your wipers (front and back, if equipped) are in good condition, with no cracks or gaps in their swipe. It's no fun to discover you need a new set in the middle of a snowstorm!

**Check Your Fluids**—windshield washer fluid, power steering fluid, brake fluid, etc. It's also a good idea to carry some extra of these fluids with you in an easily accessible place, in case you need them on the trip.

**Check Your Tires**—not the pressure this time, but the tires themselves. The old penny trick still holds true—take a Lincoln-head penny and place the top of Lincoln's head in one of your tire's grooves. If you can still see the top of Lincoln's head, you need some new tires, since the space between Lincoln's head and the edge of the penny is 1/16<sup>th</sup> of an inch—the minimum recommended tire tread depth.

**Check Hoses**—for any fraying, cracks or obvious leaks. One easy, non-mechanical way to do this is to check your garage floor—if you see any stains or pools, you probably have a leak somewhere.

**Check Your Auto Club Membership**—if you have one, or check with your insurance company to see if they offer a “towing and labor” package that may include roadside assistance. Many times, going through your insurance company is a lot cheaper than joining a national auto club—especially if all you need is basic peace of mind when you're on the road.

**Check Your Insurance Card**—and make sure you have an updated one in your glovebox, along with proof of registration. Many states require proof of these things if you get stopped or are in an accident, and the tickets for not having them handy can get pretty expensive.

**Check Your Vehicle's Emergency Kit**—it's actually a good idea to have one of these in your vehicle at all times, but especially now that you are taking a trip. And be sure to pack the kit in an easily accessible place—you don't want to be unloading your entire vehicle in a blizzard to get to your extra fan belt!

Robert James is a career Army officer from Alabama who has finally become accustomed to driving in the snow in Colorado.

## Suggested Items for an Emergency Kit

- Jumper cables
- Extra fluids
- Extra fan belt
- Very small, basic tool kit (screwdrivers, pliers, sockets)
- Road flares and orange safety triangles
- Toilet paper or paper towels
- Bottled water; MREs
- Rain poncho
- Hand sanitizer
- Tire gauge
- Tire repair kit or aerosol
- Portable air compressor, if room

And, depending on the weather:

- Blankets
- Tires chains
- Ice scraper
- Cheap kitty litter (for traction in snow)