

My Road-Trip Initiation

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Few things are more exciting for someone in their early 20s than their first cross-country road trip. So when orders came in for my permanent change of station (PCS) move from Virginia Beach to Whidbey Island, my first phone call was to PJ, a buddy from home, telling him the news and asking if he wanted to join me.

As we prepared to leave Dam Neck in the rearview mirror, we noticed some minor hesitation in my more-than-a-decade-old car. We joked while rolling down the road, “There’ll we be: a tow truck driver and the two of us headed across country.” Too bad we don’t get paid for that type of clairvoyance.

The trip started off great—we hit places like St. Louis, Kansas City, and Denver. As we left a Rockies game in the Mile-High City, we decided to head toward Mount Rushmore. It would require a little backtracking, but you don’t get a chance to see that type of great American landmark every day. Besides, we had plenty of time to make it out west.

That night, the quiet hills of South Dakota rolled by, as we drove toward Sulfur Springs, S.D. In the morning, we continued on and, by 1000, were staring at the mountain with awe. After taking the obligatory

pictures, we headed west, this time toward Idaho. About 10 miles into Wyoming, near Devil’s Tower, the car decided to change our game plan.

We were heading up a slight incline when the transmission completely gave out. We realized imme-



diately that we were in a bad position. With little traffic (but plenty of antelope) around, help was scarce.

Our one lucky break was that we still had cell-phone coverage. I had an AAA membership and made a quick call, asking for help. After spending some time on the line, we convinced them to send a tow truck our way; however, it would take several hours to reach us from the nearest service center in Gillette, Wyo.

The next 24 hours consisted of buying a new-to-me used vehicle, loading all my household goods into it from the old car, and hitting the road again. Several thousands of dollars and hours of aggravation later, I was back on the road, with little time to spare. We made it to Seattle in time for my friend's flight home and I reported to my command on time. Thankfully, we didn't encounter any larger problems, even though the possibility had existed.

In retrospect, I did some things right, but I also did many things wrong. Having AAA coverage and a cellphone were a big help, as was having an extra driver. We had made the trip safely, alternating drivers and thus ensuring adequate rest. We further had stopped frequently. Where I ultimately failed was starting the long-distance drive without ensuring the vehicle was sound mechanically.

Some common-sense ideas for safe travel include using multiple drivers when possible and minimizing time between stops to ensure you have adequate time for any emergencies that arise. You also never should drink and drive. Make sure you have some type of roadside assistance package, such as USAA or AAA, and have basic supplies on hand, such as an extra quart of oil, a gallon of potable water, and a basic tool kit.



Remember to apply the principles of operational risk management (ORM), and don't discount playing the "what if" game, which can serve a cross-country driver well. Questions like "What if I break down out of cell range?" could lead to including water, blankets and some basic provisions on your packing list. This type of preparedness could improve your situation significantly should you become stranded for several hours before help arrives.

Here are some more tips from the www.AAA.com website for ensuring your cross-country adventure doesn't become a breakdown disaster:

Before You Leave Home

- **Car Maintenance:** Check your vehicle's fluid levels, belts, hoses, and tires.
- **Review Your Map:** Know where you're going and how you'll get there.
- **In Case of Emergency:** Pack a flashlight, first-aid kit, and fire extinguisher, and always carry a cellphone.

When Experiencing Car Trouble

- **Breakdown and You Can't Move:** Get everyone out of the vehicle and onto the shoulder, safely away from traffic. If you must walk to a phone, keep your group together.
- **Breakdown and You Can Move:** Get your vehicle off the roadway, onto the shoulder, and away from guardrails. Once safely off the road, stay inside/with your vehicle until a police officer or AAA road-service vehicle arrives.
- **Signs for Help:** Raise your hood, tie a white cloth to a door handle, or use reflective triangles.
- **Good Samaritan:** If someone approaches your car to help, roll down your window enough to ask him or her to call police (beware of a random person who may assault you).
- **Do Not Ride With Strangers:** Be wary if someone is overanxious to help.

The bottom line is: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. A bit of extra precaution and forethought can help avoid headaches on the road. ■

For more info, go to: <http://safety.com/articles/the-family-road-trip.html> or <http://www.travelsense.org/tips/roadtrip.asp>.