

Pack the Perfect Road Trip Survival Kit

From maps and sunblock to playlists and classic car games, these 10 items are guaranteed to prevent the dreaded “Are we there yet?”

by NEA Member Benefits

Editor’s Note: NEA Member Benefits understands how much you love to travel. And, while now isn’t the time for unnecessary trips, we’re here to help you plan future vacations with helpful travel guides and tips. That way, when the novel coronavirus is under control, you’ll have everything you need to get back on track and plan memorable trips for your family. If you plan on visiting another state, please check the self-quarantine stipulations for each state.

There’s perhaps no greater American pastime than the classic road trip. And, its popularity has only increased during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Traveling by way of your own car (or [renting a vehicle](#) with a travel discount for NEA members) is a safe and easy way to see our beautiful country, discover regional specialty food—and do it all for the fraction of a price of a plane ticket! What’s not to love?

The key to a successful road trip is preparation. Of course, you’ll need the basics: your smartphone, a pillow, a blanket and a first-aid kit.

But what about those items we often forget that would have made the drive so much more pleasant? We called in four travel experts to help us create the ultimate road trip survival kit. Here are their top 11 items for your packing list:

1. A GPS or smartphone map app. Turn to your cellphone for assistance on the road. With a street map view, satellite imagery and even a 360-degree interactive panoramic views, [Google Maps](#) can help you plan your route—whether you’re traveling by car, public transportation, air, bicycle or foot. Google Maps also provides estimated distance and travel times as well. [Waze](#) is another alternative and features a live traffic map, road alerts, turn-by-turn navigation information and recommended travel times.

You can also pack an actual paper map. Mark it up with notes and see the full picture of your road trip adventure, recommends Michael Stern, co-author of “Roadfood.”

Keep an eye on road conditions with [SafeTravelUSA.com](#), which links to current conditions reported by all states. Most states have up-to-the-minute road conditions on their Department of Transportation websites.

2. Light, non-messy snacks. “You don’t want to kill your appetite by overindulging in Doritos, but neither do you want to get so hungry that you eat in some junk-food place out of desperation,” Stern says. Carrot sticks, trail mix, granola bars and grapes make ideal road trip snacks.

3. Emergency car kit. Pack a flashlight, batteries, jumper cables, antifreeze, a tire inflator, an umbrella and a AAA roadside emergency card, if you have one, advises Julia Stamberger, president and CEO of GoPicnic Brands. If you have no time to prepare all these things yourself, look for an affordable

emergency car kit that includes all the safety basics. Be sure to check for retailers such as Pep Boys and AutoZone on [NEA Discount Marketplace](#) to see if you can even earn cash-back on your purchase.

4. Gear to keep you clean and safe. Stay comfortable and clean by packing trash bags, tissues and napkins, cleaning wipes, hand sanitizer, travel-size toiletries and a laundry bag, Stamberger advises.

It would also be helpful to have a “coronavirus kit” tucked inside your car—whether you're driving cross-town or cross-country. Pack extra face masks, sanitizing wipes, alcohol or liquid hand sanitizer, and face shields. You can store it all in a bag or plastic container. You might also add some disposable gloves and cleaning supplies to disinfect the car or any motel/hotel room where you spend the night.

You should also check any travel restrictions if you plan to enter another state. If you have a recent negative COVID-19 test, bring the results with you.

5. Medications. In addition to pain relievers, be sure to pack allergy and prescription medications. “If any are exotic, it helps to also have a prescription in case you lose your stash and need more,” Stern says. “Likewise, if you wear glasses, bring a spare set.”

6. An itinerary. “Wandering is fun, but it’s also vital to have a plan to take maximum advantage of time and place,” Stern advises. Plan your stops so you’ll be near restaurants at lunchtime and dinnertime, and make sure you stay on track so you don’t arrive late to your destination if you can avoid it.

7. A playlist. “Having good tunes to get you psyched for your excursion and create memories is key to any road-trip adventure,” says Darley Newman, host, writer and producer of the Emmy-award-winning PBS series “Equitrekking.” “Diverse but organized selections keep you from killing the mood by going from up-tempo and invigorating to sad and contemplative too quickly.”

Follow or create a playlist or several playlists with your perfect road trip songs. Some music streaming apps, such as Spotify and Deezer, have free options but typically come with ads and limited functionality (can’t skip, shuffle mode, etc.) that disappear when you have a subscription. Apple Music and Amazon Prime, which includes Amazon Music, are two more popular streaming subscription services. (Monthly fees apply.)

8. Sun protection. Sunscreen, sunglasses and even a long-sleeve shirt will protect you from damaging sun streaming through the windows, Newman says.

9. Relevant books or podcasts. “I always bring something to read or audiobooks that relate to the places I’m traveling through,” says Jamie Jensen, author of “Road Trip USA.” He recommends “Grapes of Wrath” for Route 66, Robert Frost poems in New England, and Sherwood Anderson’s “Winesburg Ohio” for the Midwest.

Use an app such as Audible, or download ebooks from your local library using the OverDrive app. All you need is library card to borrow for free.

Podcasts are also a good way to pass the time during a long road trip. Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Stitcher apps make it easy to search, download and listen to podcasts on topics that interest you most.

10. Portable chargers. “There’s nothing more frustrating than losing the charge on your phone, computer or other electronic device on your travels,” Newman says. Bring portable backup power, car chargers or wireless charging mats, especially if you’re relying on your smartphone as your GPS or if

you're driving through remote places. "If you feel the need to constantly be connected to the internet, consider investing in tools like a personal MiFi hotspot," Stamberger says.

11. Check weather reports before and during your trip. Use a weather app, such as Weather.gov, The Weather Channel or one from your local TV news stations to monitor weather conditions along your route. Not only will this help you decide what clothes and shoes to pack, but it will alert you to any weather changes you may encounter during your trip.

Road trip games to keep everyone entertained

"Most car games don't require any electronics, and they encourage some good old-fashioned discussion and laughter, strengthening your family's bond through the memories shared," Stamberger says.

To keep yourselves entertained on long drives, play one (or all!) of these fun games:

Play the classics. Stamberger recommends classic car games such as Twenty Questions, I Spy, Name That Tune and The Alphabet Game, or adult games such as Would You Rather or Never Have I Ever.

Play travel word games. "Since childhood, I've played what my mom called the 'city, country, state' game: one person starts by naming any city, state or country, like Wyoming. The next person has to take the last letter of that word and name a new city, state or country, like Georgia," Newman says.

Count on fun. Counting games are also a good way to pass the time and keep you on your toes, Newman says: "Pick anything to count, but it must appear on your side of the car, like cows passed on their side in a rural area or yellow cars on the interstate."

Debate great food. "We do 'bests,' debating where's the best ice cream or fried chicken, or 'last meal' games—if you could have just one last great meal, what would it be?" Stern says.

Have fun at rest stops. "I like to bring along a ball or Frisbee to play catch at our rest stops, which helps stretch the legs and arms and maintain mobility after too many hours on the road," Jensen says. When you finally reach your destination, you'll be aching to stretch your muscles. Use InterstateRestAreas.com find rest stops along your route, or download the [iExit Interstate Exit Guide](#) app to find out what's at upcoming exits when you're on the highway.

"Even if you don't normally exercise at home, take walks, swim in the hotel pool, do some pushups or find a yoga class. It compensates for all that sitting," Stern says.

Planning your next vacation? Get more travel tips at neamb.com/travel.