Pump It Up: How to Find the Best Fuel Prices

Writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl quit their jobs to embark on a more than 70,000-mile (112,654-kilometer) drive of a lifetime. Here the couple shares lessons from the road. Text by Karen Catchpole Photograph by Eric Mohl

Trans-Americas Journey drivers Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl are now headed for Alaska.

These days there's no such thing as cheap fuel. But after more than 15,000 miles (24,140 kilometers) on the road, the Trans-Americas Journey has taught me a thing or two about how to find gas at a better price than what the driver in the next lane paid. Pack these tips on your next road trip and your fuel budget will go the extra mile, too.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING
SHOP ONLINE
MEMBERSHIP HAS ITS PRIVILEGES
ASK A LOCAL
THROW LOGIC OUT THE (CAR) WINDOW
TRY YOUR LUCK

TIMING IS EVERYTHING It was a beautiful summer day and my husband, Eric, and I were cruising through Minnesota's gorgeous North Shore along Lake Superior on our way to the Gunflint Trail for a bit of canoeing. At about 9 a.m. we noted the price of gas in local stations, but when we return to fill up eight hours later that price had jumped 12 cents a gallon.

Why? It was June 28, aka the Wednesday before the Fourth of July weekend when gas station owners figured drivers would pay whatever it took to get to the barbecue or fireworks or whatever.

Expect the same kind of opportunistic price gouging during any peak driving season (Christmas, Thanksgiving, etc.) when station owners know they have consumers over a

Did you know?

New Jersey and Oregon are the only states that ban self-service at the pump (New Jersey passed its law in 1949 and Oregon passed its in 1951). So sit back, let some other guy fill you up, and enjoy! Just don't expect to have your windshield washed or oil checked—that hasn't happened since 1964.

Trans-Americas Journey Dispatches:

How to Be a Good Co-pilot
Finding Cheap Gas - National Geographic Adventure Magazine

(fuel) barrel. Avoid the pain at the pump by filling up well in advance.

SHOP ONLINE Or at least do your research there. For example, www.gasbuddy.com posts gas prices at tens of thousands of locations in every state in the U.S. and across Canada, regardless of brand.

You can further hone your bargain hunting by viewing the prices on easy-to-use maps, including our favorite version that color codes the whole country so you can see, at a glance, which counties have lowest-cost fuel (green), mid-priced fuel (yellow) or highest-priced fuel (red). The data is also aggregated into lists of the top ten lowest and highest prices per state and per city. You'll feel like you've won the lottery when the cities/states you're driving through show up on the low-cost list, but it's depressing as heck when your destinations end up on the other list.

The site's prices are submitted by regular users (some of whom have posted data thousands of times) and the site has no fact-checkers, but we've found its data to be consistently accurate and reliable.

Gas prices on the Flying J Web site (www.flyingj.com), on the other hand, are rigorously fact-checked and updated every day, but only cover the 180 or so Flying J Travel Plazas in the U.S. and Canada. One feature that won't save you money, but is very helpful if you're road tripping in an RV is the site's list of which Travel Plazas have dump stations for emptying the RVs septic tank.

A good source for immediate, local comparison shopping between all the gas brands is MSN's Autos site (http://autos.msn.com/everyday/paststations.aspx). Every night the site gets official gas price information from Opis (www.opisnet.com), covering 90,000 stations (regardless of brand) across the country. Log on, input your zip code, and the site will deliver a list of stations in your area, along with their fuel prices.

MEMBERSHIP HAS ITS PRIVILEGES American Express may have recently stopped giving card holders double points on gas purchases, but there are plenty of other ways a little plastic card can be a smart move every time you fill up.

Option one is to take advantage of the many non-gas companies which are adding gas stations to their retail services (including Wal-Mart and Safeway).

To drum up business, they're offering fee-free loyalty cards that entitle you to between one and three cents off per gallon every time you fill up.

We've used many of them repeatedly and haven't found the catch yet. So what's in it for these companies? They're hoping that once you've filled up you'll pull around to their supermarket or big box store and do some more shopping.

The Flying J Rewards Club (www.flyingj.com/programs/rewards.cfm) is one of the few fee-free loyalty cards offered by a gas company and it'll get you one cent off every gallon at any Flying J Travel Plaza in the U.S. and Canada. And, as I shared with you last month, we've found Flying J prices to consistently be the lowest around, even before they take a penny off. Unlike the non-gas company loyalty cards, which are issued on the spot, you must apply in advance for the Flying J Rewards Club, since they mail you your money saving card.

Another option is credit cards that are co-branded with a gas company.

These often come with the same fees and rules as traditional credit card, but can earn you cash back with every fill up. The best deals are usually with smaller, regional gas companies like Speedway and Marathon, which recently offered eight and ten percent back, respectively, for a limited time. However, they don't have stations everywhere.

Among the big boys, BP is currently offering five percent back on gas purchases (the most generous long-term deal we've found) and the brand has stations in nearly every part of the country. The key is to find the most generous offers, then apply for the card that is co-branded with a gas company that has a lot of stations in the areas you'll be driving through.

ASK A LOCAL We were in Marquette, Michigan at lunchtime recently, so we stopped at The Rice Paddy to fill our stomachs (not the tank). Over a lovely pad Thai and a zesty green curry with chicken, we asked the effervescent owner and chef, Aoy LaChapelle, whether we should fill up our Chevy Silverado in bustling Marquette or wait to get gas in the much more remote Upper Peninsula area, where we were headed. To our surprise, Aoy assured us gas would be cheaper outside Marquette. And she was absolutely right.

That brings us to....
THROW LOGIC OUT THE (CAR) WINDOW  The good old days didn't just have $1.85 gas going for them. They also had a respect for economic logic that let drivers assume that gas prices in an area with a lot of traffic and competition, such as freeway exits and entrances, would be lower than gas prices at a station in a small town. These days all bets are off.

For example, pump prices in Missoula, Montana, were recently 11 cents cheaper per gallon near the city center than they were near bustling Interstate 90.

TRY YOUR LUCK  American Indian reservations used to consistently offer the lowest gas prices around because reservations are exempt from many of the state and federal fuel taxes that gas stations not located on a reservation are required to pay. But, for reasons we're still trying to figure out, gas stations on Indian reservation are no longer a guaranteed bargain. We'll keep you posted.

However, American Indian reservations do still consistently offer casinos—and the Moccasin Trail Center gas station on a Chippewah reservation in Odanah, Wisconsin, has figured out a money-saving way to combine the two. For every $20 consumers spend on fuel, they get $5 in Casino Cash, which is good for play at a select corner of slot machines at the Bad River Lodge & Casino right across the parking lot from the pumps. If it's your first time at the casino, they'll also throw in an additional $5 in Casino Cash.

We put $80 worth of gas in the truck and got $20 in Casino Cash, plus our $5 first-timer bonus. After seven minutes at the slots, we made back $16.50 and suddenly what had been an $80.04 fill up dropped to a much more palatable $63.44. Plus, Eric and I each sucked down a free ice-cold fountain Pepsi on our way out.

Next up on Road Trip Tips: Gooof-proof navigation, whether you love maps, satellites or following the stars. Until then, keep an eye out for our big, black Chevy Silverado and honk if you love a road trip! See you out there.

On April 26, 2006, writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their home in New York City, jumped into a Chevy Silverado and embarked on a three year, 70,000-mile (112,654-kilometer) road trip through North, Central, and South America. Read more about their Trans-Americas Journey at www.transamericas.com.

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