

AAA Expects Robust Thanksgiving Weekend

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Gas Prices Down, Vacation Costs Up

Higher prices for hotel rooms, rental cars and airfares will not keep families home this Thanksgiving, according to AAA. AAA estimates that 38.3 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home this holiday, a 2.7 percent increase from last year's 37.3 million travelers.

'Airports and highways will be busier than ever,' said Gail Weinholzer, director of public affairs, AAA Minnesota/Iowa. 'Higher prices for hotel rooms, rental cars and airfare have increased, but that will not keep people from traveling.'

Approximately 31.7 million travelers (82.8 percent of all holiday travelers) expect to go by motor vehicle, a 2.6 percent increase from the 30.8 million who drove a year ago.

Holiday auto travelers will find gas prices nationwide currently averaging \$2.23 for a gallon of self-serve regular gasoline-about nine cents lower than this time last year.

'Americans will take advantage of the fact that gas prices have been falling for the past several months,' said Gail Weinholzer. 'They might have foregone the summer family vacations because of high gas prices, but extended family get-togethers and lower gas prices will encourage Americans to get back on the road.'

AAA expects 4.8 million (12.5 percent of holiday travelers) Americans to travel by airplane, up 3.2 percent from the 4.6 million that flew last Thanksgiving holiday. A projected 1.9 million travelers (5 percent) will go by train, bus, or other mode of transportation, up slightly from 1.8 million a year ago.

'With new security measures and crowded airports, travelers should leave extra time for check-in and security,' said Gail Weinholzer. 'Travelers should educate themselves on new security restrictions before leaving home in order to avoid throwing away expensive liquid products and other restricted items.'

Despite paying less at the pump, travelers will face much higher prices for hotels, airfares and car rentals, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index. Holiday hotel rates are up 16 percent for AAA-Rated Three Diamond hotels, as strong demand allows hoteliers to increase rates that they raised last Thanksgiving, too. Expect higher rates for rental cars, as well, with an average increase of 21 percent. With an average 4 percent increase from last year, air fares will be more costly, but travelers won't see the extreme price hikes they will experience with hotel and car rental rates.

The greatest number of Thanksgiving auto travelers will originate in the Southeast with 9.1 million, followed by the West, 7.2 million; Midwest, 6.7 million; the Great Lakes, 6.2 million; and the Northeast, 2.4 million.

The Southeast and the West are expected to produce the largest number of air travelers with 1.3 million each, followed by the Midwest with 789,000; the Northeast with 772,000; and Great Lakes with 643,000.

Hot water heaters will be working overtime, as 69.5 percent of Thanksgiving travelers expect to stay at a friend or relative's home. Hotels and motels are a distant second at 16 percent, followed by cabin/condo, 4.5 percent; camper/trailer/RV/tent, 2.4 percent; other, 3.6 percent; no overnight stay, 2.6 percent; and didn't know, 1.4 percent.

Small towns and rural areas are the expected destination for 45.3 percent of Thanksgiving travelers, followed by cities, 35 percent. Mountain areas should see 8.3 percent of travelers, followed by oceans and beaches with 5.2 percent of travelers; 2.3 percent for lake areas, 0.6 percent for state/national parks and 0.3 percent for theme/amusement parks. Another 2.0 percent responded with other.

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