

AAA Chicago Projects Strong Holiday Travel

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Reasonable Fuel and Vacation Costs Persuade Americans to Travel

More Americans will travel this Christmas-New Year's holiday than ever before, according to AAA Chicago. AAA Chicago estimates that 64.9 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home this holiday, a 2.2 percent increase from last year's 63.5 million travelers. AAA's poll also estimated that 52.6 million travelers, or 81 percent of all holiday travelers, will go by motor vehicle.

"Because hotel rates, air fares and gas prices have risen only slightly from this time last year, Americans will not hold back when making travel arrangements this holiday season," said Beth Mosher, AAA Chicago's director of public affairs. "Fuel prices are about the same as this time last year, so motorists can expect to pay the same in fuel prices."

Holiday auto travelers will find gas prices nationwide currently averaging \$2.30 for a gallon of self-serve regular gasoline -- up one cent from last year. Illinois motorists will pay an average of \$2.31 per gallon -- up three cents from last year, and Indiana drivers will pay the same price as a year ago, \$2.25 per gallon.

Nine million, nearly 14 percent of holiday travelers, plan to travel by airplane, up 2.7 percent from the 8.7 million that flew over the holidays last year. A projected 3.3 million travelers (5 percent) will go by train, bus, or other mode of transportation, up slightly from 3.21 million a year ago.

"Airports will be busy this December as Americans visit family and take end of the year vacations to beaches, ski slopes, cruise ships and more," said Mosher. "With a longer travel period during Christmas and New Year's, it's unlikely the airports will be quite as congested as Thanksgiving, but it's still important to arrive in plenty of time and pack in accordance with the new rules regarding liquids and gels."

Unlike this Thanksgiving, travelers will be happy to see more reasonable hotel rates, airfares, and rental car rates this holiday season, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index. Christmas hotel rates are up 4 percent for AAA-rated Three Diamond hotels, as strong demand allows hoteliers to raise rates. Airfares stayed at an even keel from last Christmas, while rental car rates have dropped a welcome average of 3 percent from their prices last Christmas.

Americans traveling over the New Year holiday will also be rewarded with lower airfares and no increase in hotel rates from last New Year. According to AAA's Leisure Travel Index, travelers can expect to see a two percent decrease in airfares from this time last year, but will make up for those savings with higher rental car rates -- up about five percent.

Residents of Illinois and Indiana, along with other Great Lakes region residents, will account for an estimated 8.3 million auto travelers. AAA's Great Lakes region also encompasses Wisconsin, Michigan and Ohio. The Great Lakes region will have about 924,000 air travelers.

Most travelers will avoid the high hotel rates expected over Christmas and New Year's, with 66 percent of holiday travelers expect to stay at a friend or relative's home. Hotels and motels are a distant second at 19.7 percent, followed by cabin/condo, 2.4 percent; camper/trailer/RV/tent, 1.9 percent; other, 1.8 percent; no overnight stay, 5.1 percent; and didn't know, 1.3 percent.

Small towns and rural areas are the expected destination for 37.6 percent of holiday travelers, followed by cities, 35.3 percent. Oceans and beaches should see 10.1 percent of travelers, followed by mountain areas, 6.5 percent; theme/amusement parks, 3.9 percent; 0.7 percent for lake areas, and 0.1 percent for state/national parks. Another 4.7 percent responded with other and 1.2 percent didn't know.

Research for Christmas-New Year's holiday travel is based on a national telephone survey of 2,000 adults by the Travel Industry Association of America, which conducts special research for AAA.

With so many travelers going by motor vehicle, it's essential to remember to drive responsibly. Again this year, AAA is distributing its free "Great Pretender's Party Guide" featuring creative and festive non-alcoholic drink recipes from AAA's Four and Five Diamond rated establishments throughout the Midwest. For a free copy of the Guide, visit any AAA branch location or download a copy from <http://www.aaa.com/pretenders>.

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