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AUTOMOTIVE



Before you go anywhere, map out stops to break up the drive for antsy kids.

Road Trip Savers

How to stick to your budget on a driving holiday

BY LISA KADANE

Our family of four loves the freedom – and affordability – of the open road. Last summer we road-tripped around the West Kootenays, visiting Halcyon Hot Springs, Nelson and Kaslo during the four-day getaway, taking time to swim, hike, paddle and, of course, enjoy the mountain scenery just outside the car window as we looped through this remote slice of BC wilderness. And we did it all for much less than we would have spent flying across the country for summer vacay. It's been said getting there is half the fun, but road-tripping costs can quickly escalate. Read on for tips to help ensure it costs half as much, too.

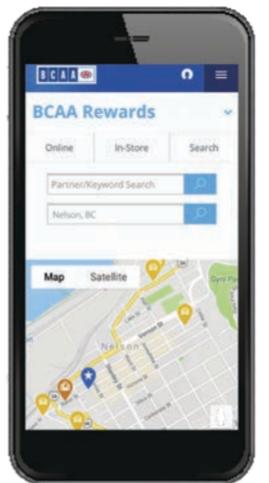
Diverge from the herd. The first rule of budget road-tripping is that you should travel before or after peak periods, and avoid holiday weekends. Gas prices and hotel rates go up right before Canada Day and August long, for example. Also consider steering clear of cities, which are more expensive than small towns for everything from accommodations to parking.

Tune up your ride. Check your air filter, oil, fluid levels, tire pressure, headlights, taillights and wiper-blade functionality, before you hit the highway, says Jeff Reed, Director of BCAA Auto Service Centres.

MEMBERS SAVE

Plan your route, access travel guides and book hotels, rental cars and more at: bcaa.com/trip-planning

Author Lisa Kadane and her kids pose at Fletcher Falls, near Kaslo, after stretching their legs mid-road trip.



A service check-up covers everything, and the pros will also look at alignment and brakes. A road-worthy vehicle will get its best gas mileage, meaning fewer fill-ups. Once you're underway, drive the speed limit and use cruise control on highways to burn less gas, says Reed.

When it's time to hit a gas station, a gas-price monitor, like the one included as a feature in the BCAA App (bcaa.com/app), can point you to the cheapest fuel.

Plot out your route. This will give you a rough itinerary of where you might stay each night. Look for affordable points of interest to break up the drive. We don't like to spend more than six hours in the car per day (split into two or three shifts), and when we stop, we often incorporate free sightseeing. Last summer, for instance, we stretched our legs on a short hike down to Fletcher Falls near Kaslo and during a stroll around Sandon, a ghost town on the way to New Denver.

Pack light. We limit luggage to two shared, medium-sized wheelee suitcases, backpacks with entertainment for the kids and a cooler filled with munchies and reusable water

bottles. This makes it easy to pack up and unload the car each day. It will save you money, too: "The less stuff you bring, the better the fuel economy is going to be," says Reed.

It's tempting to cram in everything from the stand-up paddleboard to beach towels, and throw the bikes on the rack for good measure, but consider whether you'll use it. Keep in mind that hotels near lakes and beaches often offer towels and complimentary use of watercraft like kayaks. Many cities also have a bike share program, which makes renting two wheels easy and affordable.

Free your fun. We try to choose free or self-guided activities such as hikes with a reward (edible berries along the trail, a lake for swimming) or other human-powered pursuits. At Halcyon Hot Springs, for example, my husband and I paddled our son along Upper Arrow Lake in a canoe while our daughter followed along on one of the resort's stand-up paddleboards. In the summer, some towns offer free historical walking tours, public festivals or outdoor concerts. And there's almost always

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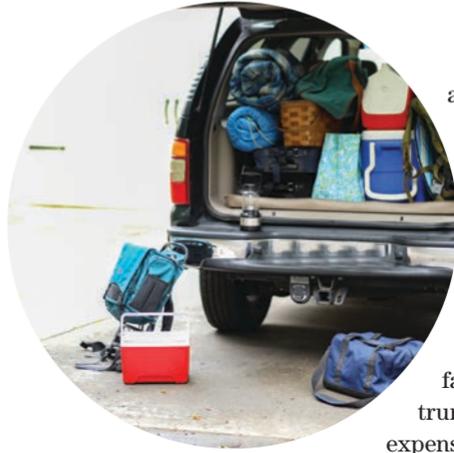
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Do you really need it? Pack lighter to save money on fuel.

a weekly farmers' market like the one in Nelson, where you can taste gratis samples of local baking, kombucha and more.

Dine in (or outside). More than any other road-trip expense, eating three meals out a day can break the bank, especially for a family. Remember that cooler in the trunk? Visit grocery stores (not expensive convenience stores) regularly to keep it filled with snacks and sandwich fixings for impromptu picnic lunches.

Use a resource such as the CAA/AAA Diamond Rating System for restaurant reviews and to find a local gem in your price range. And remember to ask for a kids' menu (kids even eat free at some restaurants).

Sleep on the cheap. We've had great luck searching for last-minute or same-day hotel deals online, filtering results to include amenities such as a hot breakfast, pool or kitchenette. Best Westerns, for example, usually have a pool and breakfast included, and BCAA Members get a discount (up to 15 per cent depending on the property).

If you're adventurous, consider a hostel. Many offer private family rooms with ensuite bathrooms, plus kitchen facilities so you can cook your own meals.

There's always camping, too, but be warned that popular campsites book up early. Camping also requires a lot of gear – think tent, sleeping bags and a cook set – which will weigh down the vehicle. But you'll save a lot on accommodation, so the extra gas required may be worth it. ■

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