How to Prepare Your Car for a Long Road Trip

Cars & Other Vehicles · about 22 minutes · 2026-11-06

Prevent avoidable breakdowns before a long drive. This 20-step checklist covers service records, recalls, tires, brakes, fluids, lights, luggage, emergency supplies, and a final departure inspection.

Things you will need

- Owner's manual and service records
- Tire-pressure gauge and tread-depth gauge
- Torch and clean microfiber cloths
- Correct washer fluid and any manufacturer-approved top-up fluids
- Roadside emergency kit and reflective vest
- Phone mount, charger, power bank, and offline maps

Planning the Trip and Reviewing Vehicle Health

1. **Review the manual and service history**
   Review the owner's manual and service history first.
2. **Check the VIN for open recalls**
   Check the vehicle identification number for open recalls.
3. **Book a diagnosis for real symptoms**
   Book a professional inspection for existing warning signs.
4. **Map route, weather, and fuel stops**
   Map the route, weather, and refueling stops in advance.
5. **Take a revealing short test drive**
   Take a short test drive several days before departure.

Inspecting Tires, Wheels, and Brakes

6. **Set tire pressures from cold**
   Set all tire pressures while the tires are cold.
7. **Measure tread across every tire**
   Measure tread depth across every tire.
8. **Inspect sidewalls for damage**
   Inspect sidewalls and tread for visible damage.
9. **Confirm your puncture recovery method**
   Confirm exactly how your vehicle handles a puncture.
10. **Assess brakes on an ordinary drive**
    Evaluate the brakes without attempting a risky roadside test.

Checking Fluids, Visibility, and Electrical Systems

11. **Check engine oil the right way**
    Check the engine oil using the manufacturer's procedure.

12. Read coolant levels with a cold engine

Inspect coolant and other accessible fluid reservoirs only when safe.

13. Clean glass and test the wipers

Clean the glass and test the wipers and washers.

14. Test every exterior light

Test every exterior light with a helper.

15. Load-test the battery before departure

Assess the battery and charging system before they strand you.

Packing Safely and Completing the Final Check

16. Pack a seasonal roadside kit

Pack a roadside emergency kit suited to the season.

17. Set navigation before you drive

Prepare navigation and communication before starting the engine.

18. Load and secure luggage within limits

Load luggage low, evenly, and within the vehicle's limits.

19. Fit seats, belts, and restraints

Adjust the cabin for every occupant before departure.

20. Walk around and check the dash

Complete one final walk-around and dashboard check.

Sources

1. Summer Driving & Road Trip Tips — vehicle checks and emergency supplies
   https://www.nhtsa.gov/summer-driving-tips
2. Tire Safety — inflation, tread, damage, and spare tires
   https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/tires
3. Vehicle Recall Search — check unresolved safety recalls by VIN
   https://www.nhtsa.gov/recalls
4. Car Care Checklist — battery, belts, tires, lights, and fluids
   https://blog.wa.aaa.com/traffic-safety/be-prepared/car-care-checklist/
5. Drowsy Driving — risks and prevention
   https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/drowsy-driving

Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/Prepare-Your-Car-for-a-Long-Road-Trip. Corrections: https://www.howcompas