Economy driving
Fuel Efficiency

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Economy driving: How to cut your fuel costs

With costs rising at the pumps, there's no need to despair. For the canny motorists there are a variety of ways to cut costs by reducing the amount of fuel they use

Gasoline and diesel might never be cheap again, but there are ways to save money.

Lose weight.
The heavier your car, the more energy (fuel) is required to move it. Every ounce you lose will save money at the pumps.

Let it roll.
Think how difficult it is to pedal a bike with a puncture. Keep your tires at the maximum recommended pressure and consider low-rolling resistance "eco" tires when you need new ones. Also have the wheel alignment checked so the car runs easily straight and true.

Make it slippery.
Not with baby oil, unless you love your car to an unnatural degree, but by minimizing aerodynamic drag at speed. Keep windows and the sunroof closed and open cabin air vents only to prevent drowsiness. Remove roof racks, top boxes, cycle carriers and purely cosmetic body additions with the exception of plastic hubcaps on steel wheels (except in town, where you could lose them to save more weight).

How cool is cool?
Air conditioning is less costly than open windows, but it still saps power and can increase the fuel thirst of a small engine by up to 10 per cent. If already fitted you need to run it once a week to keep the system healthy, but this is Britain, not Bermuda - how cold do you need to be? If the cabin gets too hot, fit reflective film to the rear windows/sunroof and take off your hat.

Fuel's gold.
You'll find the cheapest local source at www.petrolprices.com but don't use a pound's worth of fuel to reach a filling station where you can save 50p on a tankful. Avoid false economy; high-octane brews offer small efficiency gains, cheap rubbish can damage the engine. Also remember the weight issue: the less fuel you carry around the less fuel you'll use, so only buy as much as you need; the low-fuel warning light is sure to make you drive carefully anyway. Don't

be fooled by products that claim to improve economy, be they magnets, magic pellets or snake oil; they don't work.

Make your own.

You can run a diesel car on vegetable oil, and you can process up to 2,500 litres per year at home without attracting fuel duty. Your main difficulty might be finding a source, as commercial operations are moving in to take used oil from takeaways and restaurants. If you already own a chip shop, you're laughing.

Drive like Dan Dare.

Treat your car like a spaceship. As soon as you can, accelerate smoothly and gently up to a safe, appropriate (and legal) speed and select as high a gear as possible, keeping the revs down to minimize fuel use without labouring the engine. Between short fuel burn to maintain momentum, lift off the accelerator completely, which shuts off the fuel supply. Never coast in neutral; idling uses more fuel than running in gear on a closed throttle. If you're not moving at all, switch off.

Don't use the brakes.

Brakes turn fuel into waste heat and should be used as little as possible (try never on motorways). Approaching any obstruction, such as traffic lights on red (or green for a long time and likely to change), don't just drive up to it and brake; reduce your speed by lifting off the accelerator, aiming to roll to a stop at the right place. Make driving an enjoyable game of economy and accuracy, like bowls, rather than a test of nerve, like Grand Theft Auto. Advanced tuition will help you drive economically as well as safely.

Plan your journey.

It has been estimated that perhaps a third of city traffic is lost or looking for somewhere to park, so plan your journey from A to Z; write a list of directions on a piece of paper (or GPS) and stick it in an easily visible place on your dashboard or steering wheel boss. Use motorways and free-flowing roads whenever possible; a car is most fuel-efficient at a steady speed.

Do your homework.

Don't rush to replace a "thirsty" car until you've worked out the cost/benefit equation; you want to save money, not spend it. Used values are falling, and unless you're downsizing from a BMW to a banger or a motorcycle/scooter (or indeed selling up altogether and joining a car-share club) you might be better off running your current car as efficiently as possible for as long as you can. If you're changing anyway, the smallest diesel that suits your needs is probably best. The less fuel a car burns, the lower its tax-defining CO2 emissions ought to be.

Think electric? Think hard.

Will you save money overall? How long do the batteries last, and what will the resale value be? Do you want or need a car with a short range? Could you make such short journeys by other means? Can you plug it into the mains without running a cable across the pavement? If not, it's a non-starter. Although not strictly relevant to running costs, spare a thought for the source of your electricity: how green is a coal/gas/nuclear-powered vehicle? As for hybrids, they're expensive and while they might offer fuel savings at low speeds in town, they're less economical on motorways.

Buy a Lamborghini.

Supercars are hard to park, costly to repair and burn petrol like nothing else, which is why they cover fewer miles and consume less fuel overall than everyday cars. If you owned a Lamborghini, better still a classic, you wouldn't drive it to the supermarket and you couldn't use it for the school run. You and your children probably could live longer, healthier, richer lives by walking. And having saved enough for several tankful of gasoline, you could go for a blast with a clear conscience, just for fun…

Your fuel consumption will vary

Fuel consumption ratings show the fuel consumption that may be achieved with a properly maintained vehicle driven with fuel efficiency in mind. The ratings provide a reliable comparison of the fuel consumption of different vehicles. However, no laboratory test can simulate all possible combinations of conditions that may be experienced by drivers. Your vehicle’s fuel consumption will vary from its published fuel consumption ratings, depending on how, where and when you drive.

The following factors will significantly affect the fuel consumption of your vehicle: your driving style and behaviour, vehicle acceleration, braking and driving speed, overall age and condition of your vehicle, temperature, weather, traffic and road conditions, and drive systems and powered accessories (e.g. air conditioning) installed on your vehicle. In addition, small variations in vehicle manufacturing will cause fuel consumption differences in the same make and model, and some vehicles do not attain optimal fuel consumption until they are “run in” for about 6,000 to 10,000 km.

Hybrid vehicles are particularly sensitive to driving conditions and behaviours and can exhibit greater variations in fuel consumption than conventional vehicles. Moderate differences in how,

where and when you drive can have a significant impact on how much your hybrid's gasoline engine is used.

Published ratings are a useful tool for comparing vehicles before you buy, but keep in mind that they are based on standardized tests and may not accurately predict the fuel consumption you will get on the road.

Bibliography

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