



## Top stories

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DAVID ELLISON'S CONSUMER WATCH

### Spring break trips can be cost-effective

By DAVID ELLISON

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Record-high gasoline prices have many families thinking about the most economical way to pay for spring break trips.

In a conversation with Argentina James, the Port of Houston Authority spokeswoman, we discussed that subject a day before she and four family members departed Friday for San Antonio.

Of course, families such as the Jameses are wondering whether it's cheaper to fly, especially since AAA Texas estimates the average cost of a gallon of regular self-service gas in Texas is \$3.16, about 76 cents higher than this time last year.

James estimated it will cost them about \$200 for gas in their sport utility vehicle, but they will not have to worry about the hassles of airports. A check with Continental Airlines shows that the lowest fare to San Antonio with a 21-day advance is \$44.50.

"We chose to drive for two reasons: One, because we wanted to have control of our time," said James, who traveled with her husband, Stephen, two children and their grandmother. "And two: it was economical when you have a family of four or five."

So, for those headed out today or next week, Rose Rougeau, a AAA Texas spokeswoman, has some advice. Of course, routine maintenance is the most important method to get maximum fuel efficiency, she said. Also, properly inflate those tires.

To save on gas, Wayne Russell, service adviser at Colony One Auto Center in Stafford, recommends a clean fuel injector and air filter; and a regularly scheduled tune-up and oil change.

And, he says, it's not necessary to get your vehicle serviced before a trip if you've followed the maintenance schedule.

### Gas-saving tips

Rougeau said there are other ways to save on gas besides maintenance, including not putting unnecessary heavy objects in your vehicle and not purchasing premium gas unless your vehicle manual calls for it.

"The most important thing is to keep your eyes open for lower fuel prices," she said. "But don't waste gas driving to a distant gas station just to save a few pennies. And don't let the car get so low on gasoline that you are forced to stop at a more expensive station."

You can go online to find other gas-saving tips. Start with these Web sites:

- [www.howtoadvice.com/savinggas](http://www.howtoadvice.com/savinggas)
- [www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/drive.shtml](http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/drive.shtml)

### Avoiding charges

Have you ever wondered why you can't make a face-to-face credit card payment for vehicle registration at the Harris County Tax Office?

Well, Tax Assessor-Collector Paul Bettencourt says it is because credit card companies don't want to charge a 3 percent fee on over-the-counter vehicle registration.

And neither does the county, he said, because that would mean credit card companies would get 3 cents on every dollar.

"In a small-volume shop, maybe a commissioners court would say we would write off \$10,000 or maybe even \$100,000," he said. "But there is not any commissioners court that I know of that wants to write off tens of millions of dollars."

Bettencourt said, however, there is a computer terminal in each tax office for people to pay with a credit card on Texas Online. Of course, that does come with a 2.15 percent bank charge, which people will pay for the convenience.

*Got a consumer problem? Send me the details at [david.ellison@chron.com](mailto:david.ellison@chron.com)*