THE USA ROAD TRIP PLANNER

How to plan a road trip with a rental car, from route and budget to the right car, plus classic drives across the US.



Published by SIXT, the premium car rental company.

IN SHORT

How do you plan a road trip in the USA? Pick a destination and route, check the weather along the way, set a budget, choose a car that fits the terrain and your group, and pack with a checklist. Then hit the road on a classic drive: Route 66 runs about 2,400 miles through eight states,[1] the Overseas Highway links the Florida Keys over 42 bridges,[2] and Colorado's Trail Ridge Road is the highest continuous paved road in the US.[3]

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. How do you plan a road trip in the USA?
2. How do you plan your route and charging stops?
3. What is the best rental car for a road trip?
4. How much does a road trip cost, and how do tolls work?
5. How do you stay safe on a long-distance road trip?
6. Which classic US road trips should you drive?
7. Which road trips work best in summer and winter?
8. Road trips with kids and pets
9. Road trip essentials
10. Frequently asked questions
11. Conclusion

Methodology and limitations

Sources

About SIXT

INTRODUCTION

Road trips are one of America's favorite ways to travel. A few hours' drive makes a great weekend, and a week or a month on the road can take you across several states. This guide is for anyone planning a road trip in the USA with a rental car. Inside, you'll find a step-by-step plan, advice on choosing the right car, a budget template, safety and weather tips, a packing checklist and six classic routes with distances and the best time to go.

Use each chapter on its own or read the guide from start to finish. Most chapters end with key takeaways and quick answers to the questions travelers ask most.

1. HOW DO YOU PLAN A ROAD TRIP IN THE USA?

Planning a road trip comes down to a handful of decisions: where you're going, how you'll get there, what it will cost, which car you'll drive and what you'll pack. Get those right and the rest of the trip takes care of itself.

Step	What to do
1. Pick a destination	Choose based on the trip you want: a national park if you love the outdoors, or a city you've always wanted to see.
2. Plan the route	Map your route and possible stops for each day. Look out for road construction and share the plan with your fellow travelers. Chapter 2 shows how.
3. Check the weather	The forecast shapes what you pack and which car you choose. In winter or heavy rain, mountain and flood-prone roads can close, which can change your route.
4. Set a budget	Plan for gas, food, lodging, entertainment and tolls. Chapter 4 has a simple way to estimate each one.
5. Choose the car	Match the car to the landscape, the weather and the number of people. Chapter 3 explains which car suits which trip.
6. Plan meals and breaks	Mark restaurants and rest stops along the route so you know where you'll eat and stretch your legs.
7. Plan the entertainment	Take turns choosing music or podcasts, listen to audiobooks or play the License Plate Game.
8. Prepare for safety	Pack a first aid kit and an emergency kit, save the roadside assistance number and plan regular breaks. See chapter 5.
9. Pack with a checklist	What you pack depends on the season and the length of the trip. Use the checklist in chapter 9.

Rent or drive your own car?

Your own car is familiar, but a long trip adds a lot of miles to it, and if you lease, it can use up your mileage allowance. A rental gives you your choice of vehicle type and features your own car may not have. At SIXT, you can pick from a distinctive fleet, from high-end convertibles to premium sport utility vehicles (SUVs),[4] and choose unlimited mileage when you book.[5]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A road trip plan covers five decisions: destination, route, budget, car and packing.
- Check the weather along the whole route, not just at your destination, since it can change which roads are open.
- For long trips, a rental lets you pick the right car for the trip and saves miles on your own. Choose unlimited mileage so you can drive as far as you like.

FAQ

How far in advance should you plan a road trip?

Start as soon as you know your dates, especially for popular seasons. Book lodging early in busy areas such as national parks in summer and fall.

How should you plan your daily driving on a road trip?

Plan days around your stops, not just the distance. Take regular breaks, switch drivers when you can and build in time for unplanned stops, which are often the highlight of a road trip.

2. HOW DO YOU PLAN YOUR ROUTE AND CHARGING STOPS?

A good route plan keeps every stop, restaurant and hotel in one place that you can edit and share. Google My Maps, which is free with a Google account, is a simple way to do this.

Plan a road trip with Google My Maps

- **Create a map.** Sign in to Google My Maps and click "Create a new map."[6]
- **Add layers.** You can create up to 10 layers.[7] Use one for each day of the trip, or one for each type of stop, such as restaurants, hotels and sights.
- **Drop pins.** Select a layer, search for a place and click "Add to map." Search by name or address, or try a general term such as "Italian restaurant" to see results in the area shown on your map.
- **Add driving directions.** Click "Add directions" and enter your stops. Each set of directions goes on its own layer.[8]
- **Share it.** Maps save automatically to your Google account. Click "Share" to send the map to your travel companions.

Planning an electric vehicle (EV) road trip

If you're driving an EV, plan charging stops before you set off. EV trip planners show chargers along your route and estimate how long each stop takes.

EV trip planner	What it does well
A Better Routeplanner (ABRP)	Works worldwide. Enter your car and destination to get suggested charging stops. Accounts for elevation, wind and temperature.[9]
ChargeHub	Set how far from the route a charger can be and save your trips. Covers the US and Canada.[10]
PlugShare	Filter chargers by plug type and network.[11] A free account lets you save trips and leave reviews.[12]
EV Navigation	Calculates range from your car model, wind and temperature, and suggests the best charging stops for the whole journey.[13]

Features as described by each app's developer. Check each app for current features and coverage.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Google My Maps keeps every stop and route in one map you can share with a single link.
- A map can have up to 10 layers, and each set of directions takes its own layer, so on longer trips group several days per layer or use more than one map.
- On an EV road trip, plan charging stops before you go with a dedicated EV trip planner.

FAQ

What is the best way to plan a road trip route?

Use a map tool that lets you save stops and share the plan. Google My Maps lets you add up to 10 layers, drop pins for each stop and add driving directions for each leg of the trip.

How do you plan a road trip with an electric car?

Use an EV trip planner such as A Better Routeplanner or ChargeHub to see charging stops along your route, and check charger reviews on PlugShare. Keep a backup charger in mind for each leg.

3. WHAT IS THE BEST RENTAL CAR FOR A ROAD TRIP?

There's no single best car for a road trip. The right one depends on the trip. Before you book, consider these five factors.

- Destination and landscape
- Weather and time of year
- Terrain, from city streets to mountain roads
- Luggage space, for sports gear, strollers or outdoor equipment
- Number of people

Trip type	Best car type	Why
Back roads and outdoor adventures	SUV or pickup truck with all-wheel drive (AWD)	Ground clearance, grip and room for gear
City to city on highways	Premium sedan or EV	Comfort and legroom on long highway stretches
Coastal drives	Convertible	Open-air views on scenic coast roads, ideal if you pack light
A mix of cities and mountains	SUV, ideally with AWD	The most versatile all-rounder
Fall or winter trips with a chance of snow	AWD SUV	Better grip in unexpected snow flurries
Spring or summer city trips	Compact car or premium sedan	Easy to drive and park in big cities



Electric SUV: BMW iX or similar. Great for city-to-city trips. Plan charging stops in advance.



SUV. The most versatile all-rounder for a mix of cities and mountains.

Images are illustrative. We rent by vehicle category, so you get the model shown or a similar one unless you book a guaranteed model.

Cars for families and groups

Vehicle	Seats	Good for
Premium sedan	Up to 5	A family of four plus bags
SUV	5 to 7	Strollers, luggage and sports gear, with AWD options
Minivan	Up to 7	Sliding doors, fold-flat seats and room for everyone[14]

Vehicle types from the SIXT family car rental range. Availability varies by location.

Renting with SIXT for a road trip

- **Unlimited mileage.** Choose unlimited mileage when you book, or add it as an extra.[15]
- **Go coast to coast.** Cars rented at most of our locations in the contiguous US can be driven throughout the contiguous US.[16]
- **Navigate with ease.** Add GPS (Global Positioning System) navigation to your booking as an extra.[15]
- **Share the driving.** Add an additional driver so everyone stays rested.[15]
- **A distinctive fleet.** Choose from high-end convertibles to premium SUVs.[4]
- **A specific model.** At select US locations, drivers aged 25 and over can book a guaranteed model.[17]

Driving one way?

We offer free one-way rentals, with zero drop-off fees, on select routes in Florida, California and Nevada. The offer is subject to availability at participating US locations, isn't free between an airport and a downtown location in the same city, excludes corporate customers and may change without notice.[18] On other routes, a one-way fee may apply, and you'll see it before you book.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Pick the car for the trip: an AWD SUV for mountains and snow, a premium sedan or EV for highway miles, a convertible for the coast.
- Families can choose from premium sedans with up to five seats to minivans and SUVs with up to seven.
- For long trips, choose unlimited mileage and add a second driver.

FAQ

What size rental car do I need for a road trip?

Count people and bags first. A premium sedan fits a family of four with luggage, an SUV seats five to seven with room for gear, and a minivan or seven-seat SUV suits bigger families.

Can I take a rental car across state lines?

Cars rented at most SIXT locations in the contiguous US can be driven throughout the contiguous US, as set out in our terms and conditions.

4. HOW MUCH DOES A ROAD TRIP COST, AND HOW DO TOLLS WORK?

Plan each cost before you go, so your budget stays on track all the way. Gas, food and lodging make up most of your budget. How much you spend depends on how far you drive and where you stay.

Cost	How to estimate it	Tips
Gas	Divide your total distance by your car's miles per gallon, then multiply by the gas price along your route. A heavily loaded car uses more fuel, and prices vary between states.	Fill up before you set off, and keep the tank above half on remote stretches.
Food	Multiply your daily food budget per person by the number of days, then by the number of travelers. Long drives make people hungry, so budget generously.	Reserve standout restaurants ahead, and try the regional dishes on your route.
Lodging	Search by city or landmark to find stays that suit your route.	Choose stays that are part of the experience, from boutique hotels and resorts to national park lodges. Book ahead in popular seasons.
Entertainment	Add up the tours, shows and attractions you don't want to miss.	Book popular tours and shows ahead, and leave time for scenic drives and viewpoints.
Tolls	Check the toll roads on your route before you go.	See the toll guide below.

Example: estimating gas

A 1,400-mile trip in a car that gets 30 miles per gallon needs about 47 gallons. At $3.50 per gallon, that's about $163 in gas. Use the current prices on your route for your own estimate.

How do toll roads work in the US?

The US has more than 6,700 miles of toll roads, bridges and tunnels, according to the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA).[19] Tolls are increasingly collected electronically, and many toll roads no longer accept cash, so check the payment options for each state on your route before you go. Our US toll roads guide lists the toll roads, bridges and tunnels state by state.[20]

Toll system	Where it's used
E-ZPass	The most widely used system, with member toll agencies in 20 states across the Northeast, Midwest and beyond[21]
SunPass	Florida (run by Florida's Turnpike Enterprise), plus Georgia, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Texas. SunPass PRO also works wherever E-ZPass is accepted[22]
FasTrak	California's toll roads and express lanes, including all eight San Francisco Bay Area toll bridges[23]
Cashless tolling	Increasingly common nationwide. There are no toll booths: overhead gantries read your transponder or photograph your license plate

Speed limits vary by state and road type. On interstates, maximum limits range from 55 mph on some urban stretches to 80 mph on some rural stretches,[24] so watch the signs as you cross state lines.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Estimate gas, food, lodging, entertainment and tolls separately, then add them up.
- Gas cost = distance ÷ miles per gallon × price per gallon.
- Many US toll roads are cashless, so check each state's payment options before you drive.

FAQ

How much does a road trip in the USA cost?

It depends on distance, trip length and group size. Add up gas, food, lodging, entertainment and tolls. Book lodging early in popular seasons for the best choice.

Do toll roads in the US take cash?

Not always. Many tolls are collected electronically by transponder or license plate, so check the payment options for each state on your route before you set off.

5. HOW DO YOU STAY SAFE ON A LONG-DISTANCE ROAD TRIP?

Long road trips need extra planning, especially through very hot or very cold climates. These 10 tips keep you, your passengers and your car in great shape.

#	Tip	What to do
1	Get the car checked	For your own car, check oil, tires and tire pressure before you go. With SIXT, pick the right car for your route from our distinctive fleet, from high-end convertibles to premium SUVs.[4]
2	Take breaks	Stop regularly and switch drivers when you can, so everyone stays alert.
3	Use GPS	Add GPS to your rental as an extra,[15] have a copilot navigate and download offline maps as a backup for areas without phone service.
4	Keep the tank above half	Fill up before you leave and top off often, especially on back roads and in remote areas.
5	Carry water	Keep enough water in the car for everyone, all day.
6	Pack an emergency kit	Flashlight, power bank or car charger, blanket, extra clothes and water.
7	Pack a first aid kit	Bandages and disinfectant at a minimum.
8	Check the weather	Check the forecast and road conditions. In winter, check whether chain or traction rules apply on mountain routes. In summer, carry extra water and plan your driving around the midday heat.
9	Buckle up	Make sure everyone wears a seat belt on every drive.
10	Keep everyone entertained	Music and movies in the back seat help the driver stay focused.

Weather tips before and during your trip

- **Check the forecast for your route.** Weather apps such as Morecast show the forecast along your whole route, not just at your destination.[25]
- **Download a weather app before you leave** so you get alerts on the road.
- **Use the radio** for weather reports in areas with weak cell reception.
- **Check seasonal roads.** Some national park roads open only in certain months. Check official park websites, especially in winter.
- **Wait out the worst weather.** In a blizzard, downpour or thick fog, pull into a rest area or gas station until it passes.

- **Drive for the conditions.** Leave extra distance, take extra care on bridges and overpasses (they freeze first) and stick to main highways.
- **Choose the right car.** Before snow, ice or heavy rain, pick a car suited to the conditions, such as an AWD SUV.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Add GPS to your rental, keep the tank above half and download offline maps as a backup.
- Check the weather along your whole route, and let the worst storms pass before you drive.
- Pack a first aid kit and an emergency kit for every trip.

FAQ

What should be in a road trip emergency kit?

A flashlight, a power bank or car charger, a blanket, extra clothes and water. Add a first aid kit with bandages and disinfectant, and in winter, an ice scraper, a snow brush and a small shovel.

How do you drive safely in winter on a road trip?

Check that roads are open after snowfall, check whether chain or traction rules apply on mountain routes, clear ice from all windows and choose well-traveled main highways.

6. WHICH CLASSIC US ROAD TRIPS SHOULD YOU DRIVE?

From historic highways to island bridges and mountain passes, these road trips show the best of the US by car. Distances and times are approximate.

Route	Distance	Suggested time	Best time to go	Best car
Route 66: Chicago to Santa Monica	About 2,400 mi	About 2 weeks	April to June	SUV
Chicago to Miami	About 1,400 mi	About 2 weeks	October	SUV
Overseas Highway: Key Largo to Key West	About 100 mi	1 week or more	All year	Convertible
Colorado mountain loop from Denver	Varies by route	About 1 week	Late May to mid-October	SUV or four-wheel drive (4WD)

Route	Distance	Suggested time	Best time to go	Best car
California coast to Las Vegas	Nearly 1,000 mi	About 2 weeks	Late spring to early fall	SUV or convertible

Route 66: Chicago to Santa Monica

Established in 1926, Route 66 is one of America's original highways, built before the interstate system. It runs roughly 2,400 miles through eight states, from Chicago to Santa Monica,[1] past farmland, cities, mountains and desert. You could drive it in a week, but give yourself about two weeks to enjoy the stops. Spring to early summer brings warm afternoons and cool nights, so pack layers.

The halfway point is the MidPoint Café in Adrian, Texas, where the sign reads 1,139 miles to Chicago and 1,139 miles to Los Angeles.[26] An SUV gives you room for passengers and luggage on this long drive.

State	Highlights along Route 66
Illinois	The Route 66 start sign in Chicago, the Illinois Route 66 Hall of Fame and Museum in Pontiac[27] and the 170-foot World's Largest Catsup Bottle in Collinsville[28]
Missouri	The Old Chain of Rocks Bridge over the Mississippi between Illinois and Missouri, now open to walkers and cyclists,[29] and the 66 Drive-In Theatre in Carthage
Kansas	Just under 14 miles of Route 66,[30] including the 1923 Brush Creek Bridge, a Marsh Rainbow Arch bridge known as the Rainbow Bridge, between Riverton and Baxter Springs[31]
Oklahoma	The Blue Whale of Catoosa,[32] Ed Galloway's Totem Pole Park near Foyil[33] and the Will Rogers Memorial Museum in Claremore[34]
Texas	The MidPoint Café in Adrian, at the route's halfway point
New Mexico	Santa Fe, home to the San Miguel Chapel, often called the oldest church in the US[35]
Arizona	Petrified Forest National Park,[36] Meteor Crater near Winslow[37] and the Grand Canyon's South Rim, about 80 miles from Flagstaff[38]
California	A detour to the Mojave National Preserve, at about 1.5 million acres,[39] and the Santa Monica Pier, the symbolic end of the route

Chicago to Miami: from the Windy City to the Sunshine State

This 14-day trip covers about 1,400 miles in five legs. Go in October for fall colors, which in Illinois usually peak from the second to the last week of October,[40] and for mild weather in the South and Florida. Pack layers and a swimsuit. In fall, an SUV gives you room for luggage and layers; in spring or summer, a sedan is easier to drive and park in big cities.

Leg	Main route	Distance	Highlights at the destination
Chicago to Indianapolis	I-94 or I-90 (tolled), then I-65 south	About 185 mi	Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum[41] and the Children's Museum of Indianapolis[42]
Indianapolis to Louisville	I-65	About 115 mi	Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory[43]
Louisville to Nashville	I-65 south	About 175 mi	Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Johnny Cash Museum and the Grand Ole Opry[44, 45, 46]
Nashville to Atlanta	I-24 and I-75	About 250 mi	Piedmont Park,[47] the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park[48] and the Atlanta BeltLine[49]
Atlanta to Miami	I-75 south to Wildwood, then Florida's Turnpike (tolled) past Orlando[50]	About 660 mi	Orlando's theme parks on the way, then Miami Beach, Little Havana and Biscayne National Park, south of the city[51]

Before you leave Chicago, see Cloud Gate (known as "The Bean"),[52] walk the Chicago Riverwalk and try a deep-dish pizza.

The Overseas Highway: Key Largo to Key West

The Overseas Highway (US 1) runs 113 miles through the Florida Keys and crosses 42 bridges over the open water between the islands.[2] The town of Key Largo is about 100 miles from Key West, a drive of about two and a half hours without stops,[53] but plan a week or more to enjoy it. The Keys are warm all year, and a convertible is the perfect way to drive them. There are no tolls on US 1 through the Keys. If you drive down from Miami on Florida's Turnpike, check your toll payment options before you go.

Stop	Highlights
Key Largo	John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the first undersea park in the US, with snorkeling, diving and glass-bottom boat tours[54]
Islamorada	The History of Diving Museum and snorkeling at Alligator Reef[55, 56]
Marathon	The Turtle Hospital, a nonprofit that rescues and releases sea turtles,[57] and Sombrero Beach
Bahia Honda State Park	Beaches and kayaking at about mile marker 37[58]

Stop	Highlights
Big Pine Key	The National Key Deer Refuge, home of the endangered Key deer, the smallest subspecies of North American white-tailed deer[59]
Key West	About 30 miles from Big Pine Key. Bike around town, see the Southernmost Point buoy (temporarily on Duval Street during repairs)[60] and watch the sunset at Mallory Square

Colorado: a seven-day mountain loop

Colorado is made for road trips, with golden aspens in fall, wildflowers in summer and snowy peaks in winter. Choose an SUV or a four-wheel-drive (4WD) vehicle for mountain roads, add GPS to your rental, download offline maps for areas without cell service and take it easy at altitude. Trail Ridge Road and Independence Pass close in winter, so plan this loop between late May and mid-October and check road conditions before you go.

Day	Route	Drive time	Highlights
1	Arrive in Denver	Minimal	Lower Downtown and Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre[61]
2	Denver to Estes Park	About 1.5 hours	Rocky Mountain National Park and Trail Ridge Road, the highest continuous paved road in the US, which crests at 12,183 feet and is usually open from late May to mid-October.[3, 62, 63] A timed-entry reservation is required for daytime entry from late May to mid-October.[64]
3	Estes Park to Aspen	4.5 to 5 hours	Independence Pass, usually open from late May to late October or early November,[65] and Maroon Bells, where you need a reservation for the shuttle or for parking in summer and fall[66]
4	Aspen to Montrose	About 3 hours	Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park[67]
5	Montrose to Durango via Ouray and Silverton	About 2.5 hours	The Million Dollar Highway (US 550), about 25 miles of mountain road between Ouray and Silverton,[68] and Ouray Hot Springs
6	Durango and Mesa Verde	About 1.5 hours each way to Mesa Verde's cliff dwellings[69]	Mesa Verde National Park's cliff dwellings, built more than 700 years ago.[70] The Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad is a full-day round trip, so add a day if you want to ride it.
7	Durango to Denver via Colorado Springs	About 6 hours to Colorado Springs,[71] plus two to three hours for the Pikes Peak Highway round trip[72]	Garden of the Gods[73] and the Pikes Peak Highway to the 14,115-foot summit. Check whether the highway needs a timed-entry reservation for your date. Split this day in two for a slower pace.

Short on time? The San Juan Skyway is a loop of about 236 miles[74] through Durango, Silverton, Ouray and Telluride, at its best when the aspens turn in fall.

California coast to Las Vegas: from the ocean to the desert

This two-week, one-way trip covers nearly 1,000 miles, heading north up the coast on Highway 1 before turning inland to the national parks and the desert. Go from late spring to early fall. Choose an SUV for the national parks and steep mountain roads, or a convertible for the coast. Parts of Highway 1 through Big Sur close from time to time, so check current road conditions with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) before you go.[75]

Stop	Highlights
Los Angeles	Griffith Park and Observatory, the La Brea Tar Pits and a bike ride from Santa Monica to Venice Beach[76]
San Simeon	Hearst Castle, zebras grazing on the ranch land along Highway 1[77] and the elephant seals at Piedras Blancas, with a free viewing area open every day[78]
Monterey	The Bixby Creek Bridge on the drive through Big Sur, then the Monterey Bay Aquarium and sunset at Carmel Beach
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks	The General Sherman Tree, the largest tree on Earth by volume,[79] and trails for every level
Red Rock Canyon State Park	Short desert trails such as the Red Cliffs Nature Trail[80] and wildflowers after wet winters. Check conditions before driving the park's dirt roads.[81]
Las Vegas	Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area's 13-mile scenic drive (timed entry from October to May),[82] the Neon Museum and Hoover Dam[83]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Route 66 runs about 2,400 miles through eight states. Give it about two weeks.
- The Overseas Highway crosses 42 bridges over 113 miles and has no tolls through the Keys.
- In Colorado and California's Sierra Nevada, choose an SUV and check mountain road conditions before you go.

FAQ

How long does it take to drive Route 66?

You could drive the roughly 2,400 miles in about a week, but about two weeks gives you time for the museums, roadside landmarks and national parks along the way.

How long is the drive from Key Largo to Key West?

Key Largo is about 100 miles from Key West, a drive of about two and a half hours without stops on the Overseas Highway (US 1).[53] Plan a week or more to enjoy the islands.

When is Trail Ridge Road open?

Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park usually opens in late May and closes for the season in mid-October.[62, 63] Check the National Park Service website for current conditions.

7. WHICH ROAD TRIPS WORK BEST IN SUMMER AND WINTER?

Certain drives shine in the sun, others when the snow falls. Here are our favorites for each season.

Best summer road trips

Route	Why go
High Road to Taos, New Mexico	About 105 miles from Santa Fe to Ranchos de Taos, just outside Taos,[84] past desert and mountain views, art galleries and historic villages
Million Dollar Highway, Colorado	About 25 miles of mountain road between Silverton and Ouray. Choose an SUV and check road conditions[68]
Moab, Utah, to Lake Powell (Page, Arizona)	Start at Arches National Park near Moab, then drive the 17-mile gravel loop through the Valley of the Gods (passable for cars when dry)[85] and continue to Monument Valley
Portland to Seattle	About three hours past parks, forests and mountains, with a side trip to the Mount St. Helens Visitor Center at Silver Lake[86]
Florida's A1A, Miami to Fernandina Beach	Beach views along much of the coast, plus historic St. Augustine on the A1A Scenic & Historic Coastal Byway[87]
Great River Road	Follows the Mississippi River from Itasca State Park, Minnesota, through 10 states to the Gulf[88]

Best winter road trips

Before a winter trip, make sure roads are open after snowfall, clear the ice from all windows and choose a well-traveled route.

Route	Why go
Phoenix to the Grand Canyon	Snow on the South Rim, which stays open all year.[89] Check road conditions before you go

Route	Why go
Denver to Vail, Colorado	Skiing and snowboarding, plus Zoo Lights at the Denver Zoo from late November to early January[90]
Key Largo to Key West, Florida	Warm winter sunshine on the Overseas Highway
Seattle to Leavenworth, Washington	A Bavarian-style village in the heart of the Cascades.[91] Check the mountain pass before you go
Salt Lake City to Las Vegas	Valley of Fire State Park off I-15 (closed December 1 to 14 each year; check entrance hours before you go),[92] then Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, about 17 miles west of the Las Vegas Strip, where the scenic drive needs a timed-entry reservation from October to May[93]
St. Augustine, Florida, to Savannah, Georgia	St. Augustine's Nights of Lights holiday display (late November to mid-January) and horse-drawn carriage rides[94]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Summer is the time for mountain roads such as the Million Dollar Highway and Trail Ridge Road.
- In winter, head to the Florida Keys for sunshine, see the Grand Canyon in the snow or drive to Colorado ski towns such as Vail.
- Always check mountain passes and park roads before a winter drive.

FAQ

What is the best time of year for a road trip in the USA?

It depends on the route. Late spring to early fall suits mountain and national park drives, while winter is a great time for Florida, the Southwest and ski trips in Colorado.

Can you do a road trip in winter?

Yes. Pick well-traveled routes, check that roads are open after snowfall and choose an AWD SUV for snowy areas. Check whether chain or traction rules apply on your route.

8. ROAD TRIPS WITH KIDS AND PETS

Traveling with kids or pets takes a little extra planning, and it's worth it. Build the trip around regular breaks and pack what everyone needs to stay comfortable.

Road trips with kids

Our **Family Road Trip Guide** covers this in detail: car seats and booster seats by age, choosing between a minivan and an SUV, road trip games and snacks, and four family routes. The essentials:

- **Plan regular breaks** so kids can run around and everyone can stretch.
- **Add child seats.** Add an infant seat, a toddler seat or a booster seat to your SIXT booking or at the counter.[14]
- **Pack entertainment** and snacks within reach of the back seat.

Road trips with pets

- **Secure your pet.** Give them a resting place in the car and use a pet restraint.
- **Tag their collar.** Add an ID tag, even for cats.
- **Take regular breaks.** Stop every couple of hours so pets can stretch and exercise.
- **Keep them close.** Take your pet with you whenever you leave the car.
- **Pack for comfort.** Bring a favorite toy, a collapsible crate for hotel stays, and cleaning wipes and paper towels.

Looking for a dog-friendly destination? Our K9 Companion study ranks the best US cities for traveling with your dog.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For car seats, games, snacks and family routes, see our Family Road Trip Guide.
- Add infant, toddler or booster seats to your SIXT booking or at the counter.
- Stop every couple of hours for pets, and always take them with you when you leave the car.

FAQ

Can you bring a pet on a road trip in a rental car?

Pets are welcome in SIXT rental cars when they're properly secured and the car is returned clean.[95]

9. ROAD TRIP ESSENTIALS

Use this checklist as you pack. Check off the essentials for every trip, then add what you need for the season.

Documents and tech

- ☐ Driver's license
- ☐ Rental agreement and vehicle documents
- ☐ Phone charger and cables for music and navigation
- ☐ GPS added to your rental, plus offline maps as a backup

Safety

- ☐ First aid kit
- ☐ Emergency kit: flashlight, power bank or car charger, blanket, extra clothes
- ☐ Water for everyone
- ☐ Any medication
- ☐ Emergency and roadside assistance numbers

Entertainment

- ☐ Downloaded music, podcasts and audiobooks
- ☐ Car games and trivia
- ☐ Books and toys for kids

Summer

- ☐ Sunscreen (you need it in the car, too)
- ☐ Sunglasses
- ☐ Umbrella or raincoat
- ☐ Refillable water bottles
- ☐ Swimwear and beach towels

Winter

- ☐ Warm socks, gloves, sweaters, hats and snow boots
- ☐ Ice scraper and snow brush
- ☐ Small shovel
- ☐ Waterproof blanket

10. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I plan a road trip with a rental car?

Pick your destination and route, check the weather, set a budget, then choose a rental car that suits the landscape, the weather and your group. For long trips, choose unlimited mileage and add a second driver.

How do I choose the right rental car for a road trip?

Weigh the destination and landscape, the weather and season, the terrain, your luggage and the number of people. Choose an AWD SUV or pickup for back roads, a premium sedan or EV for highway trips, a convertible for the coast or an SUV for a mix of city and mountains.

What is the best car for a road trip?

There's no single best car. An SUV is the most versatile all-rounder, especially with AWD. A premium sedan is easy to drive and park on city trips, and a minivan or seven-seat SUV suits bigger families.

What is the best rental car for a long-distance road trip?

A comfortable premium sedan or EV with plenty of legroom for long highway stretches, or an AWD SUV if your route may bring snow. Book unlimited mileage.

What should I pack for a road trip?

Your driver's license and documents, chargers and cables, a first aid kit, an emergency kit and water, plus seasonal items: sunscreen in summer, and warm layers, an ice scraper and a shovel in winter.

What is the best car for driving in the snow?

An AWD SUV, driven with extra care. Check that roads are open after snowfall and whether chain or traction rules apply on your route.

Can I rent a car in one city and return it in another?

Yes. We offer free one-way rentals, with zero drop-off fees, on select routes in Florida, California and Nevada. The offer is subject to availability at participating US locations, isn't free between an airport and a downtown location in the same city, excludes corporate customers and may change without notice.[18] On other routes, a one-way fee may apply, and you'll see it before you book.

How much does a road trip cost?

Add up gas (distance divided by miles per gallon, times the gas price), food (daily food budget per person times days times travelers), lodging, entertainment and tolls.

How do I stay safe on a road trip?

Take breaks and switch drivers, keep the tank above half, add GPS to your rental with offline maps as a backup, check the weather and make sure everyone buckles up.

What is the best road trip in the USA?

It depends on what you love. Route 66 is the classic cross-country drive, the Overseas Highway is the top island road trip and Colorado's mountain loop is ideal for national parks and scenic drives.

11. CONCLUSION

A great road trip starts long before you turn the key. Pick your route, check the weather, set a budget and choose a car that fits the trip, then pack with the checklist in this guide. Whether you take on all of Route 66's roughly 2,400 miles, cross the 42 bridges of the Overseas Highway or climb Colorado's Trail Ridge Road, the planning in these pages will help you enjoy every mile.

Ready to hit the road? Rent the car.

Rent your road trip car with SIXT, from compact cars to SUVs, minivans and convertibles.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This e-book brings together road trip guides published in the SIXT Magazine and product information from sixt.com. We checked facts about places, roads and distances in October 2026 against official sources, including the National Park Service, state transportation departments and official tourism boards. Numbered references in the text point to the sources listed at the end of this e-book. Distances and drive times are approximate and depend on your exact route, traffic and stops.

SIXT product details, including one-way rentals, mileage options, vehicle types and extras, reflect sixt.com in October 2026. Offers are subject to availability and may change without notice. Check your booking for the terms that apply to your rental.

Check local rules. Rules on driving, tolls, child seats and speed limits differ by state and change often. Confirm them with the official authority before you travel.

Author: SIXT.

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ABOUT SIXT

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