Holiday forecast: Busy travel

33 million will venture out on Labor Day, auto club AAA predicts

By Larry Copeland
USA TODAY

Americans won't let the sluggish economy and spiking gas prices keep them home this Labor Day: Auto club AAA says holiday travel will hit a post-recession peak.

AAA says 2.9% more people will travel at least 50 miles from home this holiday than last year — 33 million hitting the road from Thursday, Aug. 30, to Monday, Sept. 3. That's up from 32.1 million over the same holiday last year.

If those projections materialize, it would be the highest travel volume since 2008, when the recession began curtailing Labor Day travel.

It would be the third projected increase in holiday travel in 2012, following a 1.2% increase for Memorial Day travel and a 4.9% increase for Independence Day.

"In the absence of strong economic growth that might fuel a significant boost in travel volume, it is an encouraging sign that Americans continue to prioritize travel," said Bill Sutherland, vice president of AAA Travel Services.

Another indicator of more robust Labor Day travel: Enterprise Rent-A-Car said Monday that advance neighborhood rental car reservations for Labor Day are 25% higher than a year ago.

Many travelers will take advantage of the extra day off to take an international trip, says Courtney Scott, senior editor at Travelocity.

"For those people looking for a new destination here at home, small cities and towns are becoming more popular," she said.

According to AAA, 85% of those traveling this holiday will go by automobile, and there will be a 3.1% increase in automobile travel. Eight percent will fly, with holiday air travel up 3.7% over last year.

The rest will use other means of transportation, including cruise ships, trains and buses; the number of travelers using those modes will drop by a nominal 0.2%.

The national average price of a gallon of regular gasoline Monday was $3.72 per gallon, 22 cents less than the 2012 peak hit in April and 14 cents above last year's price on Aug. 20, AAA said.

If AAA's forecast post-recession high in travel happens, it would still be below the pre-recession average. Before 2008, the average number of Labor Day travelers was 35.5 million.

Most popular Labor Day destinations

Top travel locales, based on reservations, with average daily hotel room rate:

Las Vegas	$150	South Florida	$138
New York City	$249	Los Angeles	$123
Orlando	$99	Chicago	$147
Denver	$95	Dallas-Fort Worth	$125
Seattle	$126	San Francisco	$168

Source: Travelocity