

Prayer won't boost mileage, but gas use 'Bible' might

By Lynn O'Shaughnessy
July 23, 2006



I've got to start this column with an admission. My knowledge of cars is appalling. V8? Isn't that what's stocked between the cranberry and grape juice in the grocery store?

But I decided that my ignorance of what happens after I insert my key into the ignition of my aging Volvo station wagon shouldn't deter me from sharing advice from a couple of automotive fanatics, who can tell you what the melting point of an iridium spark plug is and, with a little prodding, would probably babble on about tribology, the science of moving parts. That's got to be a good Scrabble word.

Why should you care about a couple of guys who have spent countless hours in their garages peering up into the greasy underbelly of their hot rods, cars and trucks? Because these car guys, Ron Hollenbeck, a former Navy aviator, and Kenny Joines, who grew up building engines with his dad, promise to save you money at the pump. They've written a new book, "The Gas Mileage Bible," which is aimed primarily at people who drive vehicles that seem capable of making a tank of gas disappear almost as quickly as a bag of Lay's potato chips.

The authors of "The Gas Mileage Bible" share dozens of ways that we can prolong the time that elapses between our visits to the gas station. Some of it we've heard before: don't tailgate or speed – this will burn too much gas. Duh. But the authors provide lots of advice that I haven't seen anywhere else. They also resist the temptation to lay a guilt trip on what will probably be their most motivated audience – the drivers who tool around in Chevy Tahoes, Hummers and other urban tanks. I guess \$100 fill ups are punishment enough.

The book provides technical information for the mechanically minded, but it's also a friendly read for drivers whose automotive brains haven't developed beyond the Cambrian Period.

Here's just a few of the tips from the the book:

- Be nice to your car. It's pretty clear when reading this book that most of us are automotive slackers. We treat our cars as badly as the cads who keep their dogs chained to a tree. One way to atone for our sins and boost our gas mileage, the authors suggest, is to keep our cars tuned up. The best place to find out the proper care and feeding of your vehicle is the lonely manual in you glove compartment. I confess I only open mine when a strange icon lights up on my dashboard. A good tune-up makes the engine's combustion process more efficient, which is necessary to get good fuel economy. A poorly tuned car can cost you 40 percent of the gas mileage you should be getting.

- Use high quality synthetic oil. Yes, this stuff can cost more than a month's worth of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. Synthetic oil, however, lasts far longer than the petroleum-based stuff and it also keeps your engine cleaner. If you go to Jiffy Lube, it could cost you \$30 for an oil change that will require a return trip in 3,000 miles. With synthetic oil, which could cost \$90 or \$100, you might not need to change the oil for 10,000 to 20,000 miles. The expensive oil is more slippery, the authors observe, which provides better lubrication and allows the engine to operate much cooler. It also helps clean out an engine's deposits. The authors recommend Amsoil, Red Line and Mobil 1. In general, you should select the lowest viscosity oil that's recommended for

your car. They suggest that the best choice for most people is 5W-30.

■Don't forget the tires. Check your tire pressure every week. And while you're at it, clean the oven and find the missing mates for all your socks. OK, saving money at the pump can be a tedious business, but the payoff is worth it. According to the car guys, maintaining proper tire pressure could be one of the most important ways to keep fuel mileage high. Driving on tires that are 20 percent under-inflated can boost fuel consumption by 10 percent, which can cost you two or three miles per gallon. You should also get out the tire pressure gauge if the weather changes by 30 degrees. Keep the tires filled up near the highest pressure listed on the tires.

■At the same time, you'll want to check your wheel alignment. Even hitting a curb or pothole once can throw your alignment out of whack. A misaligned car will waste more gas and require a trip to the tire store sooner than you'd like. Next time you're driving down a freeway, check to see if your steering wheel is centered. If it's cocked to the side when you are zooming straight ahead, it's time for an alignment appointment.

■Make your vehicle more aerodynamic. We're not talking about turning your car into something that would fit in on the set of "Back to the Future." A lot of the suggestions are easy – and obvious even to me. If you don't need the luggage rack, bike rack or car top carrier, take it off. (You should also clean out your car; they aren't supposed to be archaeological digs.) If you drive a truck, you might assume that you'll enjoy better gas mileage if you remove the tailgate. Not so, fellas. Wind moves smoothly over the air bubble in your truck bed when the tailgate is up. But when it's down or removed, the bubble collapses, which creates more wind resistance.

■Change your driving habits. Driving 50 or 55 mph might seem like you're trapped on a broken treadmill, but it's a cheaper way to travel. Driving at those speeds can save as much as 23 percent of fuel costs. The authors also recommend that drivers avoid idling their vehicles for more than a minute. Of course, that means you should get out of your car next time you want to order a hamburger. "The big gains are in relearning how to drive," Hollenbeck insists.

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