

Fall WHEELS

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14 best fall road trips to see foliage

Take full advantage of autumn’s cooler temperatures and beautiful foliage by planning a fall road trip through the most scenic regions of the United States. Naturally, the prettiest state to visit depends on your road trip goals—cruise the Northeast to see the colorful changing leaves on a journey through mountain landscapes, or head south to the Gulf Coast, where you’ll find foliage with a side of warmer weather and ocean views.

Russell-Brasstown Scenic Byway, Georgia

When you think of places to see fall foliage, New England destinations probably come to mind. But the southern parts of the country have beautiful colors, too. A road trip through Georgia’s Blue Ridge Mountains offers stunning foliage without the cold weather you’d find up north.

Start at the Russell-Brasstown Scenic Byway in the northern part of the state, which takes you through the Blue Ridge Mountains along the Chattahoochee River. Stop in Helen, a mountain town modeled after a quaint Bavarian village, and at Brasstown Bald, Georgia’s highest point and the ultimate foliage-viewing vantage point. Clayton, an old mountain town with antique shops, outdoor retailers, and restaurants, is also worth a visit. Take a hike in the nearby Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, then head east to the Tallulah Gorge State Park, where you can explore a nearly 1,000-foot-deep chasm carved out by the Tallulah River.

Green Mountain Byway, Vermont

If New England’s foliage is on your must-see list, make a bee-line for Vermont, where the Green Mountains erupt in color. Some of the most picturesque views can be glimpsed from the Green Mountain Byway, which weaves through Waterbury and Stowe before circling the mountains to frame picture-perfect vistas. You’ll pass by wide-open farmland, historic homes, and rolling hills interrupted by church steeples. Make it a point to stop at The Alchemist Brewery in Stowe for a pint of the legendary Heady Topper, and at the Ben & Jerry’s factory in Waterbury for a tour.

Finger Lakes Region, New York

Not far from the Big Apple, the Finger Lakes region is an oasis of fall foliage and quiet country scenery. Leaving from New York City, head west through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and stop at Gouldsboro or Tobyhanna State Park along the way. Make a detour to see Jim Thorpe, a borough in Pennsylvania with lovely mountain scenery and architecture. While in town, go on a hike in Lehigh Valley or visit the Lehigh Gorge Scenic Railway. Then head to the Finger Lakes to sample some of the region’s best wines along Cayuga Lake. Stay nearby at the historic Inns of Aurora Resort & Spa, hike at Taughannock Falls State Park, and spend a day in Ithaca to wet your whistle at Ithaca Beer Co.

Kancamagus Highway, New Hampshire

There’s a lot to see and do in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, but the Kancamagus Highway, known fondly as

“The Kanc,” tops the list in the fall. This twisty, turny road captures the best of the state’s foliage and mountain views, and it offers some top-notch photo opportunities. Stop at the historic Albany Covered Bridge, which dates from 1858, for some serious New England charm. Then make your way to Conway to give someone else a turn at the wheel as you ride the Conway Scenic Railroad for even more leafy views.

Blue Ridge Parkway, Virginia and North Carolina

This winding road covers almost 470 miles to connect Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina to Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. While you drive, you’ll pass split rail fences, old farmsteads, mountain meadows, and scenic overlooks. Stop along the way at one of the many hiking trails in either national park, or visit a local farm to grab some autumnal produce.

Route 6, Pennsylvania



Take a trip along the historic Route 6 in northern Pennsylvania for views of color-shifting forests, mountains, and other peaceful scenery. Visit the historic Straub Brewery, a St. Marys institution, while you’re in the area. You can also travel along the Elk Scenic Drive, a 127-mile route that crosses through the Pennsylvania Wilds—sometimes past large elk herds. Finally, stop at Worlds End State Park for camping, cabins, and hiking on the Loyalsock Trail to immerse yourself in the fall foliage.

Litchfield Hills, Connecticut

Take your time exploring the Litchfield Hills in the northwest corner of Connecticut. Pass through Falls Village in Canaan, where the churches, streets, houses, and railroad depot still look as they did in the 1800s. The Appalachian Trail runs right through town, so you can follow the white trail markers for a day hike. Pass through the West Cornwall Covered Bridge, which extends 172 feet across the Housatonic River, visit Lake Waramaug State Park for fall foliage views while cycling or sailing, and then head to Morris to marvel at the gardens at White Flower Farm.

Pacific Coast Highway, California

You might think a drive up the California coast is best done in the summer, but it’s also beautiful in the fall—and the weather is more comfortable. Start outside Los Angeles with an oceanside hike in Point Mugu State Park. Then hop in a car—a convertible, preferably—and follow Highway 1 from Point Mugu before joining the coast on Highway 101 to Santa Barbara. Spend a night there and stroll down State Street to check out the shops and restaurants. Make a side trip to nearby Solvang, which is modeled after an old Danish town, with a windmill, plus wineries and beautiful scenery. If you have the time, continue northwest for ocean views at Jalama Beach County Park.

The Olympic Peninsula, Washington

Make your way through the rugged coast of Washington for mountain views and lush forest drives. You can start in Seattle and loop around Puget Sound, stopping for ferry boat detours to Vashon Island or Whidbey Island. On Maury Island, stroll

along the beaches or visit Point Robinson Lighthouse for a taste of Pacific Northwest island life. Back on the mainland, hike or camp in Olympic National Park, and then carry on to historic Port Townsend, where you can wander among the old waterfront neighborhoods or head out on the water in the hopes of spotting orcas, sea otters, and other marine life.

Gulf Coast, Florida

There are two main advantages of a fall Florida road trip. One, you’ll enjoy warmer temperatures than you’d get in the north, and two, you’ll avoid the unbearable heat and humidity of the Sunshine State’s summer months. Travel along the Gulf of Mexico, and feel free to extend it further. On South Walton’s beaches, the sands are sugar-white thanks to their pure quartz crystal makeup. You can also check out the rare coastal dune lakes that exist in only a handful of places in the world. For a different kind of food truck experience, stop in the town of Seaside, where Airstream Row is a street lined with aluminum trailers serving up tasty dishes.

Northern Pacific Coast, Oregon

The Oregon coast has stunning coastal scenery fringed by forests. Start in Astoria, then head south. Along the way, you can hike at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park or Ecola State Park. Stay in Cannon Beach to see Haystack Rock and wander among those large beach boulders so characteristic of the Pacific Northwest. Locals will tell you that a stop at the Tillamook Creamery, in Tillamook, for sweet frozen treats is obligatory. You can travel all the way down the coast and top off your trip with a visit to the redwood forests near the town of Brookings.

The Great Lakes, Michigan

Skirt the country’s northern edge by driving along the Great Lakes. Start at the southern shore of Lake Huron and stroll the Riverwalk Pier or shop in the downtown antiques center in Bay City. After that, head north along the lake to hike one of the state parks near Alpena, like Thompson’s Harbor State Park. Then, drive two hours up the shore to Mackinaw City, where you can catch the ferry to the famously car-free Mackinac Island. This 3.8-square-mile National Historic Landmark is easily explored by bike or horse and buggy.

Route 66, Illinois to California



Though the iconic and historic highway has been chopped up and partially abandoned since its glory days, Route 66 has been immortalized through pop culture—you’ve heard about it in songs and seen it in movies. Only parts of it remain intact and drivable today, but it’s worth exploring, even if you don’t make it the whole way.

The best starting point for a Route 66 adventure is arguably at its eastern terminus, Chicago. Stop along the way for memorable sights, including the Polk-a-Dot Drive In in Braidwood, Illinois, the Oklahoma Route 66 Museum, the 80-foot Blue Whale of Catoosa, and Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas. Complete your journey out west at California’s Santa Monica Pier.

Great River Road, Minnesota to Louisiana



Enjoy the Mississippi River by following the Great River Road, which runs 3,000 miles from Minnesota all the way down to Louisiana. Stop along the way to explore Saint Paul and Memphis, Tennessee, and consider detours to nearby cities like Chicago or Nashville.

Highlights along the route include the Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, and the Poverty Point UNESCO World Heritage Site in Pioneer, Louisiana. There are also plenty of hiking opportunities, especially at Mississippi Palisades State Park.

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Fall driving hazards and tips to stay safe

BY BRETT BERK
AARP

Autumn’s arrival cues — weather changes, shifting wildlife behavior, shorter days, the start of school and falling leaves — can all impact cars and drivers. “The driving environment can change a fair bit when seasons change,” says William Van Tassel, manager of driver training programs for the American Automobile Association (AAA).

This is especially important for drivers 50+, who are more likely to drive an older vehicle that lacks advanced driver assistance systems, says Aimee Cox, a research scientist at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) who specializes in mature drivers.

So while you sip your pumpkin spice latte and daydream about Thanksgiving dinner this fall, read up on what to know before you head out on the road.

Beautiful fall leaves mean slick patches on the road

The lovely foliage that trees shed in autumn can cause issues. Leaves’ waxy surface prevents water absorption, according to Van Tassel, making fallen leaves slick. “Consider leaves on the road like patches of ice,” he says. He recommends avoiding them if it’s safe. Otherwise, he says, to best maintain stability, “handle your braking before you get to those patches, instead of as you’re driving over them.”

According to Van Tassel, because of chemical properties in their rubber formulas, tire traction diminishes in colder temperatures. He recommends driving “a bit smoother,” trying to avoid abrupt movements or sudden turns, to make up for this change.

AAA has additional advice for tire maintenance. Make sure that your tires are inflated to the air pressure suggested in your owners’ manual — these numbers are often also printed on the inside of the driver’s doorjamb. And check that your tires have plenty of tread. Put a quarter coin in the tread with the top of Washington’s head facing down; if you can see the hair on the top of George’s head, it’s probably time to replace the tire.

Shorter days mean less daylight driving

“Older drivers are more susceptible to vision [issues],” during the transitions between light and dark, Cox says, emphasizing the importance of illumination-enhancing technologies. If your car has high beam assist, Cox recommends using it. The feature automatically turns your high beams on and off when approaching and departing darker areas. Another good feature to have: curve-adaptive headlights, the beams of



which move with the steering wheel to increase visibility.

You can also just avoid driving in the dark when you can, says Van Tassel, who suggests using ride hailing service apps for non-daylight trips and delivery apps for retrieving groceries, takeout or prescriptions that you might need after dark.

Kids everywhere, all of a sudden, all at once

Students’ return to school means new traffic patterns, with increased bus, car and pedestrian presence during drop-off and pick-up.

“In school zones, watch your speed and be extra vigilant,” says Cox. She says this is even more relevant for drivers of trucks or SUVs, which can be more harmful because of their high hoods if they strike a pedestrian. She notes that features like Automatic Emergency Braking with pedestrian detection (AEB-ped) — which halts a car automatically when someone is detected in its path — can reduce relevant crashes by 27 percent, according to IIHS studies. The system is fairly standard in current new cars. “But that’s not really helpful for a driver of older vehicles that didn’t come equipped with it,” she adds.

So if your car is older, Van Tassel advises extreme caution when backing up. “Move at a walking pace,” he says. This is particularly important as kids are often on the move with more than just their feet and old school bicycles these days — including electric-powered bicycles, scooters and skateboards.

And follow bus rules to a tee, says the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration website. When you see a bus’s yellow lights flashing, a driver should slow down

and prepare to stop. Do not try to pass the bus at this point (it’s illegal). Come to a full stop when the red lights are flashing and the bus’s stop-arm is extended. When the bus’s lights have stopped flashing and the bus has begun moving again, you may proceed, adding that regardless of flashing lights, be very aware that a school bus likely means kids are around the street.

New drivers mean more mistakes

And then there are the new drivers — the teens very excited to be on the road, driving to school and not always making the best decisions. According to AAA, 16-19 year olds are three times as likely to be involved in a fatal crash as drivers 20 and older, and 16 year olds have a crash risk about 1.5 times higher than 18-19 year olds.

If you chauffeur a teen driver — perhaps a grandchild or grand-niece or -nephew — somewhere, you can help by modeling safe driving behaviors such as always wearing a seat belt and not engaging in distracted practices like looking at a smartphone while driving.

Oh deer — and other wildlife hazards

According to Cox, deer strikes are most common at dusk and dawn, so fall’s shorter days impact our potential roadway interactions with animals. Cox’s IIHS data also shows that deer are most active in November, during their mating season.

“We see animal strikes in November at more than two times the yearly average frequency,” Cox says, adding that West Virginia, Iowa, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Michigan have the highest rate of strikes.

Van Tassel also recommends that drivers slow down to decrease stopping distances.

“The driving environment can change a fair bit when seasons change.”

William Van Tassel

Manager of driver training programs for the American Automobile Association (AAA)

And if a deer is unavoidably in your path, he says, don’t swerve. “If someone makes a hard jerk, it might make it more difficult to recover from that and stay on the road,” he says. Leaving the roadway brings “higher risk of crashing into trees or rolling over.”

Headlight technology can help, adds Cox, as can AEB systems, some of which, she says, can also detect large animals. “If your vehicle does have these systems, make sure they’re active and engaged,” Cox says.

The golden hour glare

In autumn, the sun’s daily path is different. “The sun will not get as high in the sky,” Van Tassel says. This results in longer periods of glare each morning and evening, often coinciding with daily commutes.

The simplest aids in reducing glare should be familiar. “Use your car’s sun visor, and wear sunglasses,” Cox says. Polarized sunglasses are particularly effective, according to Van Tassel. Both also recommend to avoid driving during sunrise and sunset, and/or choosing alternative routes that avoid direct east or west exposures.

Van Tassel has additional checkup advice as well, this time for you, not your car. “Getting an eye exam each year in the fall is a great idea,” he says. “It can help identify any vision problems as early as possible.”

Preparing for bad weather can be a lifesaver

If rain, fog or frost appears, he suggests remaining home, if possible. “It’s hard to get in trouble if you’re not out on the road,” Van Tassel says, wryly. To prep for cooler weather emergencies, he recommends packing a supply kit in the trunk: “an extra phone battery, a charger cord, water, blankets and maybe a deck of cards.” You can even purchase all manner of road kits from AAA, including those that contain supplies for emergencies (e.g., jumper cables and flashlights), first aid (e.g., bandages and gauze) or foul weather (e.g., gloves, hand warmers, shovel, candles, ice scraper).

Brett Berk is a contributing writer who covers autos. His work appears regularly in Architectural Digest, Business Insider, GQ, The New York Times and Vanity Fair.

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Cheap hybrids: Every new hybrid under \$30,000

BY KIRK BELL
Cars.com

What car shoppers need to know

• Only four hybrids are currently offered with a starting price below \$30,000 (all prices include destination).

• The Ford Maverick is the lone pickup truck on the list.

• The Toyota Corolla Hybrid is the most affordable at \$26,470, while the Hyundai Elantra Hybrid is the most efficient at up to 54 mpg.

Given today’s gas prices and continuing inflation, a hybrid vehicle looks more and more like a smart buy, especially if you can get one at an affordable price. We’d call \$30,000 affordable, so we set that mark as the limit for this story (sorry, Toyota Prius, you just missed out). We scoured our databases and identified the most affordable hybrid cars under \$30,000, and there are only four — but every one of them will save you money at the pump while also serving as practical transportation.

The list includes two sedans, one SUV that can also be viewed as a hatchback, and oddly, one pickup truck. All of these choices would also appear on the list of most fuel-efficient cars under \$30,000, but the Maverick pickup would be bested by several other hybrids that cost more than that. Any of these affordable hybrid cars are worth a look as the antidote for today’s rising costs.

New hybrid cars under \$30,000

Four new hybrids start under \$30,000 in 2026: the Toyota Corolla Hybrid (\$26,470), Hyundai Elantra Hybrid (\$26,945), Kia Niro (\$28,885) and Ford Maverick (\$29,990).

2027 Toyota Corolla Hybrid, \$26,470

The Corolla is one of the bestselling cars on the planet, and the available hybrid only expands its appeal. Plus, the Corolla Hybrid is available with all-wheel drive and still for under \$30,000 with 48 mpg in the LE AWD trim; \$27,870, to be exact. Both the Corolla Hybrid LE and SE trim levels come in under \$30,000, so you can step up the standard equipment with 18-inch wheels, sport seats and upgraded interior and exterior trim while still getting an affordable hybrid.

The 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine makes only 96 horsepower, but the front and rear motors up the output to a still-modest combined 138 hp. It’s rather slow, but we like the Corolla Hybrid because it’s frugal, practical and comes with lots of safety features.

2026 Hyundai Elantra Hybrid, \$26,945

Like the Corolla Hybrid, the Elantra Hybrid is incredibly practical, highly efficient, affordable and rather slow. Its powertrain combines a 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine with an electric motor to make a pedestrian 139 hp. In addition to the base Blue trim, the SEL Sport trim also costs less than \$30,000, allowing value-minded customers to upgrade to a 10.25-inch infotainment touchscreen and a 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster, as well as navigation, satellite radio and wireless phone charging.

However, the SEL Sport is rated at 50 mpg combined compared to 54 mpg for the Blue trim. In our comparison with the Corolla Hybrid, we picked the Corolla for its better ride quality. On the other hand, given its low cost and high efficiency, the Elantra Hybrid came out on top for 2026 as our best hybrid for the money.

2026 Kia Niro, \$28,885

Kia markets the Niro as a small SUV, but there’s a good argument to be made that it’s a tall hatchback,



especially given that it only comes with front-wheel drive. For 2026, it’s now a hybrid or fully electric Niro EV; 2025 was the last model year of the Niro plug-in electric hybrid. The hybrid teams a 1.6-liter four-cylinder engine with an electric motor to make a combined 139 hp. That’s not a formula for quick acceleration, but it is one for exemplary efficiency, and the Niro delivers at 50 mpg combined.

When it debuted for the 2023 model year, we named the Niro our Best Car of 2023, citing its excellent design, stupendous fuel economy and affordable price. Only the base LX trim fits below our \$30,000 threshold, so it isn’t loaded with conveniences, but it does come with a full suite of driver-assist features. The sad news, however, is that the 2027 Niro’s price crosses the \$30,000 threshold, starting at \$31,385.

2026 Ford Maverick, \$29,990

The Maverick faces little competition, and the hybrid version with its 38 mpg rating has none. The only other compact pickup on the market is the Hyundai Santa Cruz, and it doesn’t come with a hybrid powertrain. The Maverick XL hybrid is FWD at its just-barely sub-\$30,000 price, so opting for AWD exceeds our limit. With its combination of efficiency, utility and affordability, we find the Maverick to be one of the most compelling vehicles on the market.

How much does a hybrid car cost?

Hybrids start at \$26,470, which is how much the 2027 Toyota Corolla Hybrid costs, the cheapest new hybrid on sale.

Do any hybrids under \$30,000 come with all-wheel drive?

Yes, the Corolla Hybrid has available AWD, and even with the AWD, the Corolla is still under



\$30,000, though fuel economy takes a hit from a combined 50 mpg to 48 mpg. The 2026 Ford Maverick is another hybrid on this list with AWD, but adding AWD puts the Maverick over \$30,000.

What’s the difference between a hybrid and plug-in hybrid?

A regular hybrid never needs to be plugged in — because it can’t be. A traditional hybrid uses an electric motor to aid a gasoline engine, and the motor draws its power from a small battery that is charged by the engine, brake regeneration or both. The motor may be able to power the vehicle by itself but only for a short time and mostly when cruising in low load situations. A plug-in hybrid, however, has a larger battery that can be replenished by plugging into an outlet, and combined with a

larger motor, they can power the vehicle on electric-only power for several miles; the average PHEV gets around 30 miles of all-electric range.

Is a hybrid car worth it under \$30,000?

Generally, yes, but you’ll have to do the math in each situation. Hybrids tend to cost more than their gas-only counterparts, but they can save you money at the pump to make up for that extra cost over time. On a pure cost-of-ownership basis, the extra expense of a hybrid can pay for itself within a few years, and hybrid buyers get the added benefit of polluting less along the way.

What is the cheapest new hybrid car you can buy?

If cheap hybrid cars are your thing, the 2027 Corolla Hybrid in its base LE trim is the cheapest. Priced

at \$26,470, it undercuts the Hyundai Elantra Hybrid Blue by \$475. That doesn’t mean that it will be the cheapest in the long run because, as we’ll see in the next section, the Hyundai is more efficient and will likely close the gap in fuel savings rather quickly.

What is the most fuel-efficient hybrid under \$30,000?

The 2026 Elantra Hybrid Blue is the hybrid efficiency king under \$30K. With EPA-rated fuel-economy figures of 51/58/54 mpg city/highway/combined, it tops the Kia Niro LX by 4 mpg in the combined rating. The 2027 Toyota Prius is the most efficient hybrid with top ratings of 59/50/55 mpg, but it just misses inclusion on our list with a starting price of \$30,050, including destination.

Winter vehicle maintenance starts now

Changing seasons expose vehicles to various conditions throughout the year. Although

severe weather can occur at any time, the winter is known to be particularly harsh and

can make it hard for a vehicle to function properly.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says winter weather can cause extremely dangerous road conditions. An estimated 320 fatal traffic crashes occurred in the United States in 2023, and 22,293 injuries happened when there was snow or sleet conditions at the time of the crash. It is essential that drivers prepare their vehicles for winter weather. Properly winterizing a car can help prevent breakdowns and accidents, and also potentially save drivers from being stranded in the cold.

Here are some winter car maintenance tips to consider before the first storm of the season, courtesy of AAA and

State Farm.

Test the battery. A driver needs a battery to be fully charged and in good condition to start the engine on cold winter mornings. Colder temperatures cause chemical reactions within the battery, which can make electricity slow down and hinder the vehicle’s ability to reach maximum power. Check the battery prior to winter, and replace it, if necessary.

Check fluids. Part of winter preparation is ensuring that all of the car’s fluids are at the right levels and appropriate for low temperatures. This includes engine oil, windshield washer fluid, and antifreeze.

Schedule a maintenance checkup. A mechanic can look at hoses and belts to

check that they are in good working order. Cold temperatures can make belts and hoses more brittle and prone to breaking.

Apply a windshield repellent. Scraping ice and snow off of windshields on winter mornings can be a frustrating and arduous task. Adding hydrophobic repellent like Rain-X to the windshield can make it easier to remove ice later on.

Maintain tire pressure. As outside temperatures drop, so does tire pressure. Routinely check and inflate tires to the recommended pressure listed on a label located on the driver’s side door frame.

Inspect the wiper blades. Seeing clearly out of the windshield is important for

safe winter driving. In addition to a properly working defroster, drivers will need wiper blades that can remove rain and snow. If any streaks or skips occur while using the wipers, it might be time for a new set.

Conduct a brake check. A combination of snow, moisture, and salt on roads can contribute to rust on brakes and rotors. Symptoms of brake issues include noises, sticking brake pads, and slower stop times. Before the thick of winter, drivers are urged to have their brakes checked by a professional.

Winter is on the horizon, and vehicle owners should prepare their cars and trucks now for the rough weather to come.



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Choosing the best vehicle for your teenager

So your freshly minted young driver has a license. Now what? If you are launching into a search for the best cars for teens, we can help. Even if you don't have the budget to bring home one of our picks, we will provide some helpful tips for your quest.

How much does it cost to add a teenager to car insurance?

It costs a lot to add your teen to the car insurance policy you currently hold, that is, unless you live in Hawaii. There is practically no increase in adding a teenager to your policy in our 50th state. If you live elsewhere, it can inflate your premium by 150% or more. And it's usually more for a male teen than any other young driver.

Of course, some cars are more expensive than others to insure. However, the bulk of a new driver's added insurance cost is liability coverage. That coverage pays for property damage and physical harm to others. There are many factors an insurance provider takes into account when calculating a premium.

It's impossible for anyone but an insurance company representative to even ballpark your new premium. Consequently, involving your insurance agent in the process as early as possible is essential to avoid surprises.

How do you lower car insurance rates for a teenager?

There are several discounts your provider may offer to reduce that insurance burden. Progressive, for example, offers up to a 10% discount to students with a B grade average or better. Some companies also provide a discount if your teen driver takes a driving safety course. Ask your insurance agent.

Whether your insurance provider offers a safe driver school discount or not, you might want to enroll your new driver in a safety program. Such schools hone a young driver's awareness and skills. Since 2003, Ford has operated its Ford Driving Skills for Life Academy, a traveling roadshow that visits several cities each year, and an online course. The American Automobile Association (AAA) also offers an online teen safety course.

Others, like Tire Rack's Street Survival school, still travel around the country. Hands-on programs usually combine classroom work with instruction by a qualified driving coach on a closed course.

For teen drivers, all cars aren't equal

Here is where we discuss common sense. It's possible

you reached a point in your life when you are no longer concerned with the vehicle you drive somehow defining or being a reflection of you.

Often, that less-than-mature driver raiding your refrigerator won't share your wisdom. Their dream car list will contain all sorts of cars, trucks, and SUVs that may not be suitable or safe for them, whether you can afford them or not.

To this point, Joseph Young advised, "It's really important that teens choose a car that will provide good crash protection. When shopping for or handing down a car, there are some basics that teens and their parents should keep in mind. For starters, teens shouldn't be driving an older car that lacks basic safety features like electronic stability control (ESC) or side airbags. Generally, newer vehicles offer better crash protection because they've been subjected to more challenging safety tests. This doesn't mean your teen needs a brand-new vehicle, but teens shouldn't be driving an old beater that lacks basic safety features."

Going into this project, we set some standards about the vehicles we consider best for teen drivers. Remember, you must balance the vehicle's cost with its safety features.

While newer models will likely offer more advanced safety features and driver assists than older models, a new car's price may not be realistic for many families. When you plan your budget for a vehicle, it may also be wise to factor in the potential cost of repair and bodywork. If your family budget allows, 2013 and newer vehicles will come standard with the "Big Three" of safety features: antilock brakes, traction control, and stability control, which the federal government mandates.

In 2018, carmakers had to comply with the federal government mandate for rearview cameras in all new cars, but by 2017, most already had them. We highly recommend this feature. If you are well-heeled enough to shop above this list, you might consider an electric vehicle (EV). Just keep in mind that the peak torque — the power that gets a vehicle moving — in an EV is all available the instant the driver's foot touches the accelerator. That may be too much immediate power for a teen to handle safely.

Types of cars to avoid

Tiny city cars might be more affordable and get better gas mileage than compact or midsize ones. However, they will almost always come out second in a contest with a full-size truck or SUV on the road. Joseph Young agrees: "Teens also shouldn't be in the smallest cars on the road. Very

small cars don't provide as much protection in a crash, so it's crucial that teens are behind the wheel of something slightly larger. We're not recommending they drive tanks, but something like a midsize car or small SUV is going to provide more protection than a minicar."

Sports cars might look cool but may tempt teenagers to drive beyond their skill. Big SUVs or pickup trucks will surround your teen with more metal, but they may be too big for your teen to handle. They are simply more challenging to park. And then there is the fuel economy issue.

High-horsepower cars will be high on the must-have list for some teen drivers, but even experienced drivers can overshoot their ability on rain-soaked pavement. Increased horsepower translates into higher insurance premiums and more potential for trouble.

Best new cars for teens under \$30,000

2025 Honda HR-V
Starting Price: \$26,795
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.5

Roomy, refined, and dependable, the Honda HR-V delivers the brand's most notable attributes. Every HR-V grade comes with the latest Honda Sensing bundle, featuring automatic emergency braking with pedestrian detection, lane-keeping assist, adaptive cruise control, and lane departure warning.

A couple of USB-C charging ports, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, high-beam assist, LED headlights, and hill-start assist are all standard. We'd pony up the extra \$2,100 for the Sport trim to gain proximity keyless entry, Walk Away Auto Lock, heated outboard mirrors with integrated turn signals, and blind-spot monitoring with rear cross-traffic alert.

2025 Kia K4
Starting Price: \$23,165
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.5

An all-new model for 2025, the Kia K4 compact sedan is stylish, affordable, and brimming with technology. We think your teen will be drawn to its slick exterior and enthused by its standard tech, which includes a 12.3-inch infotainment touchscreen, multiple USB-C ports, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, and proximity keyless entry.

Also standard are LED headlights and Kia's Drive Wise suite of advanced safety technologies. Among them are adaptive cruise control, lane-keeping assist, lane-following assist, high-beam assist, and forward collision avoidance with pedestrian detection. We'd spend another \$2,000 for the EX trim, adding blind-spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, a

60/40-split, folding rear seat, dual-zone automatic climate control, and safe-exit warning.

2025 Mazda CX-30
Starting Price: \$26,615
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.2

Although the Mazda CX-30's 191 hp may be a bit more than you want at Junior's beck and call, this subcompact SUV provides a hefty list of advanced technology. Standard features include all-wheel drive, LED headlights, a 7-inch digital gauge cluster, an 8.8-inch touchscreen, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, and two USB-C ports.

Advanced safety tech includes automatic emergency braking with pedestrian detection, blind-spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, lane departure warning, lane-keeping assist, and high-beam assist.

2025 Toyota Prius
Starting Price: \$29,485
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.8

The Toyota Prius is the car that made "hybrid" a household word. Toyota molded the Prius into the sleek shape of a speedster. Well, it's not that. However, it still manages an impressive combined driving fuel economy of 57 mpg. Students heading for the snowbelt can add all-wheel drive (AWD). Its rear-seat legroom is about average for the segment.

We like it so much that we named the redesigned Prius our Best New Model of 2024. Every Prius comes with automatic emergency braking with pedestrian detection, lane departure warning with steering assist, adaptive cruise control, lane-keeping assist, and high-beam assist. Blind-spot monitoring and rear cross-traffic alert come standard as well. If the new models are out of your price range, the previous-generation Prius is also an excellent choice.

2025 Honda Civic
Starting Price: \$25,400
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.7

The Civic made our list of picks for several reasons, including the fact that 2025 is the fourth year in a row we've named it our Compact Car Best Buy for 2025. It also gets a government-estimated 36 mpg in combined driving.

Every 2025 Civic arrives with the Honda Sensing suite of driver aids, including forward collision warning, auto emergency braking, lane departure warning, lane-keeping assist, and adaptive cruise control. Connectivity technology includes Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, one USB port, and Bluetooth connectivity. Honda typically doesn't offer option packages. To gain more content, you must move up in trim level. And look to the hatchback model (\$28,600) for more cargo space.

2025 Toyota Corolla
Starting Price: \$23,460
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.5

It boasts low cost-to-own figures and historically good reliability. The Corolla's starting price reflects the entry-level LE model. It offers standard equipment like automatic climate control, remote keyless entry, and a rear-seat center armrest.

Every 2025 Corolla comes with Toyota's Safety Sense 3.0. This advanced driver assistance technology suite includes pre-collision with pedestrian detection, automatic emergency braking, adaptive cruise control, lane departure warning, lane-keeping assist, traffic sign recognition, and automatic high beams.

The optional Premium Package offers a blind-spot monitor with a rear cross-traffic alert system, which is great for teen drivers. Connectivity features include Bluetooth, voice recognition, four USB ports, Amazon Alexa, Apple CarPlay, Android Auto, and Wi-Fi capability. The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) government-certified combined fuel economy is 35 mpg.

2026 Hyundai Kona
Starting Price: \$26,000
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.8

Totally redesigned last year, the 2025 Hyundai Kona offers tremendous value as a subcompact SUV with eye-catching exterior styling. We named it our Subcompact SUV Best Buy in 2024 and then gave it the same recognition for 2025. Its small size makes parking easy, a big plus for teens. The rear cargo area is well-suited to carrying gear. The gas engine offers fuel economy as good as 35 mpg on the highway. The Kona Electric is also available outside the \$30,000 budget.

There is plenty of value here, as even the base SE model comes standard with blind-spot monitoring, lane-keeping assist, forward collision-avoidance assist, lane-change assist, and rear cross-traffic collision warning. A 12.3-inch touchscreen and wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are also included.

2025 Chevrolet Trailblazer
Starting Price: \$24,495
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.2

Being one of Chevy's smaller SUVs doesn't stop the Trailblazer from being a considerable value. Some exterior restyling for 2024 dramatically improved its curb appeal. Moreover, this SUV provides an abundance of standard features. For example, its standard advanced safety features include automatic forward emergency braking with pedestrian detection, lane-keeping assist, and lane departure warning. High-beam assist is also standard. We recommend

opting for the \$395 Driver Confidence Package that adds blind-spot monitoring and rear cross-traffic alert. It's a bargain.

With the most rear-seat legroom in its class and a little better than average cargo space, the Trailblazer is an impressive hauler. At 30 mpg, its combined fuel economy is above average among rivals. You can add all-wheel drive for \$2,000.

2025 Nissan Kicks
Starting Price: \$23,220
Kelley Blue Book Rating: 4.3

Nissan completely redesigned the Kicks for 2025. We're not sure we buy Nissan's explanation that the new styling is based on sneakers. Whatever the inspiration, we believe teens will love to be seen in the newest Kicks. It exudes a sleek ruggedness. We particularly like the available contrast-color roof. A mere \$55 separates the Kicks from the most affordable model on this list of new cars: the 2025 Kia K4. Yet, it comes with Nissan's signature Zero Gravity seats and its Safety Shield 360 with automatic emergency braking with pedestrian detection, rear automatic braking, blind-spot monitoring, rear cross-traffic alert, lane departure warning, and high-beam assist. Adaptive cruise control is also standard.

All-wheel drive is available on all three Kicks trim levels. According to government estimates, the redesigned Kicks returns 31 mpg in mixed city-and-highway driving.

Used Cars for Teens Under \$20,000

2017 Toyota RAV4

The Toyota RAV4 offers a range of advanced safety technology. Every trim level comes standard with the Toyota Safety Sense P (TSS-P) suite of advanced safety features, which includes lane departure warning with steering assist, adaptive cruise control, and automatic high beams. The SE model and higher will get you the most safety features. That will also get you LED headlights, fog lights, and rear cross-traffic alert. You can also look for 2018 models within this price range.

2018 Mazda CX-5

If you choose the 2018 Mazda CX-5 in the Touring trim, it comes loaded with advanced safety and driver-assist features. Additionally, it provides LED headlights, auto-leveling headlights, dual-zone automatic climate control, automatic high beams, lane departure warning, lane-keeping assist, and adaptive cruise control. It aced all the crash tests. It also offers excellent reliability.

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Hertz data show road trips will dominate fall travel

Fall travel is shaping up to be a season of the open road. New survey data from Hertz shows nearly half of U.S. adults (46%) plan to travel this fall, with road trips significantly outpacing air travel.

Nearly 60% of travelers plan to drive to their destination, compared with just 28% whose trip requires a domestic flight. Millennials are leading the trend, proving nearly four times more likely than Baby

Boomers to use a rental car as their primary mode of transportation this fall, and combined rental car usage among Gen Z and Millennials far outpaces Boomers — a sign that these generations are choosing the flexibility of a rental over rigid flight itineraries.

More key trends shaping travel plans this season

Travelers want value

without giving up experiences. Americans are balancing budgets with memory-making this fall. Nearly one-third (31%) say they are seeking budget-friendly getaways, while an identical share (31%) is willing to spend more on memorable experiences — suggesting travelers are carefully weighing value against adventure rather than defaulting to the cheapest option.

Millennials and Gen Z are driving the experience economy. Millennials are the generation most likely to say they're willing to spend more on memorable experiences (33%), followed closely by Gen Z (32%) — together prioritizing meaningful moments over simply finding the lowest price.

Gen Z is rewriting the rules of travel planning. While older travelers are

more likely to embrace loose plans and figure things out as they go, Gen Z stands out for taking a more structured approach. More than one-quarter (26%) prefer a fully planned itinerary, and 34% are planning travel earlier than in prior years, suggesting younger travelers are prioritizing preparation, value and availability.

City escapes, beach getaways and small-town charm top the list. Major cities rank as the most popular destination type (39%), followed by beach destinations (27%) and small towns (25%), highlighting travelers' desire for both energy and relaxation. Mountain destinations, national parks and rural countryside escapes also remain popular choices.

The Southeast emerges as fall's most popular region. More than one-quarter of travelers (28%) plan to visit the Southeast this fall, making it the season's most popular region. The mix of beaches, vibrant cities, warm weather and college football continues to draw travelers.

Fall foliage travel is building momentum. Hertz booking trends show early demand building in Boston,

Portland and Hartford, while destinations across New England and the Western Mountain region are experiencing double-digit year-over-year growth. The week of October 5 is currently showing the strongest demand build for fall travel.

Smart moves for fall travel

With demand building throughout the season, Hertz recommends a few simple ways travelers can make the most of fall travel:

Match your vehicle to your adventure. Whether you're leaf peeping or exploring mountain roads, choose a vehicle that makes the journey memorable. Hertz offers options like a Jeep Wrangler, Jeep Wagoneer, Ford Bronco and INEOS Grenadier, combining standout style and plenty of room for passengers and gear.

Let AI help plan your trip. Travelers looking for guidance can use the new Hertz plugin in ChatGPT to compare vehicle options, explore available services and receive personalized recommendations based on their travel plans before seamlessly booking on Hertz.com.

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