

Holiday travel may see bump over 2008

Ginny MacDonald – The Birmingham News



Motorists travel I-20/59 through Birmingham during the Thanksgiving weekend last year. AAA estimates travel to be higher this year.

The American Automobile Association is predicting that travel this Thanksgiving will be up by 1.4 percent over last year when the economy caused it to tank by 25 percent.

Clay Ingram of AAA-Alabama said the 1.4 percent increase “is not really an increase. We are just kind of recovering a little bit from last year’s drop. It is more of a correction from last year where we took a big drop because of the economy.”

Some 38.4 million Americans are expected to travel 50 miles or more over the holiday weekend.

Ingram attributed the 1.4 percent increase to optimism, as some people think the economy is starting to turn around.

But, he added, Thanksgiving and Christmas are the most insulated holidays because of our emotional connection to them.

“Last year was a big drop because people were hurting so bad,” Ingram said. The state average cost of a gallon of unleaded gas was \$2.52, according to AAA.

“It has been that for two or three weeks,” Ingram said. “My best guess is that we will stay pretty close to that throughout the rest of the year.”

But the number of people traveling by air nationwide this Thanksgiving is expected to continue a 10-year decline. Since 2000, U.S. air travel during the holiday has dropped 62 percent.

The decline is reflected in estimates from the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport this year.

Airport officials say they are expecting approximately 53,000 to 55,000 passengers between Nov. 24 and 29. Last year and in 2007, they predicted 70,999 passengers.

The air travel decline reflects more holiday travelers taking to the road.

The number of crashes on the days before and after Thanksgiving are high because more people are driving long distances, rather than flying.

A University of Alabama study has found that days preceding and following holidays are a higher risk for highway crashes involving death and injuries. A study by UA's Center for Advanced Public Safety found that Thanksgiving Day 2008 was the 13th lowest day of the year for serious crashes.

Another reason given by the study was that the day after Thanksgiving, known as Black Friday, is one of the busiest shopping days of the year. On average, Fridays have 25 percent more serious crashes than other days of the week.

"There are definitely times to be avoided, especially if bad weather is a possibility," said Allen Parrish, center director. "The basic problem is not just the volume of vehicles, it is also the mix of drivers," Parrish said. "The situation obviously gets more dangerous when there is a large concentration of people on the road who are not nearly as familiar with their routes as commuters."

Ingram said the UA study came as no surprise to him. "The day itself, people are at home. It's the trip in and the trip home that are potentially the most dangerous," Ingram said.

AIR TRAVEL

Besides security checkpoints and what sized bottle goes in what, air travelers can add catching the flu to their list of travel anxieties. Ways that travelers can prevent the spread of flu include:

Pay attention to your health before traveling; the best way to prevent the spread of the flu is to stay home if you're sick or have flu-like symptoms.

The CDC recommends you get both H1N1 and seasonal flu vaccines.

Practice good hygiene while traveling.

Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

Wash your hands regularly to help prevent the spread of germs and illness.

To expedite time spent at airport security checkpoints and being around possibly sick fellow passengers, the TSA recommends:

Ensure your government-issued ID and boarding pass are out and ready.

Wear easily removable shoes and jackets.

Take out liquids and laptops.

Remember the 3-1-1 rule for liquids, gels and aerosols at the checkpoint: 3-ounce bottles or less for all liquids, gels and aerosols; one quart-sized, clear, plastic zip-top bag; and one bag per passenger placed separately in a security bin for X-ray screening. The liquid restriction applies only to carry-on bags.

Be prepared to remove your laptop from its case and place it in separate bin for X-ray screening.

Use TSA Family Lanes if you or your family needs extra time or assistance.

Keep an eye out for suspicious activity and report all suspicious activities or items to airport security personnel.