

Gas prices down, road trips up



Walli Davis, of Egg Harbor Township, paid just \$2.39 per gallon during a stop Saturday at the Sunoco station on Tilton and Delilah roads in Egg Harbor Township.

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Tell the kids to get their things together, make sure the credit cards are handy and pack up the SUV. It's time for that great American summer adventure — the road trip.

With gas prices falling, long-distance road trips are back in vogue just in time for vacation season, climbing to nationwide levels not seen since 2008, according to the AAA Mid-Atlantic Auto Club.

As of Saturday, the national average price for regular unleaded gas was \$2.76 per gallon, 83 cents less than this time last year. In New Jersey's Atlantic-Cape May region, the average price of regular unleaded is \$2.55 per gallon, down from \$3.50 a year ago, AAA said.

AAA spokeswoman Sue Madden said dramatically lower prices at the pump should give a big boost to the summer travel season.

"It's going to be huge," Madden said. "We're seeing gas prices that we haven't seen for some time. Everyone has more money in their pocket now and they're able to spend that money on trips."

Walli Davis, of Egg Harbor Township, pulled into the local Sunoco station on Tilton and Delilah roads on Saturday and paid just \$2.39 per gallon for regular unleaded gas for her Hyundai Santa Fe.

"I come here because they're usually the cheapest," Davis said, smiling.

She said she's noticed how gas prices have been fluctuating up and down in recent months, but is happy that they now seem to be on the decline for summer. With the cost of gas going down, she plans to take more beach trips to Wildwood.

"It's wonderful," Davis said. "I'll be going to Wildwood more and spending less on gas."

Tourist-dependent resort towns such as Wildwood and Atlantic City heavily rely on the drive-in market for business. Joe Kelly, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce, noted that it has been a strong summer so far — with lower gas prices one contributing factor.

"We do see it as a good thing. I think it bolsters travel to the marketplace," Kelly said. "If it costs less to drive, it's one of those things that are positive."

In addition to lower gas prices, Atlantic City has been benefiting from pleasant summer weather and an array of nongaming attractions built recently to tempt tourists, Kelly said.

AAA predicts that gas prices should remain below \$3 per gallon for the rest of the year, mainly due to the fairly low cost of crude oil. That should continue to encourage motorists to take more road trips during the peak summer travel period between the Fourth of July and the second week of August, AAA said.

Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association, a trade group representing small businesses, including retail gas stations, said gas consumption is up nationwide for the first time in four years.

In some previous summers, prices shot past \$4 per gallon for the higher grades of gasoline. In June 2008, even regular gasoline flirted with an average of \$4 per gallon in Atlantic and Cape May counties, AAA said.

Risalvato pointed to the psychological effects of higher prices.

"If the purchase price is viewed as too high, customers are going to be grumpy," he said.

Although it is clear motorists have been enjoying lower gas prices this summer, the gas station owners have also been benefiting because they are paying significantly less to replenish their stocks.

Stations are now paying about \$17,000 for their gas inventory of 8,500 gallons, compared to about \$30,000 a year ago, Risalvato said. However, he said station owners continue to maintain a retail profit level of 10 cents per gallon, even with their inventory prices going down.

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