

Safety in Numbers

Tips on Touring with a Group

by Gary Anderson

Traveling in a group is one of the greatest pleasures that can be offered by a car club. Yet every year we read reports of serious accidents that have happened on car tours. Because of the temptations inherent in driving a high-performance car with other enthusiasts, and the dangers that come with touring on public highways, we decided to share some tips on safe driving in groups.

In compiling these tips, I drew on 25 years of touring and running tours with the Austin-Healey clubs, my experience with publisher Barry in the 5,000 mile cross-country "MINI Takes the States" tour last summer, and the excellent touring etiquette tips prepared by and distributed to the members of the Redwood Empire Mini Enthusiasts (www.redwoodempiremini.com) and the Southern California Mini Maniacs (www.scmn.org).

From these experiences, I've assembled a list of suggested tips on safe, fun club touring. The first set of tips is addressed to tour organizers and tour leaders. The second set of tips have to do with how individual drivers can help the group function effectively, and stay safe themselves.

Tips for Leaders: Plan Safety into the Tour

If the tour is organized in advance, as opposed to an informal and spontaneous drive, the tour organizers can create conditions that make safe driving easier and unsafe practices less likely by doing a careful job of tour planning.

Plan the route ahead of time – If more than three or four cars are going to be traveling together, then advance planning is an important aspect of a safe, fun tour. Work out the route, figuring in both travel time at average highway speeds, and time for rest and meal stops while still reaching destinations on time. We heard of one tour a few years ago that planned to visit all of northern California's light houses, but because the organizers didn't calculate reasonable travel times, every lighthouse was closed by the time they arrived at it.

Run route in advance to check instructions – Don't depend on any automatic mapping system or computerized route instruction system. They have bad habits of identifying turns and name changes when there aren't any, and not identifying critical turns. If at all possible, run the route in advance at least once.

Try having someone who is unfamiliar with the route give the driver directions from the written route instructions. If the instructions aren't clear, or complete, then rewrite them to reflect the actual conditions. Also keep in mind that last-minute road closures and construction projects can affect travel plans, so if possible drive the route again a few days before the planned outing.

Set Reasonable Schedules – Keep in mind two facts when you plan the timing of the tour: First, a group travels at an average rate less than the posted speed limit when on the highway, so don't figure that you'll be able to cover

sixty miles in an hour.

Second, it takes at least half an hour to get off and back on the road whenever the group stops, plus whatever time it takes a large group to get served at a restaurant or get all of the group through a one-person restroom at a small service station.

Give everyone route maps and instructions – Make sure each car has a map and instructions for the route. Relying on the cars to follow one another is a sure way to leave lost travelers scattered across the countryside because groups will inevitably get separated. Encourage all participants to have a general map of the area or a nav system in their car so that if they do get separated from the group, they will be able to locate themselves and find their way to the next check point.

Announce the next stopping point – Before taking off on each leg of the tour, announce to the group exactly where the group will stop next. That way, each member of the group can travel at their own pace, knowing when and where everyone will be regrouping. Having check points every sixty miles or so where the group will stop and relax paces the tour, allows for comfort breaks, and provides opportunities for group camaraderie that is as important as the driving on a club tour.

Lead at a safe rate of speed – A big mistake that we've often seen novice group leaders make is to assume that the leader has to set a high rate of speed in order to stay ahead



of the group. On the contrary, the leader will actually be driving at the slowest speed in the group most of the time so that the group can keep up. A good practice is for the tour leader to drive the posted speed limit, while keeping as much of the group as possible in sight in his or her mirror.

Regroup when necessary – Especially during the first few miles from each departure point, it may be necessary to get through urban areas with traffic lights and multiple turns.

In these cases, it's a good idea to pull off where there's adequate space and wait on the side of the road for the group to catch up. That way, the leader can make sure that no one has problems, and the group is together when the group gets to the open road.

Have a "back door" – That's truck lingo for the vehicle at the back of the line; a knowledgeable tour leader at the rear of the group and equipped with a walkie-talkie can let the front leader know when the group has made it through any complicated traverses, and tell the leader if problems arise.

Have a plan to handle breakdowns – Every club we've ever toured with was like the Marines: they never leave a member behind. However, it isn't necessary, and often can be dangerous, to have an entire group pull over to the side and wait while repairs are made or assistance provided to a car in trouble. Instead, decide ahead of time who will stay behind with the stranded motorist – such as one of the experienced mechanics or one or two other cars with radios and cell phones – so the rest of the group can get back on the road and stay on schedule.

Driving Tips for Participants

Each individual participant has a role to play in helping the entire group have a safe and fun tour. Here are some tips to pass on at each drivers' meeting.

Check out your car ahead of time – Before leaving on the tour, make sure your car is in good running order. Especially if you haven't driven it for awhile, check fluid levels, tire pressures, lug bolts and simple maintenance items, the take it out for a drive a day or two before the tour. We've noticed that most breakdowns occur in the first few hours of a tour, and generally are due to simple things that could have been caught and fixed ahead of time if the participant had just taken the car out for a shakedown drive instead of waiting until the morning of the tour to pull the car out of the garage.

Carry a walkie-talkie – When I first started touring, the only way to stay in touch was by CB radio, but now hand-held walkie-talkies, with brands like Motorola or Cobra and ranges of five to ten miles, can be purchased for less than \$50. Every participant in the tour should have one.

Many clubs we've traveled with bring some loaners for first-timers, but every participant should have one. The leader's co-driver can then notify everyone at once of an upcoming turn or traffic ahead on narrow winding roads, the Back Door can radio when the group is ready to roll, and individuals with trouble can tell everyone immediately. Cell phones are all well and good, but frequently there isn't reliable service on the best-driving backroads.

Be on time at all times – There's nothing worse than getting a late start, and being behind schedule from the very beginning because one car was late in arriving at the starting point, had to stop for gas, or wasn't ready to leave at the agreed departure time. All participants should be know and stick to the schedule, and not expect the group to wait for them if they're delayed.

Keep the car behind in sight – This may be the most important rule to follow to assure that no one gets lost and everyone travels safely. The following car should be the responsibility of the car ahead. If each driver keeps the car behind them in their rear view mirror at all times, slowing down when necessary to allow the following car to catch up, the group will always stay together, no one will get lost, and no one will be left stranded.

Don't turn until the car behind can see you turn – An important corollary of the previous tip is to make sure the car behind can see you make your turn before you turn. Too often, we've been on tours where drivers would turn first and then wait out of sight down the road for the rest of the group to catch up. Instead, when the instructions call for a turn, slow down, and if necessary wait on the side until the car behind can see you make the turn. They may not be reading their instructions and there's nothing worse than to find oneself suddenly alone at an intersection with no idea where the cars ahead have gone.

Don't try to drive in a conga line – Perhaps the most unsafe practice in touring is to try to keep every one of the cars together, nose to tail, as if this were a conga line at a party. This practice is especially unsafe in main highway traffic. It leads inevitably to participants darting in and out of traffic, trying to keep up, and frustrates civilian drivers who often will take the line of hobby cars as a challenge and try to break it up.

Instead, keep a safe distance behind the car in front, and accept the fact that civilian cars will get in between tour participants. If you're driving at a speed where you can see the car behind you, and everyone knows where the next stopping point is, each driver can pick a comfortable pace, not worry about other cars on the road, and know that the tour cars will regroup soon.

Stay out of the way of larger vehicles – Our cars are very small and low relative to most of what's out there on the road and even private vehicles like sport-utes, not to mention 18-wheelers, are large and have very large blind spots. In addition these larger vehicles are hard to stop, and even harder to turn in emergencies.

The best practice is to avoid being anywhere near them if at all possible, and when passing do it quickly. If you should find a bigger vehicle tight on your bumper, then get out of their way. Better that than becoming roadkill if you have to stop suddenly.

One of my favorite driving songs has a chorus that carols: "They're all jerks, when you're out there on the road. Drive like everyone else is drunk or on the phone, and you'll be sure to make it home."

Focus on your driving – Our routes are chosen for their scenic beauty as well as driving fun, and there's an almost mystic satisfaction in seeing many cars just like ours ahead and in the rear view mirror. Just be careful and don't get distracted. It's the co-driver's responsibility to watch the scenery; the person behind the wheel needs to focus primarily on driving.

Obey the laws and follow safe driving practices – It should go without saying that every driver should drive safely – which means never crossing a double-yellow line to pass or exceeding safe speed limits, making a full stop at stop signs, signalling for turns, keeping a safe distance between cars and so forth – but sometimes in the fun of touring with a group, these laws and practices can be forgotten. Don't do that; for everyone's sake, remember to put safety first, take care of one another, and have fun out there. MC²

