

Travel expected high for Thanksgiving

By Michael Stone

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At 10:52 a.m. today, Melinda Carson will join the ranks of Americans heading toward distant family for Thanksgiving as she departs from Chattanooga Metropolitan Airport.

From there, the 68-year-old Flintstone, Ga., resident said she will go to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, then to Providence, R.I., where her son's family lives.

"Families like to get together at Christmastime, but we prefer Thanksgiving because [Christmas] is so hectic," she explained. "But this is the first time I've gone for Thanksgiving in Providence."

Carson jokingly shrugged off the pat-down procedures and full-body scanners at airport security checkpoints that have sent the nation into a frenzy.

"I said, 'Well, I'll just make sure I wear new underwear so it looks nice on the screen,'" she said with a laugh.

Carson is one of the 42.2 million U.S. citizens that AAA expects to be traveling at least 50 miles from home for 2010's Turkey Day season, defined as Wednesday through Sunday. This year's prediction is up 11.4 percent from 2009's 37.9 million.

"What we're seeing is pent-up demand from the past couple of years with a very unstable economy," said AAA spokeswoman Jessica Brady. "Overall, I just think more people have missed out and don't want to miss out for another year."

An overwhelming percentage of travelers -- 94 percent -- are expected by the AAA to travel by car. And part of the preparation for car travel, AAA says, is getting vehicles in tip-top shape for the long hauls.

Frank Holcomb, manager of the Goodyear Auto Service Center on state Highway 153, said he's had a "real surge of business" in the days leading up to Thanksgiving. That business is mostly from routine repairs, he said, including getting a fresh set of tires.

"People know when they need tires, so they're just biting that bullet and getting it done," he said.

And, with some drivers taking those new tires for a spin on Tennessee roads, the Tennessee Highway Patrol is going to make sure they're doing so in a safe manner, said THP spokeswoman Dalya Qualls.

"Thanksgiving is one of the busiest holidays trafficwise," she said, "so THP is going to be out trying to get people to wear their seat belts [and] make sure they're following the rules of the road."

During 2009's Thanksgiving holiday, there were 10 people killed in eight crashes on Tennessee's roads, according to the THP. There also were 10 deaths in 2008 and 13 in 2007, figures show.

Seat belt usage, the Tennessee Highway Patrol says, is crucial in preventing some of these deaths, because more than 56 percent of people killed in car wrecks this year weren't wearing their seat belts.

From 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. today on Interstate 40, which spans the state from east to west, there will be a state trooper assigned to every 10-mile stretch of both the eastbound and westbound lanes, Qualls said.

As for traveling by air, Chattanooga airport spokeswoman Christina Siebold said passengers need to arrive at least 90 minutes early as "we do anticipate another busy holiday travel season."

She said passengers shouldn't be wary of full-body scanners at Chattanooga's airport simply because it doesn't have any; instead the airport has magnetometers that detect metal objects.

"People are declining to go through the full-body scanners for specific reasons that aren't the same with a magnetometer," she said.

If passengers decline to go through the devices or have implanted metal objects, they will be patted down, Siebold said.

"They do some [pat-downs], but it's literally a handful a day -- there might be five out of 5,000 [passengers]," she said.

AAA expects the average price of unleaded gas to stay between \$2.85 and \$2.95 per gallon for the Thanksgiving holiday. Tennessee's average was about \$2.70 per gallon on Tuesday, AAA said.

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