



An immodest proposal about fuel efficiency

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This is a guest post by [Kiashu](#), advocating an alternative to hypermiling.

Recently there have been a few articles on [hypermiling](#) - driving your car to make the most efficient use of fuel. They mention taking junk out of your car so it has less weight in it, not hitting the accelerator hard, and so on. What's remarkable is that *none* of these articles suggested, "don't drive". Not even "don't drive *so much*." So that is my immodest proposal: "Don't drive, or at least not so much." I realise that this is insane radicalism, but there you go.

"But I *need* to drive! I have no options!"

"Perhaps. But do you need to drive *so much*? Is *every kilometre* you drive essential?"

As [noted by the World Health Organisation](#) [1Mb pdf],

More than 30% of trips made in cars in Europe cover distances of less than 3 km and 50% less than 5 km. These distances can be covered within 15–20 minutes by bicycle or within 30–50 minutes by brisk walking.

The short journeys use up a disproportionate amount of fuel, so even if your six a week 5km trips to the shops are just $6 \times 5\text{km} = 30\text{km}$ of your weekly 200km of driving, they'll make up more than $30\text{km}/200\text{km} = 15\%$ of your fuel use. This is because engines reach their peak efficiency after fifteen minutes or more of driving, and short journeys involve more stopping - your engine burning fuel for you to stay still is as inefficient as you can get.

Eliminating these short trips in your car can save you a lot of fuel, as well as improve your health. A little while ago a friend was explaining to me how he drove 1.5km to the train station every day.

"If I walk, I get sweaty, I can't be sweaty in the office."

"Take off your tie! Put it on at work. And anyway, if you get sweaty with a 15 minute walk, then you *need* to walk more."

"No, I'm okay. I just need to get something more fuel-efficient, perhaps a motorbike."

The next week he told he'd been to the doctor. "He says I need to lose weight and walk more."

This, I think, a fairly common thing. Your arse widens to fit into the seat you sit in all day.

But as well as short trips, at least two-thirds of trips are discretionary. You can do without them. The following is the data of purpose of journey by car from 1992, the most recent year available for such data for Australia as a whole. [[source, ABS](#)]

- Shopping, 25.7% of all trips, 13 minutes average trip time
- Work, 22%, 31'

- Social activities, 18.7%, 20'
- Voluntary & community activities, 9.3%, 18'
- Active leisure, 7.4%, 32'
- Child care, 9%, 13'
- Domestic activities, 5.4%, 16'
- Education, 2%, 22'
- Personal care, 0.5%, 16'
- Passive leisure, 0.1%, 22'

We have here figures for the percentage of all trips taken for that purpose. The average time spent driving each day is 1hr27'. The average time per trip doesn't add up to this 87' because not every trip is done every day; but when the trip is taken, that's the average time of it.

Only about a third of trips (work, child care, and possibly education) are non-discretionary and more or less unavoidable, assuming zero public transport and not able to bike, walk, etc. The rest can be set aside ("passive leisure", driving just for fun) or rearranged for efficiency - shopping from distant shops can be done weekly all in one go, etc.

Next to *how much* you use the car it's irrelevant whether you keep an extra spare tyre in the back, hit the accelerator hard or not, and so on. It just doesn't matter. The most effective way to save fuel is not to drive.

I suggest a couple of experiments. Keep a logbook in your car, and over a month note each trip, start time, end time, odometer at start and finish, and the purpose of each trip - like in the table above. After that month sit down and look over your logbook. Figure out how many of your trips were *discretionary* - driving 1km to the shops, going for a Sunday drive, etc - and how many *avoidable* - you went to the shops for the fourth time this week, you could have taken the bus but got up late so had to drive to get there on time, that sort of thing. Now divide those trips into your monthly fuel bill. So you get a figure for how much you're spending on trips you didn't have to take.

This expense is only going to get greater. [Peak fossil fuels](#) is simply that over time demand for fossil fuels goes up while their supply goes down, so naturally the price leaps up. And any rational response to climate change means that the price of polluting will go up. So you couldn't be bothered walking to the shops, it was late and you had a long day. That trip may look fine at \$1.50/litre fuel, but how about at \$3/lt? \$10/lt? That's \$40 a gallon, by the way. If you say that it's still worth it, then next time you go to the pump, set aside that extra money you're willing to spend. Do that a few times, and see if you can really do without that extra cash and not spend it on something else. If so, I suggest the Red Cross. If not - well then it's time to stop those unnecessary trips.

Now the second experiment. For just one week don't use your car *at all*. Just imagine that it's broken and in the workshop. What do you do? Give up on life, quit your job, stay at home? Nope - you *find a way to cope*. After the week, imagine that you've just learned to fix it will cost more than you can afford at the moment - you won't have the money for another three weeks. Now what? Well, another three weeks go by... are you dead yet? Or did you find a way to cope?

So, here's my fuel-saving tips, my immodest proposal.

1. Get rid of your car.
2. Or at least, stop trips you could do some other way.

Radical ideas, I know. Probably communist or Islamofascist or something. But with peak fossil

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fuels and climate change, we're facing a radically new world whatever we do. We simply won't be able to keep on truckin'. May as well get used to it.

I think it's better to do by choice what is going to be forced on you one day anyway. It's better for me to do a light walk which is comfortable every day in my thirties than to not walk, have a heart attack at 58, open heart surgery, and then do a light walk which is very painful. It's better to live on less money than I earn (rather than spending it all or getting into debt) because one day I may earn less, and then I'll be used to it, or have savings to tide me over. It's better to grow a few pots of fruit and vegies now so that if food is really expensive later I can just grow more then, than it is to grow nothing now and have to learn it all very quickly later. Sharon Astyk [recently noted](#) that two-thirds of Americans "die in debt, in pain and alone." We should be able to do better than this, and a lot of it depends on how we choose to live our lives.

I was once taught the Seven P's: proper preparation and planning prevents piss-poor performance. We don't all have to rush out and live on our own self-sufficient homesteads, or form lobby groups to hassle the government, or anything like that. But as Edison said, [we live like squatters, not as if we owned the property](#). We have to stop that. Get rid of your car, it's an albatross around your neck.

I know, I know. "I can't, I'm the exception, lots of people can do it, but I can't, it's impossible, I'm helpless, poor me." I know, I know. Just try the two experiments I suggested. Many things seem impossible, then we try them and they turn out to be possible - not easy, but possible.

Cross-posted from [GWAG](#).



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