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Sample Chapter

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Travel

From whitewater rafting to rappelling to spelunking, Scouts do some potentially dangerous things. The most dangerous of all, however, is simply driving to camp. According to the Boy Scouts of America, the leading cause of deaths and injuries in Scouting is motor vehicle accidents. (The second highest is aquatic activities.)

Some traffic accidents are unavoidable, of course, but most can be prevented. In this chapter, I'll discuss some ways that you can help ensure that your troop gets to camp and back safely. I'll also discuss some ways to make travel less stressful and more productive.

Follow the rules of the road

The best way to ensure safe travels is to follow the rules of the road. That means both state and local laws (e.g., speed limits and seat-belt laws) and the rules laid out in the *Guide to Safe Scouting*, which I discuss in the chapter on safety. The guide includes a whole chapter on transportation by a variety of means, including cars and trucks, boats and buses, trains and planes. In addition, its chapter on youth protection and adult leadership includes other information related to trips.

In some cases, you may find discrepancies between the *Guide to Safe Scouting* and local laws. For example, the guide prohibits riding in the back of pickup trucks, although some states still allow the practice. In cases like this, you should *always* follow the stricter policy.

Most of the policies in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* are commonsensical, but you may find a few surprising (and contrary to the way your troop operates). A few examples: You may drive no more than ten hours per day (interrupted by frequent stretch breaks), and you should only drive that long if you

have multiple drivers. All driving is to be done during daylight hours, except in the case of short trips. And convoying is prohibited, as I'll discuss later in this chapter.

Children and air bags

One of the fundamental rules of safe travel is that everyone be in a seatbelt, preferably the familiar lap/shoulder belts found in newer cars. Airbags also greatly increase your chances of surviving an accident. Keep in mind, however, that children younger than 12 years of age—in other words, most new Scouts—should only ride in the backseat if an airbag is present.

Who can drive?

One of the first rules outlined in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* is driver qualifications. In virtually all cases, drivers must be at least 18 years old and have a valid driver's license that hasn't been suspended or revoked. (You must also have a tour leader who's at least 21 years of age.)

Licensed drivers who are 16 or 17 years old may drive under very limited conditions:

- ✦ The trip is to a Venturing activity or an area, regional, or national Boy Scout event (e.g., the National Order of the Arrow Conference).
- ✦ The driver has at least six month's experience as a fully licensed driver—not including time with a learner's permit.
- ✦ The driver has no record of accidents or moving violations.
- ✦ You've obtained parental permission from both the driver and riders.

Each vehicle used on a Scout outing must be covered by automobile liability insurance with limits that at least meet the requirements of the state where it's licensed. The BSA recommends coverage limits of at least \$50,000/\$100,000/\$50,000 (or a combined \$100,000 single limit coverage). Vehicles that can carry 10 or more passengers—even if they're half full—must have limits of \$100,000/\$500,000/\$100,000 (or \$500,000 combined).

Filing tour permits

To take a Scout trip, you must complete a tour permit application. Trips of under 500 miles one way require a local tour permit, approved by your local council. Longer trips or trips out of the country require a national tour per-

mit, approved by your local council *and* the regional service center. You should allow two weeks for local permits (although many councils work much quicker) and 30 days for national permits.

To many people, the hardest part of completing a tour permit is filling out the driver information on the back. For each driver, you must list his or her name; vehicle make, model, and year; passenger capacity (i.e., number of seatbelts); driver's license number; and liability coverage limits.

Instead of filling out this information every time you complete a tour permit application, you can take an easy shortcut—assuming your council allows it. Gather the required information on *every* potential driver in your troop and assemble it in a spreadsheet that mimics the table on the tour permit application. Then, when it's time to go on a trip, staple this master list to the application, circling those drivers who will be participating in the trip in question.

You'll still need to update your drivers' list from time to time—as new leaders join or old leaders change cars—but you won't have to gather the same information over and over.

If you have TroopMaster (which I discuss in the chapter on troop administration), be sure to check out the program's Tour Permit Assistance report. This report makes tour permits easy—even doing the math on how many seatbelts you have.

Travel by buses and large vans

During my first stint as an assistant Scoutmaster back in the 1980s, our troop had its own bus, a '60s-era former school bus complete with overhead racks, bays underneath, and a custom-built equipment cage where the rear seats used to be. Painted in true Scouting colors—khaki at the top and olive drab at the bottom with a red stripe down the middle—that old bus took us on many adventures across the Southeast. Unfortunately, more than one of these adventures involved finding a bus mechanic far from home on a Saturday night or Sunday morning.

Buses and large-capacity vans can be a great option for Scout travel. Using them reduces the number of drivers you need and keeps your Scouts together. At the same time, you need to consider several important issues.

Keep a list of all potential drivers in a spreadsheet or in TroopMaster. You'll save lots of time when you complete your tour permit applications.

The BSA requires higher liability limits on vehicles capable of carrying 10 or more passengers, as described earlier in this chapter. If a bus or van carries more than 15 passengers including the driver (the limit is 10 in California), the driver must have a valid commercial driver's license, or CDL. Your state may have other laws governing large vehicles, so be sure to check with local officials before operating a bus or large van.

You don't need a CDL to drive a 15-passenger van in most jurisdictions, but those vans can create potential safety issues. There have been numerous reports over the years about the instability of these vehicles, as I'll discuss in the next section.

Beyond the issues of safety, licensing, and insurance, you need to think about operating costs—especially where the troop or chartered organization owns the vehicle. Those costs include gas, maintenance, repairs, and insurance, all of which must be included in the troop's or chartered organization's budget. My best advice: Make friends with a mechanic!

Safety and the 15-passenger van

The 15-passenger van is an odd duck. Smaller than a bus, it usually doesn't require a driver with a commercial driver's license or any special training. Larger than a passenger car, it handles differently and can pose a greater rollover risk, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In fact, NHTSA regularly issues special advisories on the use of such vans.

A 15-passenger van's rollover risk stems from its high center of gravity, especially when you carry 10 or more passengers or place luggage on the roof. (NHTSA says a van is three times more likely to roll over with 10 or more passengers than with 5 or less.) A high center of gravity reduces resistance to rollover and changes how the van handles. Add driver inexperience, and you've got a recipe for disaster.

According to NHTSA, most rollover crashes occur when:

- ❖ The van goes off a rural road (especially in a curve).
- ❖ The driver is fatigued or driving too fast for conditions.
- ❖ The driver overcorrects the steering as a panic reaction to an emergency or to a wheel dropping off the pavement.

Most deaths (80 percent) occur when passengers aren't using seatbelts. Of course, that's something that should never happen on a Scout outing.

NHTSA offers these tips for preventing rollover crashes:

- ✦ Don't carry 10 or more passengers—and have everyone sit in front of the rear axle.
- ✦ Only use drivers who have experience with 15-passenger vans.
- ✦ Avoid conditions that can lead to a loss of control, ranging from icy roads to sleepy drivers.
- ✦ Drive cautiously on rural roads.
- ✦ Know what to do if your wheels drop off the pavement.
- ✦ Properly maintain your tires.

That first recommendation seems to defeat the purpose of using large-capacity vans. One idea is to remove the back seat or two and use that space for equipment. This could help lower the center of gravity and eliminate the need for a separate vehicle to haul gear.

Use copilots to reduce driver distractions

“Are we there yet?” “I have to go to the bathroom.” “Johnny’s hitting me.” How many times have you heard things like that on Scout outings? Anyone who’s driven on a Scout trip knows that Scouts can drive you to distraction.

One way to handle distractions is to put a “copilot”—either an older Scout or an adult—in every vehicle. The copilot should handle passenger discipline, map reading, and communication with the other vehicles, allowing the driver to focus on the road.

Convoying can create problems

If you’ve ever tried to follow someone to an unfamiliar destination across town after dark, you can easily imagine how nerve-wracking it would be to follow someone across the state or across the country.

But that’s what many troops do on long trips. They travel in a convoy with only the leader knowing the way and the other drivers hoping they can keep up.

Even if everyone does keep up, convoys can be dangerous. Besides making drivers nervous, they encourage people to follow too closely, which can cause accidents and impede the flow of traffic. Furthermore, you’re sometimes only a missed traffic light away from becoming separated.

Studies show that 15-passenger vans are three times more likely to roll over when they're full. You should limit your number of passengers, have everyone sit toward the front, and keep luggage off the roof.

A better method for traveling is to hand out maps and directions to all drivers and let them proceed at their own pace. Arrange for rendezvous points every two hours or so, picking rest areas or highway exits where the drivers can gas up and the Scouts can hit the restroom or buy snacks.

Keeping in touch on the road

Once upon a time, the only way to keep in touch on the road was with citizens-band radios, which can be expensive, require external antennas, and use busy radio frequencies. In recent years, however, two new technologies have expanded the range of communications options. The first is the ubiquitous cell phone; the second, the less-familiar Family Radio Service, or FRS.

Cell phones

These days it seems that everybody has a cell phone, so you might think cell phones would be a perfect way to communicate between cars. They are useful, but you have to keep in mind the potential expense of long-distance and roaming charges, as well as the fact that Scouts tend to go places where there aren't many cell-phone towers. Also, be sure to exchange cell-phone numbers before you hit the road!

Family Radio Service radios

Introduced in 1996, FRS is a cousin of CB radio (actually one of six Citizens Band Radio Services), offering reliable two-way communications for families, friends, organizations, and businesses. FRS radios are half-watt handheld units that offer up to 14 channels on a "take-turns" basis. Manufacturers promise a range of up to two miles, but you'll probably find that your effective maximum range is closer to a mile. You don't have to have a license to use FRS; you just have to have the radios. FRS radios don't cost anything to operate, and they can come in quite handy when you get to camp.

Dozens of companies now make FRS radios, including such familiar names as Motorola, Kenwood, Radio Shack, and Uniden. Since the radios all use the same channels, they are generally compatible with each other.

FRS radio prices range from \$15 to \$200, depending on how many bells and whistles you want. There are three features you should consider as you

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shop: durability, the number of channels each model supports, and the type of batteries each uses. I also recommend picking a model with some sort of lock button that prevents you from accidentally changing channels or turning the unit off.

Keeping in touch with the folks at home

Although we don't like to think about it, emergencies can happen at home while we're on Scout outings. Whenever you travel, you should make sure that people at home can reach you if needed. Give each parent a list of leaders' cell phone numbers (or the number at the campground), or designate a single point of contact at home whom parents can call in the event of an emergency.

There will be many times, of course, when you won't be near a phone or have cell-phone coverage. In those cases, be sure to check in with someone back home when you get back to civilization.

You should also have someone at home who knows your trip plan and can notify the authorities if you are late. According to the BSA's Trek Safely guidelines, your trip plan should include your time of departure, any overnight stops, the time of expected return, the trailhead where vehicles will be parked, and the itinerary and alternate itinerary. Contact phone numbers at campgrounds or ranger stations should also be included.

Playing musical chairs to break down cliques

Most troops travel in personal cars, which is probably the cheapest and safest way to travel. One downside to this method of travel is that it can create or strengthen cliques—especially on long trips. If you give boys a choice, they'll naturally jump in a car with their buddies or with other Scouts their age. And when you get to your destination, they'll continue those associations, consciously or unconsciously excluding other Scouts.

There's an easy way to break down the barriers between cliques—and to save the sanity of your drivers. Let's say you're using two drivers: Mr. Smith, who can carry three Scouts in his car, and Ms. Jones, who can carry six in her minivan. Write *Smith* on three blank index cards and *Jones* on six.

When you start the trip, let each Scout draw a card at random; the card he draws determines where he rides. Then, each time you stop for gas or a bathroom break, reshuffle the cards and have everyone draw again. This technique ensures that you arrive at your destination not just at the same time but as a group.

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Making productive use of travel time

There's nothing wrong with letting your Scouts veg out, listen to music, or even watch movies in the backseat during troop travels. But there's also nothing wrong with making productive use of your time on the road. With a little forethought, you can turn wasted time into program time.

When you're traveling in cars, consider using the time for one-on-one teaching. For example, I can't think of a better time to teach splicing, a task that can be frustrating and time consuming.

If you have a large-capacity van or a bus, you have the opportunity to do things that involve larger groups. Patrols could sit in groups and work on skits for a campfire, or you could use the time to teach a new Scout song.

You might also consider designating certain vehicles for Scouts who need to do homework. Yes, it seems strange that anyone would want to do homework on a campout, but oftentimes Scouts have no choice—especially on trips where you don't return until late on a Sunday.

Special rules for motels

Although Scouting is all about outing, there are times when it's preferable to stay in motels while you're on the road. For example, I can't imagine a time I'd want to camp less than on the way home from Philmont.

Motels can create special challenges and temptations that you need to be ready for. First, boys seem to love to play with the phones in their rooms, calling each other (or other guests) at all hours. Check with the motel manager to see if the phones can be disabled in the rooms you're using.

While you're at the front desk, see if you can get the cable TV turned off as well. During our troop's stay at one motel, one of our leaders found out—thanks to a concerned guest—that a hard-core porn movie was showing on channel 69. Evidently, the signal was bleeding over from a pay-per-view channel. (Even if porn movies aren't showing where you stay, many motels offer free premium channels like HBO, which routinely show R-rated movies and other programs inappropriate in a Scouting environment.)

In our case, the motel staff wasn't able to help, so the leader went into each room while the boys were swimming and unplugged the cable. One

When staying in a motel, be sure to let the desk clerk know which room the adult leaders are in. That allows them to quickly contact you if there's a problem or a complaint.



group later figured out how to reconnect it, but they were so interested in watching “Saturday Night Live” that they never found the movie.

Besides getting in trouble in the rooms, boys sometimes get in trouble outside of them. You’ve undoubtedly heard the old idea about sticking a piece of tape across a closed door so you can tell when it’s been opened. That works well unless someone brings along extra tape. For even more security, use colored tape or make a chalk mark on the back of the tape before sticking it on the door.

It’s a good idea in motels to strategically position the adults in rooms between the Scouts’ rooms. Be sure to keep a list of all the room assignments, and tell the people at the front desk which rooms the adults are staying in. The Scouts should also know where at least one adult is staying, in case of nocturnal emergencies, but you might consider keeping the location of other adults confidential.

Resources

Traffic laws, like speed limits, vary from state to state. If you aren’t sure about the laws for your area, check with your nearest drivers-license bureau for more information. Here are some other useful resources related to travel:

- ♣ *Guide to Safe Scouting*: BSA #34416C, <http://www.scouting.org/pubs/gss/toc.html> 
- ♣ NHTSA information on 15-passenger vans: <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/hot/15passvans/index.htm>
- ♣ Family Radio Service links: <http://www.gmrsweb.com/frslinks.html> 
- ♣ Family Radio Service FAQs: <http://www.provide.net/~prsg/frs-faq.htm>

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