

Preparing for a Road Trip

Trip preparation consists of packing the things you may need to repair the car, checking the car before you go, and checking the car daily during your trip.

The newest MGA on the road today is over 40 years old and the latest MGB is over 20. That's old for a car. I've heard the argument that if you've restored the car, it should be as good as new, but even if you've just rebuilt the entire car, there are some spares that you should have along. Remember that our cars earned their infamous reputation for reliability by not working so well when they were new. A new generator is better than an old one, true, but even the new one is still the ancient design that wasn't so great back in the Fifties.

What to Check Before You Go

This list may seem lengthy, but it contains items that should be checked annually, as well as some one-offs. If you've been to the Lube & Tune tech sessions and then done that work on your car, you have a lot of this completed already.

Tune-up

Check the plugs, cap, rotor, points and condenser, and replace them if they're due
Replace the plug wires if needed
Check the timing
Check that the vacuum advance is still hooked up and working
Check that the mechanical advance is working

Engine

Adjust the valves if due
Check the fuel lines for cracks and leaks

Cooling system

Check the coolant level (Use a 50-50 mix.)
Check the pressure cap's seal (Even 4 psi helps.)
Check the hoses (heater hoses too) for cracks and softness

Lube

Engine oil & filter change
Oil the generator & the distributor
Check the carb oil levels
Chassis lube
Check the transmission, steering rack & rear axle levels and change if due (I use 90W in my transmission – it seems to help on long runs.)
Repack the wheel bearings if due

Brakes & Clutch

Check the front linings (You should check the rears too, but mine take forever to wear.)
Check the fluid level in the master cylinder(s)
Look for leaks along the lines (No kidding – you can go a long time with a small leak.)
Check the three brake hoses and the clutch hose for swelling, cracks and softness

Miscellaneous Items

Battery electrolyte levels
Battery terminals, cables, and clamps
Fan belt tension and condition
Shock absorber fluid levels (Even the rears.)
Look for broken spokes (Road wheels, not the steering wheel.)
Check tire pressures (Remember the spare!)
Fuel pump electrical and piping connections (And the points for the very ambitious.)
Check the exhaust system for leaks and secure mounting
Check that the front suspension hardware is secure and that the A-arm bushings are OK

Very Miscellaneous Items

Check the nuts on the rear axle U-bolts (The car will rear steer if they're loose.)

Make sure that the choke and throttle cables aren't frayed (Frayed ones get stuck in the housings and hold the throttle open.)

Clean the fuse contacts in the fusebox (Corrosion here can disable the entire electrical system.)

Check the front & rear shock absorber mountings, and the rear shock links (Loose ones cause funny clunks that you can never find.)

Lube the driveshaft U-joints, if you haven't already, and check for wear (You can't tell they're bad at freeway speeds until it's too late.)

Look for leaks at the hose between the engine and oil gauge pipe (You'll see a mist near the hose if it's going away.)

Make sure that the wipers work for *at least* five minutes

You may notice some omissions. I've given up checking the rear brake linings on my car. I've always had to change them because they became oil-soaked before they wore out. (But since they never wear out, they never need to be adjusted!) I also don't bother to check the carbs' mixture and balance – since they never screw up, I never mess with them. Also, consider changing a fluid where I suggested just checking its level, if you haven't done so in awhile. (Two years for coolant, or four for the gearbox and axle, for example, on a seldomly-driven car.)

What to Check Daily on the Road

Check these things while the tires & engine are cold, before you start the car in the morning.

Engine oil level (Actually, I'll do this at every gas stop – I worry a lot.)

Coolant level

Brake fluid level

Fan pulley/water pump (Wiggle test)

Tire pressures

A general check for loose or leaking items, both under the hood and under the car

What to Bring

Some people bring nothing but a credit card. Others bring the most amazing collections of spares. The following items start with the basics and go to the more complete. Choose what suits your car and abilities. If you're worried about your generator, for example, bring a spare. If you replaced the generator six months ago, don't worry about it.

The Manual

The first and most important thing to bring is a shop manual. Even if you never work on your car yourself and don't know which end of a screwdriver to hit with a hammer, bring the book. That way, if something goes wrong, you can at least get the car towed to a shop and hand the mechanic the book so he'll know how to work on your car. If you only bring one thing, *bring a shop manual*.

Simple Things

If you're more mechanically inclined, you can bring along some simple items. A set of those small parts that can stop the car but can be easily changed is handy to have along. Few parts to fit our old cars will be available outside of large metropolitan areas, so bring fuses, ignition parts (points, condenser, cap, rotor), fuel pump points, radiator hoses & clamps, a fan belt, a thermostat & gasket, and a roll of electrical tape.

Also bring some simple tools to install those parts. A beginning list is a socket set, a medium screwdriver, a #2 Phillips screwdriver (plus "stubby" versions of each), a set of wrenches, a pair of locking pliers, a feeler gauge (for gapping the points & plugs), a pocket knife, and a tire pressure gauge. Check that your jack is in the car and that it works, and that you have the lug wrench or knockoff hammer too. A tube of hand cleaner, some rags, and an assortment of zip ties will also be useful. The tools can be discount store items since they're for emergency use, so you don't have to spend a lot of money for them.

Weird Things

If you're more ambitious (or a worrywart), bring more parts. You can take larger components like a generator, distributor, water pump, fuel pump, regulator, and ignition coil if you're unsure of the ones in the car and if you have spares. Smaller items, such as sparkplugs, generator brushes, electrical crimp connections and wire, carb kits, cotter pins, and hydraulic kits (or even complete cylinders) can also be brought along. Some of these items automatically require that you bring others, such as the appropriate gaskets and/or sealers and hydraulic fluid. (Ever try to find DOT 4 fluid in the middle of nowhere?)

This in turn means more tools. You'll need whatever it takes to remove and replace whatever you're bringing from the list above, such as a terminal crimping tool, an adjustable wrench, gasket material or sealer, and a one-person brake bleeder.

Stowing It All

Make a pile of all the small items that you plan on taking. We'll define small as the size of an ignition coil or less. Then go purchase a plastic storage container slightly larger than the pile. Get a container with a lid that snaps on securely and that will fit in the trunk (or wherever) of your car, and put the piled items in it. Other things, like hoses and belts, can be nestled in with or under your spare tire. The larger items can be fit in wherever there's room. Packing the car before the trip is part of the fun, right?

My own packing list is somewhat longer (it's on the last page), and is based on my past experiences.

Notes

That's it. It seems like a lot of stuff to do and bring, but you'll need to do those things sooner or later, so why not before the trip? Most of the parts can fit under the spare (you're not going to need them anyway, right?), and the tools can be rolled up into a towel and stuffed in the bottom edge of the trunk where they're out of the way and can be reached without having to unpack.

My first rule for tools is that nothing first-rate goes in the car. Good tools are expensive, and many models from the MGA on back don't lock. I had a toolbox stolen once, and now my traveling tools come from the discount stores. Some people say that when you're on the side of the road and it's an emergency, you want the best. My experience has been that the tools in the car aren't used much, and quality isn't necessary there.

The seemingly limited selection of wrenches and sockets is enough to fit the things you can fix in a parking lot. The wire is for testing things or wiring stuff back onto the car, not for replacing pieces of the harness, though it could be used that way. Wiring is pretty reliable (no moving parts) and none of my electrical problems have ever been caused by faulty wires. What has caused problems are the connections (especially grounds), which is the reason for bringing the crimp terminals. The tubing is for bleeding the hydraulics. You can always find a container to hold the bled fluid.

The hoses, belt, fuel pump, and distributor pieces are ones that have already seen action. After all, these are spares, and I don't mean for them to go into regular use.

You can turn a big castellated nut, as found on the suspension, without a large wrench or socket. Place a pair of needle-nose pliers so that the tips nestle into the castellated nut, and then turn the pliers with a wrench. You can turn a large plain nut by grabbing it with the locking pliers and again turning the pliers with the wrench, though that tends to round off the nut. Remember, these are emergency tactics.

Temporary washers and shims can be made from a soda pop can. The metal is thin enough to cut with scissors or a pocket knife. Depending on what you're doing, you may need more than one of these washers.

If you have the space, bring a fuel pump instead of points, and a generator instead of brushes. It's easier and faster to replace the entire unit on the side of the road than to rebuild it, and sometimes the failed part isn't rebuildable. For example, if your armature shorts out, new brushes won't help.

If the radiator springs a leak, use only part of a can of Stop Leak. You generally don't need an entire can for a radiator as small as the one in an MG, and there's no reason to pour any more system-clogging material in than is necessary.

Road Trip Supply Box Packing List

Items tagged with a • are in the toolbox within the supply box. Items tagged with a ° are not carried in the supply box.

Tools

- (1) set of combo wrenches
3/8, 7/16, 1/2, 9/16, 5/8, 11/16
- (1) ignition wrench set
7/32, 15/64, 1/4, 9/32, 5/16, 11/32, 3/8, 7/16
- (1) set of gear wrenches
3/8, 7/16, 1/2, 9/16
- (1) 1/4" slotted screwdriver
- (1) 1/8" slotted screwdriver
- (1) stubby 1/4" slotted screwdriver
- (1) #2 Phillips screwdriver
- (1) stubby #2 Phillips screwdriver
- (1) pocket knife
- (1) SU jet wrench
- (1) Lucas ignition screwdriver/feeler gauge
- (1) feeler gauge set
- (1) test lead with alligator clips
- (1) 8" adjustable wrench
- (1) 8" locking pliers
- (1) 6" needle-nose pliers
- (1) 6" lineman's pliers
- (1) wire crimp tool
- (1) small VOM
- (1) 8" combo file
- (1) 8" round bastard file
- (1) points file
- (1) tire valve multi-tool
- ° (1) cheapo 3/8" & 1/4" socket set
- (1) hydraulic bleed line w/ check valve
- (1) small flashlight

Supplies

- (2) pair latex gloves
- (1) box of electrical crimp & Lucas tubular connectors
- (1) box of assorted hardware
- (1) small (2 oz) WD-40
- (3) highway flares
- (2) clean rags
- ° (1) old towel (wrapped around socket set)
- (30) 4" wire ties – mixed colors
- (5) 8" wire ties
- (5) 15" wire ties
- (1) piece of 240 grit sandpaper
- (1) piece of medium emery cloth
- (1) tube of hand cleaner
- (1) bottle of Rain-X
- (1) new bottle Castrol DOT 4 brake fluid
- (1) coil of safety wire
- (1) roll of electrical tape
- (1) roll of duct tape
- (1) paper gasket material
- (1) cork gasket material
- (1) tube of #2 Permatex (non-hardening)

Parts

- (1) assorted hose clamps
(two of each size on car)
- (1) 2' length 10 gauge wire
- (1) top radiator hose (Magnetite)
- (1) top/bottom radiator hose (MGA/B)
- (1) intermediate radiator hose (all)
- (1) thermostat & gasket
- (1) 3' length of heater hose
- (2) 1 3/8" freeze plugs or rubber expansion plug
- (1) 18" length of fuel line
- (1) vacuum line & fittings
- (2) 8' lengths 16 gauge wire
- (1) 2' High tension wire
- (1) ignition parts set (in separate bag)
 - sparkplugs (pre-gapped)
 - points condenser screws
 - low-tension lug & lead
- (6) carb/manifold gaskets
- (1) set generator brushes
- (1) fuel pump point set
- (1) box of fuses
- (1) bolt-on battery cable clamp
- (1) ignition coil
- ° (1) voltage regulator (MGA/Magnetite)
- ° (1) generator
- ° (1) fuel pump (generic or SU)
- ° (1) water pump
- ° (1) distributor w/ cap, rotor & wires
- ° (3) quarts motor oil

Parts to consider adding

Throttle cable (or bike gear cable)
Oil bypass pipe
Oil filter & gaskets
Lightbulbs
 Tail/brake Parking lights
 Dash lights (?) Headlight
Hydraulic rebuild kits
 Slave cylinder Master cylinder(s)
 Wheel cylinder Caliper
Carburetor rebuild kit

Items Duplicated in Every Car

Service manual
Flashlight
Jack
Lug wrench *or* knockoff hammer
Fan belt (& air pump belt for GT)