



The Basics

\$4 gas?! Here's how to get it free

Hotels, auto dealerships, car rental agencies and many other businesses are offering free or discounted gas. But carefully weigh the real costs, and be wary of scams.

By [Jeff Cade](#)

The more gas costs, the better it works as an incentive. Right now, you can get free gas for buying a new car, eating a chicken dinner or taking a vacation. You can even earn free gas for not driving.

But \$4-a-gallon gas also can lead drivers to make some foolish decisions. In some promotions, gas is a prize, absolutely free for the few who win. In others, it's an eye-catching trade-off, a headline-grabbing discount in place of a boring old price cut. And in some cases, free gas is an outright scam.

Talk back: [Been tempted by a "free gas" deal?](#)

Because most of these promotions are local, it's difficult to offer hard-and-fast guidelines other than to keep your antennae up. Here's a sampling of what we found.

Gas and something to burn it: Buying a new vehicle can get you a gas card good for a year with [Suzuki](#) and three years with [Chrysler](#).

Suzuki will give consumers who buy a new 2008 or 2009 vehicle through June 30 a Visa debit card for free gas. Depending on the model, the amounts range from \$320 to \$470. Buyers must qualify to finance their vehicles through the company's American Suzuki Financial Services, and, if so, they'll get 0% interest for up to five years.

Chrysler's offer is for \$2.99-a-gallon gasoline; the company will pay the difference between that and the pump prices for up to 12,000 miles a year (figured at Environmental Protection Agency estimates). But the deal is good only for gasoline with up to 87 octane regular unleaded fuel, E85 fuel (an ethanol-gasoline mix) or diesel fuel. Not all vehicles are eligible for the program, and you might have to give up some other rebates.

Lock and load: One innovative solution can be found an hour from Minneapolis in St. Cloud, Minn., a city of about 65,000 people where some 11,000 have locked in prices at the family-run [First Fuel Bank](#).

Video: [Gas mileage claims often way off base](#)

Residents can buy at today's rate and lock in that price for future gas purchases.

According to First Fuel's Linda Ernster, a few farsighted customers are paying 98 cents a gallon. They locked in at that price way back when and never used the fuel, saving it for times like these.

As prices have gone up, business hasn't slowed, but there are no plans to expand. The family operation, started in 1983 by Denis Feneis and sons Jim and Dan Feneis, has six filling stations.

Rent a car to get the gas: Hertz is offering a free tank of gas for rentals three days or longer through June 30. For a long trip, leaving your gas guzzler at home and renting a fuel sipper could make sense, even with the rental costs. Most other major car rental agencies are offering discounts up to 25 cents a gallon for prepaid gas purchases, but that makes sense only if you burn every last drop.

[Continued: Free gas help](#)

Paint your wagon: [FreeGasHelp.com](#) offers motorists driving more 1,000 miles a month up to \$2,400 a year to wrap their vehicles with advertising.

"We've seen a dramatic spike in interest," marketing director Mel Jacob said.

Motorists are given a dry run of sorts, starting with door-magnet ads to ensure everyone is happy before committing to the costlier conversion. Right now FreeGasHelp has about 1,000 cars on the road.

Winner's combo: Eating chicken doesn't typically give diners gas, but they could win a year's worth of fuel if they're lucky. [Mrs. Winner's Chicken and Biscuits](#) locations in metro Atlanta are registering customers for weekly drawings to receive 52 weeks of prepaid \$50 gas cards.

Customers need to register each week to be eligible for the Wednesday drawings.

"We'll send (contest winners) to an Exxon" or someplace similar, said Robert Jacks, the director of marketing and public relations, but no truck stops or stations that serve food. "No sense helping out the competition," he said.

Hallelujah: The First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., has a "free gas" sign out front. Each time newcomers or members

attend a church event during a Sunday-to-Wednesday revival, they get a pink raffle ticket for a chance to win one of two \$500 gas cards. So many inquiries came pouring in that a new phone line was added, and a receptionist was dedicated to answering each phone.

In the news: The Houston Chronicle, in a circulation drive, is enticing readers [with drawings of \\$100 gas cards](#) and a grand prize of 26 of them. [The Orange County Register](#) has a \$250 card for a lucky registered winner. The [News and Observer](#) of Raleigh, N.C., offers readers a chance to win \$100 gas cards.

Save on your drive: Golfers can drive a bit more cheaply, getting gas cards ranging from \$50 to \$100 from [Dick's Sporting Goods](#) when they purchase certain Calloway drivers.

Sleep on it: Many resorts, lodges and hotels are offering gas cards to entice road-weary travelers.

[BedandBreakfast.com's](#) "Tanks a Lot" promotion features mostly \$20-\$25 gas cards for each night of lodging at some of its member establishments. [Hotels.com](#) has mail-in rebates, mostly for \$25 gas cards for each night that travelers book.

[BnBfinder.com](#) also can direct travelers to gas-card lodging deals, linking those to its "One Tank Trip" destinations.

Video: [Gas mileage claims often way off base](#)

[Bear Mountain Lodge](#) in Bethlehem, N.H., is offering \$100 gift cards for three-night stays.

Some state tourism offices are helping connect travelers with those looking to stay closer to home and save on gas. For instance, you can log on to [Travel Michigan's](#) Web site for more gas deals.

[Continued: Clearing the air](#)

Clearing the air: Commuters in certain regions of the United States can cash in on incentives and help clean the air at the same time.

[Cumberland](#), a business district in metropolitan Atlanta, is aggressively looking to cut pollution by offering car pools of three or more \$40 in monthly gas cards and \$60 a month to pools of four and more. Over three years, poolers can earn 12 gas cards. Commuters also can earn \$3 a day to stop driving, up to \$180 for a 90-day period.

The Clean Air Campaign is something of a pioneer in the field, said Brian Carr, the director of communications, but seemingly every urban area facing pollution and congestion issues has incentives commuters can cash in on. Check your state, county and city transit or environmental agency for information. For instance:

Those starting a van pool in [Contra Costa, Calif.](#), can receive \$1,000 bonuses.

Portland, Ore., municipal employees can get \$30 a month by walking or biking to work.

In an area of central Pennsylvania, motorists willing to skip driving 10 days over the summer can earn \$20 shared-gas cards, \$5 Starbucks cards and transit tickets. "We can't give them money, but we can certainly give commuters practical things," said Mike Ridgeway, a spokesman for the Air Quality Partnership of Susquehanna Valley.

Residents or employees in [Solano County, Calif.](#), can receive 60% of the cost of a new bike, up to \$100, if it is used for commuting to work. New van pools receive \$100 gas cards for each seat they fill.

[NuRide](#) links commuters who wish to share rides and uses a points system that rewards users with discounts on items from a range of local and national sponsors. The program can be found in these areas: Washington, D.C.; Houston; Minneapolis-St. Paul; New York City; Connecticut; and Hampton, Va. The site grades drivers and riders to better ensure safety, compatibility and reliability.

Don't be fooled

Consumer advocates stress doing homework before committing to deals that could be predatory and take advantage of those desperate to ease the gas pinch on their wallet.

"Definitely read the fine print," said Linda Gorman, the public-affairs manager at AAA Arizona.

Will an offer of free gas cause you to spend money you otherwise wouldn't?

To get a gas card from a hotel or resort, you could wind up paying the rack rate, which typically is much higher than the savings from a \$25 gift card. For example, [Circus Circus in Las Vegas](#) has a deal for a \$50 gas card, but shop around because there may be deals off the strip that will save you more than that, Gorman said. If you'd planned to stay at Circus Circus anyway, the deal might make sense.

Similarly, Gorman said, some credit cards' annual fees and interest rates could outweigh any gas-savings advantages that the cards' issuers promote.

A bigger problem that's likely to grow worse is gas-related scams.

Your e-mail inbox might be flooded with offers of free gas cards simply for returning a survey or giving the names of six friends. You might get a phone call saying you've won a free tank of gas, coupons for discounted gas or gas as an incentive for a free-trial offer.

Keep your bank and credit account numbers to yourself. Any offer that requires them is a scam.

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