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Gifts and gridlock as 25m plan getaway

18 million cars to hit road despite high fuel prices

Massive repair plans for motorways and railways

Martin Wainwright

High pump prices and the lure of foreign beaches may give a helping hand to Britain's annual Christmas travel problems as the first of an estimated 25 million people start packing their bags today.

Traditional excuses for not visiting the in-laws are more justified than usual according to drivers' organisations, which predict that the jump in petrol and diesel prices will have the first real effect for more than 10 years.

A survey by the RAC suggests that 49% of Christmas drivers intend to cut the number of journeys they make, even though 18m cars are expected to hit the road today.

"Every litre is costing motorists an average of 10p more than it did last Christmas," said Neil Thompson of the RAC, which also found that 58% of drivers are thinking of dropping one or more family visits over the next 10 days by car.

Some extra traffic will be pushed on to the roads by the usual Christmas week list of major repairs to the rail network, with engineers taking advantage of regular commuter services reduced by 65%. The biggest problem will be closures of sections of the west coast mainline between London, the north-west and Scotland, between Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. There will be essential repairs at Rugby, with three miles of new track and 15 new points being laid, with buses or train diversions operating.

Euston station in London will shut on December 27 and 28 and Glasgow Central will be closed for major signal works between Boxing Day and January 3.

Concern about carbon footprints has meanwhile been swept aside by the lure of warm weather, with airports already busy after forecasts that Christmas at home will be damp, dull and not white.

Manchester airport expects 270,000 travellers between now and Christmas Eve, with Tenerife the most-booked destination, followed by Alicante and Malaga.

The number of people with second homes in Spain has weighted the "predictable British tendency to head for the Cos-tas" according to the Travel Trust Association, which expects 3 million Britons to spend Christmas overseas.

Keith Betton of the trust said: "The way Christmas falls this year gives the chance for a really good break, because next week will not exist for many businesses. Offices will turn the lights off at the end of Friday and nobody will be back until at least January 2. You have to be very keen to open up simply for next Monday and the Monday after."

Increased spending power has upped the ratio of overseas travellers going long-haul, with Dubai and Las Vegas catching up with Florida as the favourite exotic Christmas spot. The Association of British Travel Agents has also noted an increase in bookings for Egypt, after international interest in the boy pharaoh Tutankhamun after a series of sell-out international exhibitions.

John Bevan, managing director of last-minute.com, which has also had a flurry of overseas bookings, said: "It would appear that Britons are opting out of the pressures of a family Christmas, having to visit both your own parents and the in-laws. Instead they are choosing to enjoy their time off work by visiting sun-drenched destinations."

Those who are sticking to traditional ways will find plenty of old-fashioned travel challenges on roads and trains, although some two-thirds of roadworks on motorways and major roads will be finished or suspended from 6am tomorrow until the end of New Year's Day.

That leaves only 66 miles of contraflow, lane restrictions and other bottlenecks, but they affect 10 motorways and four major roads, including the main north-south links, the M1 and A1, and the M25. The junior minister responsible for roads,

Tom Harris, said: "The Highways Agency is taking all possible steps to allow drivers to use the roads safely and without

delays. But it will be busy, so we urge people to plan their journeys and allow extra time."

New monitoring systems and speedier reaction to delays will be part of the agency's response to accidents and breakdowns, although several potentially far-reaching innovations are not ready for use. Ten police forces are trialling quicker ways of clearing wreckage and collecting evidence after accidents, a process which can cause huge jams, as happened on Tuesday when the westbound trans-Pennine M62 was closed all day south of Leeds. A mathematical model of "phantom jams" – apparently without a cause but actually due to poor braking or speed variation – is also likely to be tested after development at Exeter University.

Bookmaker William Hill said that it was still taking a few small bets on snow at Christmas, but odds against are lengthening daily and stand at 3-1 even in the north of Scotland.

One couple, Ken and Dorothy Hatch of Poole, Dorset, are putting British weather out of their minds after the Passport Office sorted out a muddle just in time to save their £10,000 family get-together in the Alps.

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The Deira islands in Dubai. Dubai and Las Vegas are catching up with Florida as the favourite exotic Christmas spot

