

AVOIDING AUTO REPAIR RIP-OFF

If you're planning a long vacation drive out-of-state this summer, be alert when you pull off the Interstate to refuel and check the oil.

Some auto repair cheats ply their trade at service stations along highways with heavy vacation travel. They target cars with out-of-state license plates, knowing that victims will be reluctant to take the time to file a complaint with local authorities.

According to Consumer Reports, here are some of the more common repair scams:

Smoking alternator. The attendant empties an eye-dropper of antifreeze on the alternator, making it smoke. You're told you need a new alternator and you pay for one. But what you get is your old one, disguised with some quick-drying silver paint.

Leaking radiator. The attendant jabs a small sharpened screwdriver into the radiator or hose. You're told you need a new radiator.

Leaking tire. Same method as a leaking radiator, to sell you a tire.

Defective shock absorber. The attendant squirts oil on one of the shocks while the car is raised on a lift, and says you shouldn't keep driving the car. You pay for new shocks you didn't need.

Exploding battery. The attendant drops Alka-Seltzer tablets into the battery cells and replaces the caps. Soon, an explosion blows off the caps -- and you're being sold a new battery.

Loose spark plug cable. The attendant loosens a cable, making the engine miss, then sells you a tune-up.

"Short sticking." The attendant pushes the engine oil dipstick only partway in so it registers a quart low, then "adds" oil from an empty oil bottle.

Missing fuel cap. The attendant steals yours and offers to sell you a new one.

Advice for motorists: don't leave your vehicle unattended at a service station while you're traveling. Also pay by credit card. If you discover that you have been ripped off, you can dispute the charge with your credit card company.