

Love, Lies, and Transportation in L.A.

In the past six months Angelenos have been shaken by earthquakes and scorched by brush fires. Sort of like lumps of tofu in a stir-fry wok. But, what the hell, we're tough out here. We can take it.

What does scare us, though, is suffocation. We're about to go down for the third time in the sea of media cliches that followed the quake. One more mention of "California's love affair with the car" and we're goners. That's not us. If we wanted to fondle cars, we'd be somewhere in Alabama.

But aren't Californians slaves to their cars? Compared to whom? Thirty-six states have more vehicles per capita than California.

But don't we drive a lot? Well, the folks in 36 states drive more miles per capita than we do. But don't Californians get a driver's license at birth? Not exactly, 37 states have more drivers per capita than we do. And for those of you with Greenish inclinations, 42 states use more gasoline and diesel per capita than we do. Ah, but what about public transit? Yes, we have it and we use it. Forty-two states use transit less than we do. The numbers are all right there in Highway Statistics and the Statistical Abstract published by the Feds. That's primary data, not secondary hearsay from newspaper clippings.

So how did this love-affair stuff get started? I have the inside story from a highly placed source. Once upon a time, a New York reporter came out here to learn about the horrors of auto-eroticism. Seek and ye shall find. Especially if you start with the conclusion and then search until you find a fact that supports it. Ignoring the ordinary, this guy finally found someone with a 90-minute commute. He could now go home and write his story: People in Los Angeles travel 90 minutes to get to work.

Not exactly a scientific sample. Suppose I were to visit New York, searched for a long time and found a smiling New Yorker. Would it be fair if I wrote a story accusing New Yorkers of being happy?

But seriously, the pesky government statistics even have something to say about that 90-minute commuter fish-story. Turns out the average commute in L.A. is 26 minutes and the average commute in New York is 5 minutes longer, 31 minutes. That's 10 minutes a day we save on a round trip—extra time to fight brush fires, clear quake rubble, or hum a mantra.

So much for our fabled auto dependence. What phrase might take its place to fill the cliché gap? Well, we do have a lot of hot tubs. Why not write about California's love affair with hot water?

— Charles Lave

MEASURING CALIFORNIA'S "AUTO DEPENDENCE"

	MOTOR FUEL PER VEHICLE	MOTOR FUEL PER PERSON	LICENSED DRIVERS PER 1,000 PERSONS	VMT PER PERSON	VMT PER DRIVER	VEHICLES PER 1,000 PEOPLE	% OF WORKERS TAKING TRANSIT TO WORK	
ALABAMA	722	653	719	10,497	14,610	905	0.8%	ALABAMA
ALASKA	602	497	558	7,054	12,645	826	2.6%	ALASKA
ARIZONA	716	544	640	9,314	14,554	760	2.1%	ARIZONA
ARKANSAS	1,101	687	725	9,247	12,750	624	0.5%	ARKANSAS
CALIFORNIA	655	480	656	8,492	12,944	732	5.1%	CALIFORNIA
COLORADO	570	514	617	8,216	13,314	902	3.0%	COLORADO
CONNECTICUT	592	466	672	8,091	12,034	787	4.0%	CONNECTICUT
DELAWARE	723	568	728	9,884	13,570	785	2.5%	DELAWARE
FLORIDA	688	517	730	8,547	11,708	752	2.1%	FLORIDA
GEORGIA	777	670	696	11,023	15,835	863	2.9%	GEORGIA
HAWAII	534	370	616	7,174	11,638	692	7.6%	HAWAII
IDAHO	590	599	685	9,931	14,498	1,016	2.0%	IDAHO
ILLINOIS	652	463	638	7,401	11,608	710	10.3%	ILLINOIS
INDIANA	775	610	616	9,673	15,715	787	2.6%	INDIANA
IOWA	642	612	664	8,236	12,399	955	1.3%	IOWA
KANSAS	788	593	714	9,293	13,022	753	0.7%	KANSAS
KENTUCKY	772	616	650	9,484	14,589	798	1.7%	KENTUCKY
LOUISIANA	725	519	610	8,163	13,377	716	3.1%	LOUISIANA
MAINE	726	576	720	9,594	13,329	793	0.9%	MAINE
MARYLAND	661	494	661	8,508	12,866	747	8.4%	MARYLAND
MASSACHUSETTS	702	429	701	7,761	11,065	611	8.5%	MASSACHUSETTS
MICHIGAN	672	520	687	8,746	12,735	773	1.7%	MICHIGAN
MINNESOTA	756	558	574	8,857	15,418	739	3.8%	MINNESOTA
MISSISSIPPI	852	621	743	9,605	12,936	728	0.8%	MISSISSIPPI
MISSOURI	841	644	724	9,884	13,660	766	2.1%	MISSOURI
MONTANA	734	696	718	10,290	14,327	948	0.6%	MONTANA
NEBRASKA	702	619	671	8,848	13,189	882	1.2%	NEBRASKA
NEVADA	909	624	708	8,185	11,566	686	2.7%	NEVADA
NEW HAMPSHIRE	626	514	767	8,991	11,722	820	0.7%	NEW HAMPSHIRE
NEW JERSEY	687	489	729	7,640	10,475	711	9.0%	NEW JERSEY
NEW MEXICO	789	673	699	10,835	15,510	853	1.0%	NEW MEXICO
NEW YORK	665	360	569	5,962	10,486	541	25.5%	NEW YORK
NORTH CAROLINA	747	579	675	9,631	14,268	774	1.0%	NORTH CAROLINA
NORTH DAKOTA	716	709	671	9,372	13,972	990	0.6%	NORTH DAKOTA
OHIO	644	511	683	8,502	12,449	794	2.6%	OHIO
OKLAHOMA	756	635	719	10,784	14,997	841	0.6%	OKLAHOMA
OREGON	683	586	812	8,817	10,853	858	3.5%	OREGON
PENNSYLVANIA	686	461	665	7,297	10,978	672	6.6%	PENNSYLVANIA
RHODE ISLAND	651	408	674	7,124	10,576	626	2.6%	RHODE ISLAND
SOUTH CAROLINA	880	611	675	9,679	14,347	694	1.1%	SOUTH CAROLINA
SOUTH DAKOTA	703	702	712	9,546	13,407	999	0.3%	SOUTH DAKOTA
TENNESSEE	656	601	685	9,543	13,930	917	1.4%	TENNESSEE
TEXAS	794	581	651	9,151	14,058	732	2.3%	TEXAS
UTAH	740	514	603	8,695	14,424	695	2.4%	UTAH
VERMONT	755	595	727	10,353	14,235	788	0.8%	VERMONT
VIRGINIA	710	567	740	9,720	13,137	799	4.1%	VIRGINIA
WASHINGTON	610	535	696	9,256	13,307	878	4.7%	WASHINGTON
WEST VIRGINIA	787	557	714	8,898	12,466	707	1.1%	WEST VIRGINIA
WISCONSIN	702	522	685	9,174	13,392	744	2.6%	WISCONSIN
WYOMING	997	1,016	741	13,039	17,588	1,019	1.5%	WYOMING
AVERAGE STATE	723	570	683	9,040	13,250	790	3.2%	AVERAGE STATE
CALIFORNIA	655	480	656	8,492	12,944	732	5.1%	CALIFORNIA
AVG./CALIF.	1.10	1.19	1.04	1.06	1.02	1.08	0.63	AVG./CALIF.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Source Notes:
 Transit mode share data come from *Statistical Abstract, 1993*, Table 1017.
 All other data come from *Highway Statistics, 1991*, published by FHWA, U.S. DOT, Tables MF-21, MF-21A, MV-1, DL-1B, VM-2.