

Review: AAA iPhone app offers member discounts

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In this product photo provided by AAA, the AAA Discounts iPhone app is seen.
(AP Photo/AAA)

(AP) -- An organization rooted in 20th century car culture is joining 21st century smartphone culture. AAA has introduced a free iPhone application called AAA Discounts, which uses GPS technology to instantly identify nearby businesses offering deals for AAA members.

AAA, which has more than 51 million members, is best-known for providing roadside help when your car breaks down. But most members know the card can also be used for discounts. If you're like me, though, it's too much trouble to plan travel based on where discounts are offered, and I rarely remember to ask if my card can get me in somewhere cheaper.

The AAA app makes it easier. In map mode, businesses offering the discounts nearby are marked. Or, you can scroll across town or across the country to look for opportunities to save with your card.

It can be a bit easier to go into list mode, where you'll find the business name, address and actual distance from you. Tap the business you like, and then you can see it on the map, or even get directions there.

I found the map didn't always recognize my finger tap to open information about a business. And some areas show a virtual thicket of flags for businesses with discounts. It's hard to tap the right one, so you find yourself zooming in and out on the map frequently.

I also found that a large proportion of the listings seemed to be pharmacies offering prescription discounts. The average age of a AAA member is 50, but app users of any age uninterested in drug store locations can turn off the health listings by clicking the "more" button, which allows you to filter categories.

Altogether, the AAA Discounts app covers 110,000 locations in North America. Many of these are hotels - clearly of interest to any traveler. The app could be particularly useful on a road trip. Set it in map mode and when you're ready to call it a night, pull into one of the roadside hotels that shows up on your map. Tapping on the flagged business shows discount details and also offers an option where you just tap to call directly.

I've been driving with AAA maps for more than 20 years. But I was surprised to see that the AAA map quality wasn't vastly superior to the Google Maps application that came preinstalled on my [iPhone](#). Google Maps shows Metro stations and which streets are one-way, both essential information in a city like my hometown of Washington, D.C. The AAA maps lacked that information. But the AAA map does have more landmarks and museums, and much more prominently displays hospital locations.

Since its launching, the AAA Discounts app has been downloaded nearly 200,000 times, according to AAA spokeswoman Heather Hunter, and it's one of the top free downloads in the iPhone's Lifestyle apps category. It also works with the iPod touch in Wi-Fi locations. Anyone can download it, though only members can take advantage of the discounts.

If you are a AAA member, there's no reason not to get it. But if you're not, it may not be all that useful.

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