

**Rules of Thumb:  
How to Hitch-Hike  
and Live on the Road**

By Christopher Drifter

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The secret number is 23.

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“I will hail them, my brothers of the wheel, and pitch them a yarn, of the sort that has been so successful hitherto; and they will give me a lift, of course...”

– Mr. Toad, *The Wind in the Willows*

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## Disclaimer

Hitch-hiking is an inherently dangerous activity and no amount of good judgement or common sense can completely eliminate the possibility of coming to serious bodily harm or even death. Roads are dangerous places – every single time you get into a vehicle, you place your life in the hands of the driver whether they are a stranger to you or not. In many places, hitch-hiking is illegal. The advice here is offered as-is, with no guarantee of merit, and no liability can be accepted for any damage to persons or property as a result of following it. True names have not always been used in the anecdotal sections of this book.

*Do not* hitch-hike if you aren't prepared to take responsibility for your own actions.

*Do not* hitch-hike without thoroughly researching which laws may apply to you.



## PART I: Introduction

### **Tales from the Road: USA**

#### **Manchester, Tennessee to Boulder, Colorado (2000km)**

“This is a good spot,” I said to Lauren. The long, straight road that stretched out before us was lined by trees but still had plenty of space either side for vehicles to pull over and stop. A steady succession of vehicles crawled along the road through the still air. Bumper to bumper festival-goers all on their way home.

We paused. The forest had provided us with shade while we had hiked away from the music festival. Neither of us were ready to step out into the 40°C Tennessee heat – our clothes were soaked in sweat and it wasn’t even the afternoon yet. Still, at least our hike had come to its end. We dropped our bags a few metres from the vehicles and

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drank our water thirstily. A few drivers watched with interest. Not that there was anything else to watch.

I rummaged around for the sign I had made back at the camp-site – a torn piece of cardboard with the letters “COLORADO” written in black bold Sharpie pen. As I held it in my hands I felt the familiar excitement rising in my body – a real adventure was about to begin. “Let’s try to make it all in one trip,” I said. Smelly, dirty, and hung-over, we stood up to face the traffic and held out our thumbs.

Everyone was in a good mood and the traffic was so slow that we were able to talk to people for a few minutes before they passed us. We laughed and joked and swapped stories. Lots of people passed out their leftover festival goodies as gifts to us: chocolate, bottles of water, beer, and a huge watermelon. Every time we saw a Colorado license plate we rushed over and cheered. But the drivers just smiled and shrugged – every vehicle was full. They wanted to pick us up, I could see it. It was just a matter of finding someone who could.

“We’ll have her, but not you!” was the most common joke shouted from car windows as they passed us by, and I laughed every time. “We could take you as far as Nashville,” a few people offered more seriously. One could even take us 400 miles to St. Louis. “Thanks, but we’re going to do it in one trip,” I said, and I believed myself. We were in such a good spot, how could we fail?

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An hour and four Colorado license plates later, somebody beckoned us to their window. “Did you know there’s two guys down the road, and they’re hitching to Colorado too?” the driver said. Lauren and I looked at each other. The chance of one vehicle going all the way to Colorado seemed plausible – but two was impossible. “Thanks for telling us,” we said. I reminded myself that our fellow hitch-hikers had no way of knowing about us, and no way of knowing that we’d been trying for longer than they had. Nevertheless, our bad luck was frustrating. We put away the sign and decided to accept the next offer to Nashville.

Our rivals, two young guys from Denver, came up the road after a little while in search of a better hitching spot and I called them over. It was midday, but we were all already exhausted from a couple of hours of standing in the sun. We walked away from the road and made ourselves comfortable in the shade of the forest. I sliced the watermelon we had been given and the four of us ate together in the shade of the trees. Our spirits were high despite the fact that none of us had found a ride yet. We talked about the hopes we had for our journey ahead, shared tales of our journeys already travelled, and failed to notice as the traffic steady dwindled. When we finally returned to the road an hour later, almost everyone had finished leaving the festival. The traffic had dried up completely.

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No problem. We decided to walk up to the next road together to try to get the non-festival traffic too, and our new friends offered to hitch from further down so that we could get the first ride – an offer I gratefully accepted.

When we reached the next road, however, there was already a queue. Three homeless men were waiting at five metre intervals at the best place for vehicles to stop. I could hardly believe our bad luck. Before that day I had never seen another hitch-hiker on the road. At this point we'd seen five – and it was meant to be illegal in Tennessee. We talked to the homeless men for a few minutes before moving on. Suddenly the air felt cooler. I looked up at the sky – there were storm clouds coming.

Our new spot was terrible, a vulnerable position in the middle of an intersection with four lanes of traffic. We couldn't continue up the road without entering the free-way and we couldn't go back without competing with the homeless men. By now the sun had disappeared and Lauren was starting to lose faith that we would find a ride. It had been three and a half hours since we started and a heavy rain seemed inevitable. I was starting to lose faith too.

It had been raining for quite some time when the cop car pulled over beside us. The cop gave us a long stare as he hauled his heavy frame from the vehicle and I began to reflect upon how fragile my permission to travel in the USA really was. But before my panic had the

chance to really set in, the cop turned around and disappeared into an office trailer. My confused relief was replaced a few moments later by even more intense panic when I realised that we were hitch-hiking directly across from a mobile police station set up for the festival. Lauren and I must look like a miserable pair, I thought, if Tennessee cops are getting more pleasure from watching us suffer than by coming over and arresting us for breaking the law.

Finally, a car stopped – a young guy on his own.

“Where are you going?” I said. I didn’t care, we were going to get in his car anyway.

“Nashville,” he said. Perfect.

## About this book

This book is a guide to hitch-hiking, or, more specifically, how to get from one place to another by soliciting rides on the side of a road from strangers. My friend Rob Mullett introduced me to hitch-hiking in my first year of university. We had known each other for only a matter of days before we took a weekend trip from Canterbury to Brighton and then to London. Like every other aspiring teenage traveller I had watched *Into the Wild* (2007) and read *On the Road* (1957), but I had never realised that adventures like these were possible in

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England in 2009. In fact, I'd never even seen an actual hitch-hiker before. Yet, to my amazement, complete strangers were willing to pick up two boys dressed in bright woollen jumpers. On that first trip we were picked up by a female nurse in her forties, an ex-policemen in his sixties, two girls our own age, and a handful of other normal British citizens who wanted nothing more than to pass on some kindness that day.

As a novice hitch-hiker I was considerable dead weight to Rob, who always sat in the front and made the conversation (except here and there when I interrupted with something awkward and occasionally offensive). But, after those first few bungling experiences, I had the chance develop my social skills a little by hitching around Wales on my own – and the next summer Rob and I hitched around France and Spain together. Since then I've travelled North America extensively – from New York to Tennessee to Colorado, and from Vancouver Island, Canada, all the way down the west coast to Tijuana, Mexico and back again. I've also hitch-hiked a considerable amount in Europe, travelling around Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Italy.

In this book I'll provide advice based on the things I've learned about hitch-hiking, but also about life on the road in general. The sections can be read in any order, and are as follow:



## **Part I: Introduction**

A discussion on who can hitch-hike, the reasons you should do it, and some advice for travelling with a partner.

## **Part II: The Four Hitching Commandments**

An overview of the four simple rules that I follow in order to get the most out of my hitch-hiking experiences. See page 27.

## **Part III: Making the Journey**

Here I talk about the hitch-hiking process in detail, step-by-step, from planning your journey to arriving at your destination. See page 39.

## **Part IV: Life on the Road**

Advice for how to live comfortably on journeys that last weeks, months, or even years. Finding places to sleep, eating well, earning money, and staying safe are all covered in this section. See page 81.

## **Part V: Final Note**

A few parting words of encouragement. Page 105.

Each section begins with a brief tale from my own adventures on the road. These stories are intended as small self-contained lessons, give context to some of my

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advice, and provide those who have never hitch-hiked before with an idea of what it feels like. They mostly tend to focus on the difficult situations I have faced (which are much more interesting than the times I made my way from A to B without incident).

The advice given in this guide is based on my personal experience and explains methods that work for me. There are, of course, lots of different ways to go about hitch-hiking. You'll find in the final pages a list of recommended books and websites: all are worth reading if you wish to gain a wider knowledge on the subject of hitch-hiking. Of course, there's no better way to learn than just going out and doing it!

### **Why choose to hitch?**

We live in a world of unprecedented choice when it comes to travel. In an age where planes, trains, buses, trams, trolleys, and subways are more widespread and affordable than ever before, it might seem as though hitch-hiking is a bit redundant. And the truth is that, in many ways, it is.

Some people have the impression that hitch-hiking is an ultra-cheap way to travel, and it can be. But – although you aren't directly paying for transport – you are still paying with your time. In the USA, a 12 hour bus

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journey might cost \$100 – but hitch-hiking the same route could take 3 days. If you plan poorly and end up buying your food as you need it at rest stops, you'll very quickly exceed the cost of a bus ticket. Carrying your own food and cooking equipment will reduce costs, but at the expense of more weight on your back. Even with food handled, you may have to spend a night in a town or city where you are not willing to sleep outside – in which case a room in even the cheapest hostel or hotel will greatly reduce the money you thought you were saving.

Along with costing time and money, hitch-hiking also takes a toll on your health. Days are spent exposed to the elements, breathing polluted air, and nights consist of sleeping with one eye open in places that are often noisy and uncomfortable. If you are on your own, there can be little time to relax. You must always be aware of what is going on around you: is this a good spot, is this person trustworthy, am I on the right route, have I left anything behind? On top of this, you must be prepared to hike several miles a day with all your gear, and provide interesting and engaging conversation for every driver that picks you up.

Suddenly a \$100 bus ticket doesn't sound so bad.

So why should you choose to hitch-hike? If you don't have any particular destination in mind, or no particular time you need to be there, then hitch-hiking is a good method of travel. There are also some types of

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journey where hitching can work out cheaper: if you are planning to camp anyway, you need to cover a long distance, and transport is particularly expensive or infrequent to your destination, then you may save some money; if your destination is only a few hours away and you eat a packed lunch from home, then you'll definitely save money. But you'll still have spent more time, and be arriving more exhausted, than if you'd just coughed up for public transport in the first place.

The important thing to understand is this: hitchhiking is most rewarding, and makes the most sense, when it's the purpose of your journey – not just a means of moving from one place to another. The one true reason to hitch-hike is simply because it's really, really fun.

You will meet people you would never ordinarily meet, and they will tell you stories you'd hear nowhere else. When you get picked up by a local, they'll tell you more about the place you're travelling through than you could ever hope to learn simply by staying there; they'll tell you the best places to eat and to go out and have fun; they'll tell you the safe places and the dangerous places; they'll tell you the town gossip for decades past. When you get picked up by a tourist, they'll take you to viewpoints, beaches, and sideshows that you'd never have been able to reach without owning a car yourself.

Some people will share their philosophy on life with you. Some will tell you their biggest fears and

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regrets. Some will tell you about the best things that have ever happened to them, and some will tell you the worst things that are happening to them right now. You are unceremoniously tossed out of your personal sphere of existence and exposed to what is real and honest and authentic: the incredible variety of human life as it exists on earth. It's exhilarating.

Every person you meet has made the decision to help you, to be kind to you, to treat you as a friend – and you do the same to them in return. When you hitch-hike, you take nothing. A driver does not lose anything by letting you in their car – in fact, they gain your company. Of course, there are some people who may try to give you money. Some may want to take you to dinner, and some may invite you to meet their families and sleep on the sofa. Sometimes you might even accept these offers – it doesn't matter. Because if you are a good hitch-hiker, everybody wins.

Don't hitch-hike because you want to get somewhere. Hitch-hike because it will remind you that everywhere there are good people, and because the experiences you will have while hitch-hiking are experiences that you could not have any other way.

### **Who can hitch-hike?**

Anyone can hitch-hike – but some people will spend more time waiting than others. As a general rule drivers will decide to pick you up when they can relate to you in some way. A person will not pick you up if they feel threatened by you. Therefore, people who are perceived as non-threatening and easy to relate to will find hitch-hiking very straightforward – and people who are intimidating or not easy to relate to will find hitch-hiking difficult.

Generally a person will relate to you if they believe you share some common ground, or if you remind them of someone they know. For example, other travellers will relate to you strongly: you're both doing the same thing, except they're using a vehicle, so they're very likely to pick you up. A big-shot bank CEO may not relate to you as strongly on a personal level, but if you remind her of her children she might pick you up anyway. This selection process works in your favour – if someone decides to stop for you, then you're likely to have something in common, which helps the conversation flow easily.

The fact is that people are more likely to stop for women than they are for men. Fairly or not, in most places in the world females are generally perceived to be less capable of causing harm and more likely to need help

than men. They score highly on the non-threatening and relatable scales. However, women may also be at higher risk when hitch-hiking, and therefore might refuse a higher number of rides. Or so the theory goes – the female hitch-hikers that I've met report that they feel comfortable accepting the vast majority of rides, and they certainly tend to get places quicker than I do when I'm on my own.

That said, I've met hitch-hikers of all genders, age, race, and hygiene level. Everyone seems to get where they're going eventually.

## **Should you travel with a partner?**

As Christopher McCandless famously concluded, "Happiness is only real when shared". Having a partner to share the risks, difficulties, and challenges that you'll face when hitch-hiking undoubtedly improves the experience – if you can find the right partner, that is.

The main advantage of hitching alone is that you can get rides slightly faster and you can travel on your own terms. You eat when you're hungry, sleep when you're tired, and give up when you've lost hope – without having to worry about someone else's needs in the process. Plus, you have the chance to get picked up in those fancy two-seater sports cars which is always fun.

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However, although solo-travel is enjoyable in many ways, the real joy of hitch-hiking comes when you do it with someone else. Your long-distance journeys will be much more pleasurable if you can find someone with a positive outlook who has a similar tolerance for discomfort, if only because it allows you to take it in turns to be the one who talks to the driver.

### **Can you hitch with more than two people?**

For a long time, I had the firm belief that hitch-hiking was impossible with more than two people. Like many people with firm beliefs, I didn't bother to challenge my assumptions. I was amazed when I finally tried hitch-hiking in a group of three: not only is it possible, but the wait times don't feel meaningfully longer than hitch-hiking with two. The only real difference was the extra five minutes it took at the beginning of each lift to pack all our stuff into the vehicles.

Hitching in a group of four is also surprisingly straightforward. In this situation you can wait in pairs, with the second pair standing a reasonable distance away from the first. When a vehicle stops, the first pair should simply ask the driver if they mind taking two more. If the driver disagrees, then you have the choice of waiting for the next ride or splitting up to get there faster.



If you're in a group that splits up, it can be useful to arrange to meet at the central train station of the next major settlement on your route. This is a place that exists in every town or city, that drivers can find with ease, and which contains lots of options for further travel. The only downside is that once you've successfully regrouped, you'll have to find your way to the edge of town to start hitching again (see page 57).

## **But isn't hitch-hiking dangerous?**

Hitch-hiking is an experience that comes with a high degree of perceived risk. You'll find that many of the people around you will express concern, or strongly resist the idea that hitch-hiking can be a relatively safe, incredibly enjoyable recreational experience.

You'll notice a strange thing when talking to others about hitch-hiking. Everyone tends to respond very enthusiastically when you tell a hitch-hiking story from your past – they listen in amazement at the strange situations you found yourself in, the unique people you met, and they wish that they could have the time and freedom to do the same. Tell a person about your *plans* to go hitch-hiking, however, and they'll find every possible problem with what you're about to do; they'll project their own unfounded fears on to you until the smallest doubts can seem like impassable obstacles.

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Successful hitch-hiking requires confidence. Don't listen to these nay-sayers – unless a person is speaking from experience, they can be safely ignored. However, it is important not to be ignorant about the risks of hitch-hiking. We'll spend a lot of time in this book talking about about what exactly these risks are and how to manage them, but for now you should know that the dangers of hitch-hiking are much lower than is generally perceived. So long as you have good judgement and treat the people around you with respect and kindness, the odds of having positive experiences are vastly in your favour.

## PART II: The Four Hitching Commandments

1. Thou shalt hitch during the day
2. Thou shalt have good judgement
3. Thou shalt respect road safety rules
4. Thou shalt pay it forward

### **Tales from the Road: Sweden**

#### **Uddebo to Skattunbyn (500km)**

The pine forests of southern Sweden often remind me of carefully tended public gardens. Tall straight pines block the sunlight to the lower foliage, limiting growth and making the plants seem trimmed and well-kept, while neat dirt paths wind their way around the small ornament-

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like mossy boulders. It's a gentle, hospitable form of nature, much like the Swedish people themselves. It was in the midst of such a forest that Anna, Angela, and I now stood, on the side of one of those many long roads that cut through the pines and boulders to connect the smaller towns of Sweden. It was cold and we had had a long day. The three of us had got into our first car early in the morning, and now the sun was starting to set.

It had not been an easy journey. We'd passed through Borås, the rainiest town in Sweden, and spent several hours getting wet before giving up and taking a bus to the next city on our route. And although we'd already travelled several hundred kilometres, our friends were waiting for us at a festival that was still several hundred kilometres away. We were going to be in for an uncomfortable night if we didn't get a ride soon; our tent and cooking equipment were waiting for us at the festival too.

"Let's buy some food and find a barn to sleep in," said Angela eventually. The driver of our last ride had told us that there was a store a few kilometres down the road. At least we'd be able to eat something. We picked up our heavy bags and resigned ourselves to the walk ahead, our thumbs still outstretched hopefully towards the intermittent traffic.

The next car stopped.

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Huge smiles cracked across our faces and we ran towards the vehicle – a large dirty four by four which would have plenty of room for all our stuff. It wasn't until we'd shoved our bags amongst the car batteries and jimmy cans that were already in the back of the car that we paused to take a look at our new driver, a large, muscular, tattooed 22 year old skinhead who introduced himself as Lucas.

“Can you take us as far as Örebro?” I asked, naming a large town an hour or so away that we had decided we'd try to reach by the end of the day.

“I can take you further,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“Avesta.”

Avesta! Avesta was a small town close to the festival. It was also the home town of two Swedish guys with whom I'd travelled the USA. Not only would we have a comfortable place to sleep, I was also going to have the pleasure of seeing two very close friends again. Cheering with excitement, I began an enthusiastic conversation with Lucas about Sweden. I couldn't believe our luck.

Three hours later, my good mood was waning. There was something about Lucas that was a little bit off. Upon discovering that Anna was German, he had told us

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a story about how he had met a German girl that “did everything in the bedroom”. When we'd mentioned that we loved hitch-hiking because of the people we meet, he'd told us that talking to some people made him want to puke. He'd also made several references to how he had difficulty controlling his anger. My conversation with him had suddenly become one long effort to avoid provoking either anger or vomit. All of us were tired and looking forward to the end of the journey.

It was with general relief that, as it neared midnight, we finally started to reach the outskirts of Avesta.

“Would you like to see a lake I used to visit when I was a child?” said Lucas.

“Okay,” we said, assuming that we were going to take a short diversion and drive past something beautiful.

Lucas spun the wheel and we lurched on to a single-lane dirt track leading into the forest. We rushed through the trees at much the same speed we had travelled on the highway. Branches whipped across the windscreen, the vehicle rose and fell violently over the uneven road, and sharp turns appeared in the headlights almost without warning, but none of this seemed to have any effect on the position of Lucas's foot on the accelerator. Angela, Anna, and I had stopped talking, but Lucas, oblivious of the tense atmosphere, continued.

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“The lake is really deep. It's an old quarry that's filled with water – it's impossible to reach the bottom,” he said. A great place to dispose of dead bodies, the three of us thought nervously. I checked my phone: no signal.

We'd been driving deep into the forest for 45 minutes now. If we asked Lucas to turn back, would he react with aggression? We'd gone from giving up on our journey to celebrating our good luck to living out the classic hitch-hiker's nightmare – all in the space of just a few hours.

Finally we reached the end of the road. Gingerly we got out of the car. Our eyes were fixed on Lucas, waiting to see what he would do. Confused, he gestured towards the lake.

A huge expanse of black water stretched out before us, its surface an unbroken reflection of the pale mist that drifted low and heavy across it. The full moon, large and bright, made silhouettes of the trees that lined the shore, and above us the cloudless sky was filled with the milky way. It was beautiful.

Lucas grinned. He had shared something with us that he loved. He was happy.

## **1. Thou shalt hitch during the day**

Let me start by saying this: hitch-hiking at night isn't worth it. When the sun has set, your day of hitching has ended. Accept it. Where you are is where you are going to spend the night, unless you are willing to walk or take public transport somewhere else.

Pedestrians on the road at night are at a far greater risk than during the day. Drivers are more likely to be tired, and you are more likely to be difficult to see. Hitch-hiking often requires you to stand in positions where drivers may not expect to find you, and trying to use street lamps to make yourself more visible will often mean standing closer to the road than would be considered safe during the day time. You may also be at increased risk of having to deal with drunk drivers.

With less light to see you by, drivers will find it harder to make a considered judgement as to whether or not they would like to let you into their vehicles. If you solicit for rides near roadways during the night, some drivers may get the impression that you provide illegal services of some kind: law-abiding citizens will be less likely to pick you up, and less than law-abiding citizens may expect more than you are willing to give in return for picking you up! Darkness also makes it harder for you to make a good judgement about the people who stop for you, as vehicles are not generally well-lit from the inside.



Obviously, these things aren't an issue if darkness falls when you are already inside a vehicle. When this happens, however, you must have an increased awareness of your surroundings. Keep track of where the driver is taking you, and try not to get out of the vehicle in industrialised areas or urban areas that are in a state of disrepair. When you exit a vehicle after darkness has already fallen, finding a safe place to eat and sleep can also occasionally be slightly more difficult.

There are a lot of problems that you just don't have to deal with if you make the simple decision to stop travelling an hour before the sun goes down. If you do decide to hitch at night, however, remember to stand a couple meters behind whatever light source you're standing under to ensure that your features don't cast ominous shadows across your face.

## **2. Thou shalt have good judgement**

Hitching can be hard work, a little scary, and require a lot of social energy. And there's almost nothing more refreshing than cold beer on a hot day, followed by another one to boost your courage, and third to loosen your tongue. We already know that, as a hitch-hiker, you're the kind of person who is willing to operate outside of the rules of mainstream society; so what could be the harm in taking a little marijuana with you

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(medical, of course) to ease the tedium of standing on the side of the road for hours at a time? And it would be a shame to let all this cocaine just go to waste...

Unfortunately, the use of narcotics, both legal and illegal, will to some extent reduce your ability to make good judgements. Bad judgements can very quickly turn any safe and enjoyable experience into a dangerous one – and this is particularly true with hitch-hiking. The side effects of common narcotics can also be very unpleasant in the context of hitching: strong urges to go to the bathroom, paranoia, reduced abilities to be coherent or understand others, increased lethargy, or even strong desires to keep moving can all easily spoil the fun of hitching.

This is not an anti-drugs rant. Actually, if you have particularly strong views against drugs than you may want to consider not sharing your opinion while you're on the road. Many people will make the assumption that hitch-hikers are open-minded when it comes to drugs. It's not unusual to be picked up with the expectation that you'll share a little weed, and it's not uncommon for the occasional driver to be under the influence of something themselves. The idea of picking up hitch-hikers often quite appeals to drunks and it's not beyond some truckers to extend their operational distance with the use of illegal stimulants. In these situations it's up to you to notice before you get into the vehicle, and, failing that, make a

decision whether or not to remain in the vehicle once it becomes obvious. Some drugs impair the driver more than others and some drivers behave more erratically on narcotics than others. You have to make a judgement. Speaking of which, people who are under the influence will often try to share with you at some point – for me, the slight loss of rapport that comes from not accepting their offer is worth knowing that I will not get carried away and lose control of the situation.

In most cases, remaining sober and being discreet about what you carry will ensure that hitching is a positive experience for everyone. Bear in mind that in some countries, even just having an open container of alcohol within reach of a driver is an illegal offence – and it would be very poor form to repay the kindness of someone who has picked you up with a criminal charge.

### **3. Thou shalt respect road safety rules**

I can appreciate that some readers may be beginning to suspect that this hitch-hiking guide was actually written by their mother. Those readers should consider themselves lucky that their mothers were giving them such good hitching advice. Also, tidy your room.

Most people who have never hitch-hiked focus on “stranger danger” as their main cause for concern. We’re

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familiar with roads, we know what it's like to be in a vehicle, we don't generally worry that we're going to come to harm as a result of travelling by car – even when we're driving slowly past an accident and craning our necks to see how bad the injuries were.

However, in my opinion, the most significant risk you take when hitching is the risk of bodily harm as a result of failing to follow proper road safety. There are very few studies that we can use to compare your risk of injury from road accidents to your risk of being a victim of crime from hitch-hiking. Both of the only two credible studies into the risks of hitch-hiking – a 1974 Californian highway police study and a 1989 German federal police study – concluded that the actual risk of being a crime victim as a result of hitching is much lower than is generally perceived, and not particularly higher than the risk faced by normal citizens. On the other hand, there were 185,540 reported injuries in road accidents in the UK in 2013 alone. Unfortunately there are no modern studies investigating the dangers of hitch-hiking, perhaps because victims of crime while hitch-hiking are few and far between.

So worry less about the drivers, and more about the cars. Road safety permeates every aspect of hitch-hiking, and you should always be conscious of the risks you take by putting yourself in close proximity to traffic. See page 57 for more detailed advice, but the basics are as follow:

don't unduly distract drivers, either while you're on the side of the road or inside their vehicles; give drivers plenty of time to see you – don't hitch immediately after a blind turn, for example; and make sure vehicles are able to stop and start safely when picking you up – this means they must have plenty of space, and that roads with a speed limit greater than 50mph/80kph are generally inappropriate for hitching.

The most important thing is to just be aware of the very real danger that hanging out on roads represents – don't let familiarity lure you into a false sense of security.

#### **4. Thou shalt pay it forward**

I've already mentioned that one of the most beautiful things about hitch-hiking is that you gain something without taking anything. The vehicles you ride in are on the road anyway and the increased gas usage of an extra person is negligible. Even so, if you want to be a good hitch-hiker you have to give something in return for your ride. There is an unspoken contract that you agree to when entering someone's vehicle: they will take you closer to your destination, and you will provide them with good company. It's a fair exchange.

If you get into a vehicle and immediately fall asleep, or you don't make conversation, or you get into an

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argument, or you act inappropriately, then you are not holding up your side of the deal and it is no longer a fair exchange. Once you are in the vehicle, you have one job: to make the driver and any passengers feel as comfortable as possible, and then to entertain them for the length of the journey.

I think about this responsibility through the paradigm of “pay it forward”. Essentially, if I leave someone’s vehicle and I feel like they’re going to be even more excited to pick up the next hitch-hiker they see, then I know that I’ve successfully provided them with good company. If I leave someone’s vehicle and they’re less likely to pick up the next hitch-hiker, then I have failed. The great thing about this rule is that it not only provides immediate positive experiences for individual hitch-hikers in the short term, but it also makes hitch-hiking easier and more enjoyable for everyone in the long term too. Make a conscious effort to leave your drivers in better condition than you find them.

These four commandments are the fundamentals of being a good hitch-hiker. Following them will improve your experiences of hitch-hiking and reduce some of its inherent dangers – although the danger, of course, will never be entirely eliminated. Now that you understand what constitutes good hitching etiquette, it’s time to learn the specific methods and strategies that will make you a successful hitch-hiker.

## PART III: Making the Journey

### Tales from the Road: Canada

#### **Qualicum Beach, Vancouver Island to Tofino, Vancouver Island (165km)**

Barne had separated his possessions into two bags: a small bag that contained his money, passport, and electronics, and a bigger bag, which contained his clothes, camping equipment, and everything else. This precaution – which allowed him to abandon his large bag if he had to – was the only sign he gave that he was nervous about our trip.

Barne was a 19-year-old German guy with a magnificent beard and a satisfyingly deep voice whom I had met a few weeks ago while volunteering on a small farming project in Qualicum Beach, Vancouver Island. Although he was strong and well-suited to the heavy physical labour we were required to do there, he hadn't

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liked the people we worked for. When the time came for me to leave, he had decided he wanted to go too.

Now I was taking him hitch-hiking for the first time.

Our destination was Tofino, a remote part of the island that is famous for its beautiful beaches and incredible surfing. It was only two or three hours of driving, so I was certain that we'd get there in one day. The route was incredibly easy; a few short hops between small towns followed by one long road that went directly to Tofino. The weather was bright, sunny, and warm – perfect weather for relaxing at the coast.

I took him confidently to our first hitching spot: a large intersection with almost all the traffic going in our direction. We stuck out our thumbs. Nothing happened. The drivers didn't want to stop when the lights were green and when the lights were red they simply ignored us. After an hour without success I could see that Barne was beginning to wonder whether this hitch-hiking thing worked at all.

“Let's cut our losses and take a bus to the next town,” I said. The local buses were very slow, but we weren't having any luck here.

While we were on the bus I figured out a good place for us to get off to start hitching again. Luckily the bus route crossed right over the road we needed to follow



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to Tofino – it would be very easy to get to the hitching spot. I spent 20 minutes sitting on the bus telling Barne about our good fortunes before I realised that we'd missed our stop. Barne sighed.

An hour later, soaked in sweat, we finally arrived at the correct place. Traffic flew by at 120kph. A big red sign warned us: no pedestrians. There was no way around it; the road that had looked perfect on the map was in fact impossible to hitch. I looked at Barne. It was mid-afternoon and we hadn't caught a single ride yet.

“I'll make a sign,” I said.

We found a spot on a smaller road leading on to the one we actually wanted. For a while the traffic passed by without taking notice. Then, suddenly, a blue Toyota swerved over and broke hard on the gravel beside us. I ran over to the vehicle. A silver haired white woman sat behind the wheel, grinning.

“Normally I only stop for Natives,” she said, “But you guys are in totally the wrong place.”

She drove us to a better place, and when she let us out Barne made meaningful eye contact with me.

“Well, we're on our way,” I said. “The next ride won't take so long.”

The next ride was from a man who took us less than 2km down the road to a gas station. Then we got a

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lift with two old loggers who told us stories of the girls they'd slept with in the forests that we drove past. We had time to hear several detailed stories before they dropped us off at a roadside liquor store. Unfortunately another hitch-hiker was already there trying his luck. While we waited for him to get a ride we sat and chatted on the liquor store bench with a Native American.

The three of us had an easy conversation about all best times we'd had drinking. "You want a beer?" the Native American kept offering, amazed that we kept turning him down. Eventually the hitch-hiker got a ride and it was our turn. "Remember," the Native American said as we left, "Every day is a good day when you can walk Mother Earth."

And then: "Change your sign to 'TUFF', and you'll have better luck. That's how we say Tofino around here."

As we put our bags down at the spot, I began to realise why it had taken the other hitch-hiker so long. There was virtually no traffic. But at least we were out of the town now. We could sleep in the forest here if we wanted. I wondered how I should approach suggesting the idea of camping to Barne. We had been hitching for close to 7 hours, and we weren't even half way there. This was not the introduction to hitch-hiking I'd been hoping to give him.

Finally, a black truck with two surfboards attached

to the roof stopped and we spent two hours driving through picturesque mountains in the evening light.

“So how do you like hitch-hiking?” I asked Barne after we arrived in Tofino.

“I like it,” he said, “but I don't know if I'll do it again.”

“Well, at least you tried it first,” I said.

## **Planning your route**

Depending on how much time you spend walking to hitching spots, how quickly you get rides, how many rides you take, and how indirect your route ends up being, it will take you considerably longer to hitch-hike a journey than if you had gone directly by car. As a general rule of thumb, hitch-hiking takes double the amount of time that normal driving would. I therefore consider that every 4 hours I would spend in a car on a direct journey will take about a day (7-8 hours of travel) when hitch-hiking. 8 hours of active hitch-hiking per day is a relaxed pace that doesn't leave you too exhausted – and it gives you time to enjoy the places you travel through. If you choose to travel at a faster or slower pace then change this rule accordingly.

As we've discussed, spending an entire day on a 4

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hour journey is not an insignificant loss of time, so the first step to your route planning should be to explore the alternatives. Look up, in hours, the time a direct route would take by car, divide by 4 to get the number of days it will take you, and then use that to calculate the cost of food and shelter. Remember that on long routes you'll probably want rest days. Then compare that number to the cost of taking a bus, train, or flying. If the numbers are close, don't forget to consider that hitching is a high-quality travel experience, whereas taking a bus, train, or flying will probably be pretty boring.

If hitch-hiking the route still seems worth it, then you can start planning your route. One principle of hitching is that it is easiest to catch a ride from the outskirts of a city. However, it's also easiest to get dropped off on the wrong side of the city (where your ride enters to finish its journey) which means you have to make your way to the opposite side to start hitching again (where vehicles exit to continue their journey). This means that larger cities are easier to get to - but then more time must be spent crossing to the other side.

There are therefore two main strategies when it comes to hitching:

1. Move between large cities on fast roads
2. Move around large cities, between smaller towns on smaller roads

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Moving between large cities is good for travelling very long distances. You're more likely to get rides that take you further, and faster roads mean less time spent in the vehicle. However, psychologically it can be more draining – faster roads mean more dangerous hitching spots and a higher commitment to your rides. You can't get out just anywhere on the highway. Getting on to the fast roads can be tricky, but once you're on the road you can hitch between rest stops for a slightly easier journey.

Hitching through most capital cities is not recommended – they are so large that you'll spend a considerable amount of time and money crossing to the other side, and it's generally cheaper and faster to take a longer route around them.

Moving between smaller towns is much more relaxed, and takes you through much more beautiful scenery. However, you'll be taking shorter rides on an indirect route on slower roads, which significantly increases the amount of time it will take to go the same distance. If you're not in a hurry or if you're going a short distance, however, it's a much more enjoyable experience. Hitching spots are closer together and easier to find; walking from one end of a town to another takes maybe half an hour – perhaps you take a moment to sit and drink a coffee as you pass through. It's always nice to spend more time in forests and fields and less on the barren and polluted main roads.

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Planning is the same whichever strategy you decide to use. First you must identify the main roads you're going to be travelling on, as well as the main towns and cities that you'll pass through along the way. Look for the simplest possible route between yourself and your destination – not necessarily the shortest. Jumping between popular destinations may be faster than taking a direct line.

When you're actually on the road, you'll want to take the longest rides possible to minimise the time you spend moving through the settlements themselves. If your starting point or destination doesn't have much traffic passing through it, you should explore the public transport options between those places and the nearest big town or city as a backup plan.

### **Route planning example**

Here is an example of how I planned my trip from Manchester, Tennessee to Boulder, Colorado. First I used google maps to get the fastest direct route by car. This gave me a travel time of about 18 hours, so I planned for 5 days of hitching. Given that I had a tent and was willing to sleep outside each night, I calculated my cost of shelter at \$0. I wasn't really sure how much my girlfriend and I would spend on food, but the alternatives were the greyhound (\$175 each) or flying (\$230 each), so as long as together we spent less than \$75 per day on food we

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would be saving money. This seemed very likely.

I then looked at which roads we would need to take. The American interstate system is perfect for this kind of journey – all we needed to do was take the I24 north, then the I64, then the I70 west. Three roads for a 2000km journey is about as easy as it gets. I then identified the big cities that we would pass through on the route. They were, in order: Nashville, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Denver. This was also good news – with only four major cities on the route, a far greater proportion of traffic would be going longer distances. The more cities you have to pass through, the more time you're probably going to spend on the road. If I had been travelling somewhere with a much higher density of cities (as in Europe), I would have looked for towns and cities near my route that I might end up going to as a compromise, but that was not required for this journey.

Next I identified the road closest to my location with the most traffic going on to the I24 north. This is where I planned to look for my first hitching spot. Because we were hitching from a large festival, I was hopeful for three things: that there was the possibility that there would be at least a handful of people driving all the way from Tennessee to Colorado, that those people would all be taking the same route, and that they would be very likely to pick me up. In human psychology, 'the bystander effect' refers to the tendency for people not to act when

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they believe that there are others that could also act – for example, there might be many witnesses to a crime, but nobody calls the police because they expect somebody else to do it. ‘The bystander effect’ also works in reverse – a person is much more likely to act when they think they are the only ones who are going to do so. This is why doing the whole trip in one ride became my ambitious Plan A (see page 11). If that failed, I would try to get to St. Louis, and if that failed, I would settle for Nashville.

Once I knew my route, I spent some time researching the legality of hitch-hiking for each state I would pass through (Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado) so that I would be prepared in case I had to deal with the police. I also identified the locations of any 24-hour Walmarts on the route, as these are generally close to main roads and they let you sleep for free in their parking lots.

You have much less to worry about if you are planning a journey that is less than 4 hours of hitching by car, but you should still follow the same process.

1. Calculate how much time the journey will take (1 day of hitching = 4 hours of direct travel by car).
2. Calculate the cost of hitching and compare to the alternatives.
3. Decide whether you will take fast roads between



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large cities, or slow roads between smaller towns.

4. Identify the exact roads you will try to take.
5. Research the major cities and towns that lie along those roads, and maybe a few options for shelter, food, and public transport. Also consider any local laws regarding hitch-hiking.
6. Identify which road you will look for your first hitching spot on.

If you have access to the internet, you may wish to use <http://www.hitchwiki.org> to help plan your route. This website is filled with information about hitch-hiking. Most usefully you can find specific advice for hitching through popular locations and there is an interactive map with user-submitted recommendations showing both the good and bad hitching spots for many major towns and cities across the world.

It's important not to over-plan when hitching. The chances are high that you'll end up going off route, and you'll have to be comfortable with adapting to that. A roadmap is very helpful, as is a phone with GPS, but neither are totally necessary. If you're lost you can just make use of the knowledge of the people who offer you rides. So, as long as you know which major roads and cities are on your route, you can just say "I'm going to X" and the driver will tell you whether or not you're headed in the right direction – and if you're in a bad spot, more

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often than not they'll take you to a better one.

You don't need to know every little detail about places for food or where you can sleep. You may want to remain ignorant of the law, seeing as you're planning to break it anyway (I prefer to have some idea). At the end of the day, all you need is enough information about your journey to allow you to improvise effectively. Embrace the fact that you can't plan the specifics.

It's going to be an adventure.

### **Packing your bag**

Deciding what to bring with you on your travels is a skill all on its own. You need to take into account how long you will be travelling for, the different environments and weather conditions you'll be travelling through, how you will eat and sleep, and how much you are physically able to carry.

This section is going to assume you will be making a trip over several days and that you're planning to cook and sleep outdoors for free. If you're hitching for less than a day you can skip this advice – all you really need is a mobile phone for emergencies, some water, and a packed lunch.

As a general rule I try to carry as little, and as little

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of value, as possible. Despite this, I always find myself throwing or giving away things when I move on during long term travel. Here is a list of the gear that has remained with me throughout:

### Rucksack

Your rucksack should be appropriate for hiking and have straps for your waist. 60-70 litres is a good size, but you can get away with a lot less if you invest in smaller equipment.

### Waterproof bags

Carrying 4-5 waterproof bags of different sizes can help keep everything separate, organised, and dry within the rucksack. When you're staying in accommodation the bags can be taken out of your rucksack, allowing you easy access to your possessions without having to spread them all around the room.

### Clothing

Take as little as possible and keep it practical for your climate. Remember that you aren't going to change your shirt, underwear, or socks as much as you would at home. Keep your dirty clothing separate from your clean clothing to prevent everything starting to smell.

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### Basic hygiene & first aid items

Toothbrush, shampoo, and whatever else you need to keep yourself looking presentable. Don't bother carrying first aid items that you don't know how to use. The most useful over-the-counter medicines to carry are non-drowsy allergy pills, anti-inflammatory painkillers, insect anti-itch cream, and anti-diarrhoea pills.

### Wet weather gear

This is absolutely vital. People don't tend to welcome wet hitch-hikers into their vehicles and it can be hard to dry clothing on the road. Wet weather gear also helps prevent illness and discomfort on the road.

### Bivi bag or Tent

A bivi bag (essentially a large waterproof bag that you sleep inside) is more uncomfortable and slightly colder, but nearly as waterproof as a tent and much more discreet. It is faster to set up and take down, doesn't require soft ground for pegs, and is smaller and lighter to carry. You also maintain a far better awareness of your surroundings in a bivi bag. A tent, however, will keep your gear dry and you get a bit more privacy.

### Sleeping bag

Make sure it's appropriate for the temperatures you'll be sleeping in. Synthetic filling is cheaper, but less

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insulating and doesn't compact as well. Down filling is warm and compacts well, but when it gets wet it's hellish to sleep in and requires warm weather to dry.

### Inflatable roll mat

These tend to take up a lot of space, but they make a huge difference to comfort (the earth won't suck all the warmth out of you while you sleep) and are worth having. Get the smallest one possible. If you buy a cheaper foam mat, you can cut it to the size of your body to avoid wasting space.

### Ear plugs / eye mask

Bit of a luxury, but these take up no room and make a big difference when you find yourself trying to sleep in bright and noisy conditions next to a road.

### Camping towel

Go for small, lightweight, and fast-drying, but make sure you keep it separate from clothing – camping towels start to smell really bad after a while.

### Toilet paper

One roll is enough. Keep it in a waterproof bag if you want it stay useful.

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### Cooking equipment

There are lots of different ways to cook on the road. At a minimum you'll need a small portable stove, fuel, camping cookware, a spork, and a sharp knife. See page 92 for more detailed advice.

### Water bottle

A screw on cap is less likely to leak water all over the stuff inside your bag. A metal canteen can be thrown on a camp-fire to boil and sanitise water (let it cool down again before you try to pick it up). Pouches with drinking tubes take up less room when empty and are easier to drink from when hiking. Try to have the capacity to carry about 2 litres, you can always fill up less.

### Thick black marker pen

Handy for making signs from scavenged cardboard or drawing moustaches on your partner while they sleep.

### Books

Books make for an easy way to pass the time without having to covertly charge a device in fast food restaurants. Bring a couple and trade them with other travellers as you go.

## Indian Tapestry

This is a large sheet of soft patterned material that is surprisingly versatile when travelling. I use it as a picnic blanket, a scarf, a poncho, a bedsheet, a sleeping bag liner, a carrier bag/hobo bindle, and for room decoration. With all the practical gear, sometimes it's nice to have something beautiful too.

## Carrying a weapon

Should you carry a weapon? Most people will advise you to carry a knife, but you should consider carefully whether or not to actually do so. I suspect that a knife doesn't offer much more than psychological protection and that attempting to use one as a weapon will only cause an already bad situation to escalate into heavy violence. If something goes wrong and you take out a knife, your opponent will likely react far more extremely than if you had chosen to flee or call for help; they now may legitimately fear for their lives. All you've really done is caused them to receive a big boost of adrenaline, increasing their ability to cause you harm.

Given your probable lack of experience with using a knife as a weapon (and hopefully your hesitance to hurt someone badly) you will be unlikely to be better at defending yourself than if you had no weapon at all. Bear in mind that carrying a knife in some situations may also be illegal and you may face tougher consequences if you

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do have trouble with the police. Finally, consciously choosing to carry a weapon puts you into a fear mind-set instead of a friend-making one, which doesn't make for much of a fun adventure.

That said, I have always carried a knife in my pocket when hitch-hiking. Its main use is for cooking and I do not really consider it a weapon to be resorted to if things go wrong. For a while when camping outdoors in the USA I carried bear spray, and if anything desperately untoward had taken place then maybe I would have tried to make use of that. The fact is, however, that I have never felt my safety deliberately threatened at any point in any of my travelling. In fact I've had many rides with people I might have felt threatened by in different circumstances and they were often the ones who helped me out the most.

### **The art of packing**

To pack your rucksack, lay everything out on the floor in the order you think you are going to use it. Then, starting with the items you think you will need to take out of the bag last, try to fit everything in as tightly as possible. The items you use the most should go in the outer pockets for easy access. If you can, try to place waterproof, durable items right at the bottom, and heavier items close to your back to reduce the force they apply relative to your body. Place hard irregularly-shaped items



away from your back so they don't dig in while you walk. Items you use frequently should go in the outer pockets for easy access.

If your bag is too heavy to walk a few miles with, take some less important items out until it is light enough for you to carry. Remember, you'll have to walk to find good hitching spots and being able to comfortably carry your bag will make for a much more enjoyable journey.

## **Finding a spot**

A good hitching spot refers to a place where there is a high likelihood of being offered a useful ride you are willing to take. The first step to finding a good hitching spot is to identify the which roads have the most traffic going your way. Most of the time this will be the main road that connects to the next destination on your route.

Unfortunately, main roads are usually fast moving with few good places to stop safely, so it's difficult to hitch on them directly. Instead, look for smaller roads that lead on to that main road – these will still have a high quantity of useful traffic, but are much more likely to have safe places for traffic to stop. Remember that you need to be on the edge of the town or city nearest your next destination. Pick the most convenient smaller road and walk (or take public transport) there.

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Once you're on your chosen road, start walking along it in the direction you want to travel. You're looking for a spot that fulfils the following criteria:

### Drivers should be able to see you easily

Most drivers will consider several different factors before they decide pick you up. These will differ from person to person, but examples might be: do they want company? Are they driving through places in which they will feel safe with a stranger? Is there enough room in their car? Most importantly, they need to make a judgement about you. Are you someone they'll feel comfortable having in their vehicle?

It is important that drivers have a chance to consider these things, so you should maximise the time they have between seeing you and passing you. Most normal people are not willing to let strangers into their vehicles without having the chance to judge them. The less time drivers have to judge you, the less 'normal' your lifts might end up being. The more time drivers have to make that judgement, the more likely they are to offer you a lift, and the more likely it is that you will want to accept that lift.

There is a counter-argument that says that allowing drivers to see you for too long also gives them time to talk themselves out of picking you up. This may be true, but the increased safety that comes from giving drivers

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plenty of time to see you is worth it, in my opinion.

Try to find a spot that has traffic approach you on a straight road. Don't hitch just after a corner, and (of course) don't hitch after dark.

### Vehicles should be able to stop safely

It doesn't matter how much a driver wants to pick you up, if they can't stop safely then they won't give you a ride. This means that your spot must have space for a vehicle to pull over without getting in the way of traffic.

Lay-bys and turnouts make for ideal hitching spots, but are uncommon in some countries. Most drivers feel comfortable pulling into turnings on quiet roads, but you'll get your hopes up every time a vehicle actually turns on to it. Bus stops are also good, although you must make it clear that you aren't there waiting for a bus. It is also possible to hitch in places where the traffic is forced to stop periodically, such as on intersections and roundabouts, but you'll miss out on many rides from drivers who do not want to inhibit the flow of traffic when it is moving.

### Do not be a danger to yourself or others

Finally, remember that you are a pedestrian on roads that are usually the exclusive domain of vehicles. You need to gain the attention of drivers, but this should

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not come at the expense of your safety, or the safety of those around you. At the very least, getting in the way of traffic will annoy drivers and be counterproductive to your hitching experience.

The faster the traffic moves on the road, the more distance you should keep from it. Keep your bags back from the road and out of the way of anywhere a vehicle might want to pull over. If possible try not to obstruct road signs. If a road is very narrow with high verges, you may need to find another road to hitch on.

Always walk on the side of the road that faces oncoming traffic when travelling between spots. Use pavements where possible and walk in single file where no pavements exist. Don't walk on the inside bend of corners – cross to the outside before the corner and cross back afterwards to make sure traffic has the best chance of seeing (and avoiding) you. Always look both ways and wait for traffic to pass before crossing the road. Do not run in front of vehicles when you cross the road and, especially in poor weather conditions, consider wearing something bright or reflective in order to increase your visibility.

### **Taking advantage of bad hitching spots**

If you have found a place where drivers have plenty of time to see you, plenty of room to pull over, and you're out of the way of traffic – then you have found a

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good hitching spot. Of course, you will not always be able to find spots that fulfil the criteria perfectly, but it's not always necessary to do so. You can get rides from the worst hitching spots possible – you'll just spend a lot more time waiting for them.

However, bear in mind that spending an hour finding a good spot where you'll get a ride in 20 minutes is the same as spending 20 minutes finding a bad spot where you'll be waiting an hour – except an hour of walking leaves you a lot more tired and smelly than an hour of waiting.

My normal strategy is to start hitching from the first possible hitching location I come across, even if it isn't great. Sometimes drivers who know the road will pick me up and take me to an area where they think I'll have a better chance of getting rides. If I wait longer than 30-45 minutes and no cars have stopped, then I'll spend 30-45 minutes looking for a new spot. That way I can balance the time spent looking and the time spent waiting fairly evenly, and the hiking makes for a pleasant break from the monotony of waiting.

If I've been waiting more than an hour, but cars have been stopping and I've just not been accepting their offers, then I'll generally just take the next ride – even if it's not that useful. At least that way I can try to find my next hitching spot from the comfort of their passenger seat.

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### Good hitching spot examples

- Lay-bys, turnouts, T-junctions leading to quieter roads.
- On the shoulder of a quiet or slow moving road.
- Bus stops, truck stops, rest stops, petrol/gas station exits.
- Roundabouts, intersections.

### Bad hitching spot examples

- On the shoulder of a busy, fast moving road.
- Highway/motorway on ramps or exit ramps.
- Immediately after a corner.
- Roads with multiple lanes.
- From within (or immediately before) a town/city.

## Soliciting rides

Once you've found your hitching spot it's time to start soliciting rides. Take your bag off – you'll look like you'll take up less space in the vehicle, and you're going to be here for a while anyway. Put your stuff somewhere nearby but out of the way of anywhere vehicles might want to stop. Some hitch-hikers like to make sure their

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bag is visible to traffic so that drivers know they are travellers, rather than locals, and therefore probably have much better stories to tell.

Now you can start to hitch-hike. The symbol for hitch-hiking is universally recognised in western cultures: hold your arm out straight and form a ‘thumbs up’ sign with your hand. Make eye contact with drivers as they come near and give them a friendly wave and a smile. Try to look as though you are having the best a time a person can have while waiting on the side of a road.

(If you're travelling through a non-western culture, do your research on local customs and hand signals. In some countries, for example, the “thumbs up” sign reputedly translates to “up yours”!)

### **Accepting or rejecting rides**

When a vehicle stops for you, pick up your bag and run over to the window. Make eye contact with the driver, smile, and say: “Hi, thanks for stopping, where are you going?”

Listen carefully as they reply and make a mental judgement about their appearance and the appearance of their vehicle. If you are willing to accept the ride, thank them and get into the vehicle as quickly as possible. Otherwise, say something like “Thank you, but I’m looking for a ride that takes me further,” or “That’s too far

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out of my way” and move away from their vehicle.

If you’re rejecting the ride because you feel uncomfortable about the person, but you’ve already told them where you’re going and therefore can’t lie about it, it is still possible to decline politely by saying something like, “Sorry, my parents/partner asked me to only accept rides from couples/women/etc.”

Remember that you don't owe them anything just because they stopped, and you don't necessarily need to come up with an elaborate excuse just to refuse a ride. Thanking them and moving away from the vehicle is usually enough.

### **Using a sign**

Some hitch-hikers consider a sign to be vital, others think it completely unnecessary. By communicating to drivers exactly where you’d like to go, you greatly increase your chances of getting a ride to that place – but you may miss out on potentially-useful offers that don’t go directly to that place. It’s always a good idea to have some cardboard with you to make a sign if you decide you want one.

A sign is most useful when your hitch-hiking spot has a lot of traffic that isn't going in your direction, such as at a roundabout, or at an intersection that leads on to the road you want. In this situation, having a sign



prevents drivers who aren't going your way stopping unnecessarily.

To make a sign, take a thick black pen and some cardboard and write in large, thick lettering. As a test you should place the sign a short distance away and see if it is still readable. Exactly what you write is up to you, but generally you should keep it short. Good choices might be the name of a city you want to arrive in, or the name of the next main road you want to take. If locals have a nickname for a town or city, you may have increased luck using that. If you are in a foreign country, consider writing the name in the native language.

On longer journeys I usually take a large piece of cardboard and fold it in half or into thirds. Now I have 4-6 different spaces to write on, and I can use a combination of techniques and adapt to changes of plan easily.

### **Other props**

Sometimes hitch-hikers like to bring other props with them, and there are various superstitions about what can increase or decrease your chances of a ride. If you're travelling in a foreign country, waving the flag of your home country might increase your chances of being picked up by expatriates or people who can at least speak your language. Musical or sporting equipment will emphasise the common ground you share with others who

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play music or sports. Top hats, funny wigs, and other costume ideas might increase your novelty appeal. There are even tales of hitch-hikers carrying unnecessarily heavy or bulky items as a sort of sadistic challenge – such as the guy who hitch-hiked Ireland with a fridge (see page 107). Whether or not these props work are up to you to decide. Personally, I prefer to carry less in my backpack.

### **Sharing hitching spots**

If you're hitching from the same spot as other people, keep some distance between each group so that drivers won't be discouraged from offering a ride. Ideally only one group should hitch-hike at a time, with the others resting away from the roadside and not putting themselves at risk or distracting drivers unnecessarily. Of course, there's nothing wrong with asking a driver who stops if they'll consider helping the friendly sunburnt fellow sitting a few steps down the road as well. Some might even consider it good manners.

### **Dressing the part**

How you choose to present yourself to drivers may have an influence on who you get picked up by. It's probably not worth altering your appearance from how you usually travel – hitch hiking isn't a job interview – but making an effort to look neat and approachable generally results in a greater quantity of higher quality

rides.

It's probably a good idea not to wear sunglasses, or hats or scarves that obscure your face. Women might consider dressing conservatively to avoid unwanted advances. Wearing bright colours might improve your visibility on the road, and bear in mind that you could travel through different weather conditions over the course of the day.

Ultimately, you'll probably get rides no matter how you're dressed – but taking care in your appearance may reduce the time you spend waiting for them.

### **Common hand signals from drivers**

Occasionally a driver (or their passengers) will return your thumbs up signal with a hand gesture of their own. It almost always means that they're not going to pick you up, but it is worth knowing what they're trying to tell you.

#### Twirling, upward pointed forefinger

The driver is turning around and therefore they are not going in your direction.

#### Forefinger pointed left or right

The driver is near their destination, or turning off soon, and therefore they are not going in your direction.

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Both hands held up with palms exposed/thumb and forefinger held close together

The driver would love to pick you up, but there is some reason that they can't – probably a lack of room in the vehicle.

Thumbs up/peace sign

The driver approves of your method of travel, but not enough to pick you up.

Middle finger/other obscene gestures

The driver has poor social skills and acknowledges that they would not be enjoyable to share a vehicle with. However, they wish you luck with the next one.

Use these hand signals to make judgements about your hitching spot. If a lot of drivers are turning off or turning around, perhaps you have chosen a road that doesn't have much useful traffic and you should move further along if possible. If a lot of drivers want to pick you up, but can't, you're probably having bad luck in a good spot and it might be worth staying longer.

### **Non-roadside hitching spots**

The road isn't the only place you can hitch-hike. You may find some success at bus stations (ask the bus

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driver if you can ride for free), airport drop off points, petrol stations, car parks, or just by talking to people on the street.

When you're hitch-hiking from a place like a petrol station or car park, you have two choices:

1. Wait at the exit with a sign.
2. Approach people directly.

It can be effective to use both approaches simultaneously if you're travelling with a friend. Try to stay in sight of one another or you risk missing out on rides with people who stop at the exit, but don't want to wait for you to search for your friend. Be prepared for the vast majority of people to reject you if you're approaching them for rides. The trick here is to ask as many people as possible and be as friendly as possible. Don't be afraid to approach people who are sitting in their vehicles. Sometimes a driver will see you asking other people and then actually come up to you to offer a ride.

You'll also find that, as you go about your day enjoying the places you're visiting, people will often notice your large backpack and carefree attitude and strike up conversation. It's not uncommon for these friendly conversations with strangers to turn into impromptu rides – so feel free to tell people the broad details about your hitch-hiking experiences and where you're hoping to get to next. As always, use your

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judgement and, if you're going to camp outside, don't tell anyone where you're planning to do it.

### **Unsolicited gifts**

In countries where pan-handling is common, some drivers may mistake your request for a ride for a request for charity. This might come in the form of money, food, or other gifts.

In my opinion, such gifts (when given freely) represent extreme kindness on the part of the driver and it is bad form to reject them and deny a person their chance to perform a generous act. Kindness and generosity towards strangers should not be discouraged in this world. What you do with the gift is up to you. If it's something edible and you're hungry, you can eat it. If you get money and you aren't truly in need, consider passing it on to the next homeless person you see.

### **Staying motivated**

Standing by the side of the road waiting for a ride can be draining. Every vehicle that passes can start to feel like a personal rejection. But the more miserable you look, the less likely drivers are to decide to pick you up. Making a conscious effort to enjoy yourself and stay motivated will vastly improve your experience.

Singing songs, dancing on the spot, talking out

loud to the cars, practising your world-class mime routine, or simply having a pleasant conversation with your hitching partner are all good ways to stay motivated while looking like you're enjoying yourself. Food and sleep are the main fuel of motivation, so try eating a snack or taking a nap if you catch yourself lagging.

Remember, it only takes one person to decide to give you a ride – you'll get one eventually.

### **When you really get stuck**

Occasionally the time it takes for you to get a ride is longer than the time you're willing to wait. When this happens it's worth trying to hitch-hike public transport instead. Walk to the nearest bus stop and ask the bus driver if you can get on for free. You'll be surprised how often this works, especially if you're female. Trains are another option, but it's much harder to avoid paying for a ticket and the fines can be high for getting caught without one.

It's not the end of the world if you do have to pay for a bus or a train, though – travelling to the next town over is normally enough to change your luck, and these short, local journeys are rarely expensive. Pay attention to the stops, however, and make sure you get off near a good hitching spot, or you risk wasting a lot of time hiking back the way you came.

### **Travelling in the vehicle**

#### **Introducing yourself and making conversation**

Once you've accepted a ride from someone and entered their vehicle, introduce yourself and, if possible, shake hands with the driver. Thank them for picking you up, but don't go over the top - some people can feel uncomfortable with elaborate displays of gratitude. A good way to put someone at ease is to immediately treat them as though they are a friend. You can start the conversation by simply asking "How's your day going?"

Think about the way friends talk to each other – conversation flows naturally, almost effortlessly. They don't interview each other; there's no need to ask lots of questions about who they are and what they like, because those things are already known. Friends spend most of the time speaking in statements; one person expresses an opinion on something and the other person responds to it. They try to make each other laugh. Questions are used mostly to clarify or ask for more detail about something that has just been said. Both people usually engage in some form of "active listening", where the listener agrees with the speaker while they are speaking and then restates or paraphrases what was said in their own words before responding with something new.

Your aim is to reach this kind of conversation as



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quickly as possible. Don't fall into the trap of interviewing the driver, or having them interview you. The questions will inevitably dry up and, ultimately, the whole exercise is pointless. It is unlikely you will see this person again, so you don't need to pry out every little fact about them. Most people realise that, on some level, this type of conversation is inauthentic – and treating them like a friend means being genuine and honest.

When you ask somebody how their day is going, you'll generally get one of two types of response:

1. "Oh, fine thank you, how about you?"
2. "Well, I've got a long journey ahead of me to Salt Lake City. I've just been in Denver where I visited my daughter and her husband to help them get ready for their first baby."

The second type of response is the one you're hoping for – a long reply with plenty of conversation topics that you can choose to develop. Look for common ground and try to judge which topic the driver would be most excited to talk about. Then ask a question that aims to elicit a similarly long response.

If you get the first response, then it is up to you to be the one to present potential conversation topics from which the driver can select. A good reply would be something like: "I'm having a really good time. I've just been visiting my friend in Boulder and we spent a lot of

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time climbing and hiking. Now I'm trying to get to San Francisco – I don't know much about it, but I've heard it's beautiful." With this response you have revealed something about yourself (you like outdoor activities and beautiful cities), you've opened up potential conversation topics about Boulder, and you've indirectly posed a question about what San Francisco is like. Try to anticipate any kind of common ground you might share, but don't be dishonest about yourself to try and make them like you.

By talking this way you give the driver the opportunity to select the conversation topics that they are most comfortable with and you'll find it harder to run out of things to say. If conversation dries up about one topic, you can go back and develop a new line of conversation about something that was said previously or you can ask another open-ended question and develop from there.

As you talk you'll begin to get an idea of the personality and interests of the person you're speaking to. You can use this information to effectively direct the conversation towards topics that they're more likely to enjoy talking about. Here is a list of the types of conversation you could be aiming to have, in order from best to worst:

1. The driver explains a subject in which they are an authority – their passions or areas of expertise.

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2. The driver tells you a story, or shares their thoughts and feelings about experiences they have had.
3. You share with the driver your experiences, thoughts, and feelings with regard to a subject they are genuinely interested in.
4. You seek opinions and recommendations from the driver on safe topics (movies, music, books, places to visit).
5. You tell an entertaining story.
6. Small talk.
7. Silence.
8. Sensitive topics including most political, religious, or philosophical discussion.

Is talking about sensitive topics really worse than silence? It depends, of course, and there are some hitchhikers who enjoy discussing these subjects while travelling in particular. Certainly you have the opportunity to hear a wide range of views and broaden your current beliefs by engaging in this type of discussion. However, you must have a high degree of tact and open-mindedness for this to work and, crucially, so must your driver. These conversations can be a minefield; tread lightly.

Generally, the more you manage to be the one

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listening, the better the conversation is – and you get bonus points for finding common ground or learning new things about the world. However, occasionally you'll get a ride with someone who is not very talkative. In these situations it is up to you to judge if that person would be entertained by one of your longer stories, or if they'd prefer to sit in semi-awkward silence for a while. When you're spending several hours travelling together, silence can sometimes be a relief.

### **Helping others help you**

Most of the time, if you are in someone's vehicle, it means they have made a decision to help you – but not all drivers understand the best way to do that. Don't be afraid to be clear about what would be most useful for you. You'll find that many drivers are more than happy to go out of their way to make your life easier and it's definitely worth taking advantage of this when you can.

As you near the end of your time travelling together most drivers will ask you where you want to be dropped off. If you are in a town or city, go through the process of finding the next appropriate road to look for a hitching spot and ask if they can drop you off near that road or near any public transport that can be used to reach that road. If you want to stay on the same road, but they're leaving it, ask to be dropped off at the last rest stop.

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I've found that hitch-hiking goes very smoothly for me when I use this magic phrase:

“I need to be dropped off on the road which has the most traffic going to [my destination], in a place where it is safe to stop.”

If you are close to your final destination, drivers will usually offer to take you all the way there.

### **Leaving the vehicle**

Don't forget to thank your driver and wish them a safe journey when the time comes to leave them behind. Check that you still have your most vital possessions (wallet, phone, passport, etc.) as you get out of the vehicle and look carefully around your seat to make sure that you aren't about to leave anything behind. Think about whether you have any luggage in a different part of the car and remind the driver that you need to take it before they leave you. Leaving the passenger door open while you retrieve your possessions can prevent any possibility of confusion. If you introduced any fast food wrappers, water bottles, or other litter into the vehicle, make sure you pick it up and take it with you as well.

### **Strategies for uncomfortable rides**

Very occasionally you may find that you've made a

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poor decision and accepted a ride from somebody that you do not feel comfortable travelling with. These bogeymen (or women) of hitch-hiking are rare, but having a back-up plan can make you feel more confident on the road.

Before you jump to hasty decisions, consider whether your feelings of discomfort are based in any prejudices you might have – perhaps this is an opportunity to expand your social boundaries. Listening to racist viewpoints or endless wild conspiracy theories might be unpleasant, for example, but it doesn't necessarily put you in any greater danger than when travelling with somebody who is well aligned with your world-view. You may not like everyone you get into a vehicle with, but at least you're making progress towards your destination – and you're learning about the world.

If the vehicle you are in is being driven dangerously, the most effective thing to do is ask the driver to slow down. Often this will be enough to turn an uncomfortable ride into a pleasant one. Verbal threats or persistent reckless driving is more serious, however, and in these situations you'll ideally try to make an excuse to get out of the vehicle early while still having the driver drop you off at a good place to continue hitch-hiking. If this is not possible, or if the driver refuses to let you out, insist that you want to leave the vehicle immediately – remember that, depending on where you are, it may take a

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few moments for the driver to find a safe place to pull over. If they do not pull over when they have the opportunity to do so, saying “I think I’m going to be sick,” followed by some theatrical retching in their general direction may change their mind.

In situations where you are genuinely in danger, call the police or attract attention from people around you. If this is not possible, consider whether any of the following last resorts represent a lesser risk to your personal health:

- Exit the vehicle while it is moving.
- Set something on fire and throw it into the back of the vehicle.
- Use pepper spray or similar on the driver (remember you are in an enclosed space, and will probably suffer some of the effects yourself).

I have had several uncomfortable rides, but I should add that I have never made the decision to end a ride prematurely because of it. Furthermore, I don’t know of anybody who has ever had to make use of any of the above last resorts while hitch-hiking.

### **Continuing your journey**

As your old ride drives away, get out of the way of any traffic and orientate yourself. If you are not yet at

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your destination, you must now consider how to continue your journey. Do you have enough time or energy to find your next ride? Do you have any other needs to attend to, such as finding food or using the bathroom? And where exactly are you going to sleep tonight anyway?



## PART IV: Life on the Road

### Tales from the Road: Europe

#### **Uddebo, Sweden to Bologna, Italy via Prague, Czech Republic (3400km)**

It had been a relaxed day of travelling. Anna, Angela, and I had eaten a delicious breakfast that morning on the small island of Fejø, and then been driven to a ferry port on the south side of Denmark by the man we had been staying with, a wonderfully kind British expatriate called Peter. When we reached the port he hadn't wanted to leave us.

“If everything went right for you today,” he said, “how far would you want to go?”

And then, after a moment: “I could take you to Berlin, if you wanted.”

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We laughed and thanked him and refused.

“If we got to Berlin today,” I said, “We’d be like a dog that finally caught a rabbit. We wouldn’t know what to do.”

The three of us tried to hitch-hike on to the ferry, but the port staff moved us on pretty quickly and instead we boarded as fully paid foot-passengers. Once at sea, Anna and Angela went to work approaching people and asking for rides while I, lacking the feminine arts of persuasion (or perhaps just plain old courage), waited with our bags.

By the end of the journey they’d found two rides: neither had enough space to fit three extra people, so we split up and arranged to meet at the central station in Lübeck, Germany, which both rides happened to be passing through. My journey was uneventful; I got along well with my driver, a young mountaineer who was on his way back from a trip in Sweden, and conversation was easy. He had a job designing greenhouses to grow tomatoes on an industrial scale. “We would waste less energy if all of Europe’s tomatoes were grown in Morocco and transported from there” he said. “You have no idea how much power it takes to grow tomatoes in an unfavourable climate.”

Lübeck was warm and full of tourists, so we decided to pay for our dinner by playing music on the

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street. Our little travelling band consisted of the following: Anna and Angela singing beautiful harmonies together; Anna rocking out on guitar; and me mostly using my own guitar as a kind of awkward percussive instrument, like a child given something to keep him busy while the adults do the real work. Still, Anna and Angela had lovely voices and we got a generally positive reception from the crowds as they walked by.

Performing together made for a nice moment in our travels and I decided to immortalise it with a photograph. My efforts with the camera were interrupted, however, by a young man who suddenly stepped out from the bustling stream of passers-by and addressed me with a short string of surprisingly soft German syllables.

“I speak English,” I said, my shameful reply in circumstances such as this.

“That’s good,” he said in perfect English. “Have you got a place to stay tonight?”

“We’re camping,” I said.

“You can stay at my place, if you want,” he said.

I looked at him for a moment. His expression was neutral, but his face looked kind. He seemed detached from the offer he had made: it wouldn’t bother him if we said yes or no. I liked that – it was an honest offer, without any trace of an ulterior motive.

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“Come on over and meet the girls,” I said.

He introduced himself as Torsten and we walked to his apartment to meet his girlfriend and drop our backpacks off. Torsten lived with his biological father, a man that he hadn't met until he was 18. Since then they had connected as friends, rather than father and son, and he more often described him as his room-mate than by their true relationship. But Torsten spoke of his “room-mate” with a deep affection and I wondered how many others could call their fathers their friends so truthfully. His girlfriend spoke good English and welcomed us without hesitation. Angela, Anna, and I decided to cook a big meal to thank them both for their hospitality, and Torsten countered our offer by saying he'd like to give us a tour of Lübeck first.

Torsten's mother had been a tour guide and his knowledge of his home town was encyclopaedic. Although we'd already seen most of Lübeck while looking for a place to busk, Torsten pointed out a thousand little things we'd missed or ignored. He showed us how the town had placed explosives on all the bridges in case of attack by Allied forces during WWII. He explained that Lübeck had the best marzipan in the world and that every year the local marzipan shops competed to build elaborate edible sculptures out of it. He told us about the seven churches of Lübeck and their histories and legends. At every turn the city was filled with secrets

which he revealed to us one by one. Finally, as darkness fell, he took us to the top of a high-rise car park and we gazed across the lit-up roofs of the city.

I'd never heard of Lübeck before. I'd never planned to visit. And it was such a beautiful, interesting place. How many other places like this were out there, waiting for us to discover them?

“Thanks for trusting me so easily,” Torsten said later. “I was worried that I made you the offer too soon.”

“I could tell straight away that you are a good person,” I said.

But it wasn't true. We had taken a risk by trusting him. And we had been rewarded.

## **Sleeping on the road**

For the average budget traveller, living on the road means sleeping in cheap hostels every night. While there is nothing wrong with this when you're travelling by public transport, there are several problems with trying to hitch-hike between hostels.

First, the cost. The price of hostels varies widely from place to place, but, even if you consistently find places that are very cheap, the total amount of money spent adds up quickly. Sleeping every night in \$15 hostels

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for a month is still \$450. The true cost of a hostel is not just the price of the bed either. It's easy to get caught up in the spending habits of other travellers and suddenly find yourself eating out every evening and drinking your money away in the nights, only to wake up one morning to find your wallet empty and your new friends already on their way to a different city.

Cheap hostels also have the downside of being in undesirable areas of the city. You're probably more vulnerable as a traveller walking back to your hostel late at night through a rough area than when you're camping quietly in the woods at the edge of the city, and it's not uncommon to hear of people who have had their possessions stolen from their less-than-secure shared rooms. The comfort of these rooms can be questionable, too, often suffering from ageing mattresses and loud noises – either from the bar downstairs, the traffic outside, or the snoring of your room-mates. Of course the vast majority of hostels are safe enough, comfortable enough, and very enjoyable to stay in – but it's worth remembering that you aren't guaranteed these things just because you're paying.

Finally, and most importantly, hostels are simply inconvenient for hitch-hiking. If you book ahead, you'll suddenly feel under pressure to reach a certain destination each day. If you don't book ahead, every evening is spent wandering a city looking for a vacant bed at a good price.

Either way you're guaranteed to waste time each morning when you have to make your way to the edge of the city to start hitch-hiking again.

At this point, the experienced budget traveller might suggest couch-surfing as a good alternative to hostels. Although undoubtedly cheaper than hostelling, couch-surfing suffers from many of the same issues, namely the pressure to reach certain places by certain times. The main disadvantage is the effort required to organise a place to sleep: access to the internet can be sporadic when you're hitch-hiking (unless you have a smart phone), and you have to be able to predict where you're going to be at least a few days in advance (which is generally difficult when hitching).

That said, for shorter journeys of perhaps less than a week, it is possible to overcome the difficulties presented by hitch-hiking between hostels and couch-surfing hosts. You can make it work for you. It can be nice to stay in a hostel every once in a while on longer journeys too, when the possibility of doing laundry and taking a shower outweigh the other inconveniences.

Most of the time, though, the better option is simply to camp outdoors.

Many of us have gone camping, but the idea of pitching a tent outside of a camp-site can seem like a criminal offence to some. At the very least, free-camping

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can feel like a dangerous prospect to people who have never experienced it. And it's true that sleeping outside in a big city (or even a small town) has its risks and discomforts. With good judgement, however, there's no reason why your nights on the road should be anything but comfortable, restful, and reasonably safe. As with hitch-hiking, the skill is in finding a good spot.

A good sleeping spot is discreet, somewhere out of the way, a place where you won't be noticed by other people during the night. Safety is the most important criteria. I prefer wooded areas, away from footpaths and ideally hidden from the road. If you're in a densely populated area when darkness falls, consider taking local transport somewhere a little more rural. If you absolutely have to camp in a city, look for large parks or playing fields. These are usually emptier than you'd think, but it's a good idea to scope them out in the daytime. Give a wide berth to any areas that show signs of settlement by the homeless. Establish your sleeping place after nightfall, away from street lamps or other light sources, and don't make a lot of noise or use a torch or phone once you've set up camp.

When most people camp outside, they imagine big tents and camping stoves. Free-camping is different. A tent is essentially a thin wall that blocks out your awareness of your surroundings, transforming normal, innocent night-time sounds into imminent threats of rape,



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murder, or animal attack. It's also a hassle if you need to leave an area quickly. Sleeping in a bivi bag – a large waterproof bag that you use to protect your sleeping bag from the dirt and rain – is much better in terms of convenience, situational awareness, and discretion. Try not to cook in the evenings, as the light and noise can attract unwanted attention, and the smell can attract animals in more rural areas.

If you do have an encounter with a stranger during the night, remain confident. People are conditioned to be scared of each other during the night time and you can use that to your advantage. Don't be aggressive, but firmly assert that you have to sleep and want to be left alone. Sometimes people will try to give you money or share something with you – it's often easier just to let them share it and then send them on their way. Pretending to be asleep or otherwise ignoring someone who is trying to get your attention can just make them even more determined to interact with you. Holding eye contact and keeping a neutral expression is a much more effective way to discourage them. After the person who is bothering you leaves, make a decision as to whether or not you want to stay in the same place or move on.

The second main criteria when choosing a sleeping spot is comfort. This largely depends on your ability to stay warm and dry, especially if you're in a bivi bag. Ideally you should try to find shelter from the wind and

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the rain – even a small bush can make a big difference – but just as important is the ground upon which you sleep. Concrete is hard, cold, and soul-destroying to sleep on. It should be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, tall grass, pine forest floors, or a sandy beach can rival the comforts of even the most expensive memory foam mattresses. The Earth will suck out your heat energy no matter what terrain you're sleeping on, however, so it's important to carry a mat to insulate your body from the ground.

You may occasionally find yourself sleeping in colder conditions than your gear was designed for. You can improve your situation by purchasing a hot water bottle and filling it with boiling water each night. Keep it close to your body, wear a lot of clothes, and wrap your shoulders in your towel/blanket – it's enough to get 8 hours of sleep. Wear multiple socks or wrap your feet with some dirty clothes to reduce icy-feet syndrome.

Be aware that large rivers or lakes sometimes create a lot of moisture in the surrounding air even if it doesn't rain and look for tide markings if you want to camp on the beach without being swept away. Remember to find shelter for your backpack as well as yourself and consider researching and taking appropriate precautions against wildlife – particularly bears.

If you make good judgements when it comes to comfort and safety, then there's no reason why you

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shouldn't be able to relax and enjoy a good night's sleep every night. In fact, you may find yourself so comfortable with free-camping that you start struggling to get out of "bed" in the mornings. In theory it's a good idea to pack up your camp-site early to avoid unwanted attention, but most of the time the only people who see you are early-morning joggers and dog walkers and they tend to leave you alone (although their pets may not). When you do eventually leave, remember to take all your rubbish with you.

If you're in a rural area and you're the kind of person who doesn't mind asking, you may have some success by knocking on people's doors and requesting to camp on their property. Farmers are more often open-minded about this and may have actual buildings to let you sleep in. (If you haven't slept in a barn yet, put it on your bucket list – there are few things as warm, dry, and comfortable as a large pile of hay, so long as you don't suffer from allergies.) Independent hostels or bed and breakfasts can sometimes allow you to camp on their land for free and I've heard of some hitch-hikers asking to sleep in the gardens of normal, everyday people, although I've never plucked up the courage myself.

If you make friends easily, and you're confident in your judge of character, there is also the option of asking the people you meet if you can stay with them. The major advantage of this method is the possibility of regular

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showers. You'll be amazed at how quickly people form trust and how extensive their hospitality can be. This works best when it happens naturally – perhaps your last ride of the day was with someone who really enjoyed your company and they offer you their couch when they find out you're camping outside. Carrying a sign with the words “Looking for a sleeping place” while you walk around town can also be surprisingly effective. It's like hitch-hiking, but with sofas instead of vehicles and you'll also get lots of advice from people about safer places to camp, cheap hostels, and so on.

### **Eating on the road**

Food was always one of the big challenges for me when I travelled. Space for food was usually limited and delicate foods often spoiled in my bag (or, worse, busted open and spoiled everything else in my bag). I found cooking on a camping stove to be frustrating. Then, after an unsatisfying meal, I'd have to find somewhere to wash everything up before it crusted on to the equipment. Honestly, most of the time I just paid extra for ready-made foods. The result was that I spent a lot of money, ate a lot of unhealthy food, and normally got sick by the end of the trip.

Then I went travelling with an Italian girl called Angela and suddenly found myself eating several filling,

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healthy, delicious meals every day. She used simple recipes and a minimum of equipment, and a handful of ideas are listed here to inspire you to create your own similar meals on the road. The meals here consist of foods that are very cheap when travelling Europe, so you may have to find different staple foods if you're travelling elsewhere.

Eating lunch as your main meal is highly recommended, as it can be difficult to cook when it's dark and you're tired in the evenings. Always try to have the ingredients for your next two meals in your backpack.

### Minimum equipment

- 1x Camping stove with gas
- 1x Saucepan with lid (preferably one in which the lid doubles as a small frying pan)
- 1x Sharp knife
- 1x Bowl per person
- 1x Mug per person
- 1x Spoon/Spork per person
- 1x Thermal flask (to keep hot drinks warm)

### Breakfast

The ideal breakfast is filling, requires little to no

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preparation time, and results in as little washing up as possible. If you're travelling somewhere cold, it's nice to have a hot drink to warm up with too. Our standard morning meal was Muesli with yoghurt (much more filling than milk), bananas, and instant coffee or tea.

### Lunch

Take lunch as your main meal. Cook rice or pasta on the stove and then add other ingredients: chick peas, thinly sliced carrots and tomatoes, and tuna are good with rice. Cheese, chorizo, and bell pepper are good with pasta.

Red lentil soup is also great. Take red lentils, aubergines, tomatoes or tomato sauce, onions, olive oil, curry powder, and salt. Chop up all the vegetables. Fry the onion in oil for a couple minutes, then add the aubergine and salt and cover until the aubergine is soft. Stir and add a mug of lentils for each person. Add water and eventually the tomatoes and curry powder. Delicious!

### Dinner

The evening meal usually consists of whatever food is left in your backpack that you don't want to eat for breakfast, or food that's not going to last much longer. Otherwise, bread with baked beans is nutritious, filling, quick, cheap, and easy. If it's safe to have a camp-fire, cook potatoes in tin foil and sausages on sticks.

## Snacks

Buy bread and make sandwiches to snack on during the day (or eat for dinner). Cheese, jam, tuna, or peanut butter are good choices. Cheese and tuna will fill you up, jam will keep bread from getting dry, and peanut butter is very high in calories. Another delicious snack you can make with ingredients you already have is Pane Pomodoro. Just slice tomatoes on to bread and cover with oil, herbs, and a pinch of salt.

Nuts, raisins, apples, and so on are great for travelling as they keep well and are unlikely to spoil or make a mess. It's a good idea to travel with a bar of chocolate or similar sugary snack to give you a little temporary boost when you feel your mood getting low or your energy levels crashing.

It's worthwhile to make the effort to eat well on long hitch-hiking journeys; it's very difficult to maintain good morale when you're hungry and it's much easier to get sick if you fill your body with junk food. Planning ahead for meals will reduce the amount of money you spend trying to silence your growling stomach with petrol-station sandwiches. If you're cooking on a camping stove, carry a spare gas canister with you to avoid potentially frustrating cooking experiences when the first one runs out unexpectedly.

### **Making money on the road**

No matter how frugal you are, you will always be spending money while you're travelling. Most hitchhikers try keep travel cheap by limiting their expenses, but you also have the option to try to earn money on the road. My own experience is primarily with playing music on the street, but I have known others who earned money by making and selling jewellery, writing poems, playing chess, or performing magic tricks. Walk down the main street of any tourist town and take inspiration from the many street performers you'll inevitably see there. They aren't there just for fun – there's money to be made. Here's how to do it with music.

I should begin by saying that I am not a talented musician by any means, although I have been fortunate to travel with talented musicians at times. People give money not because you're necessarily playing high-quality music, but because you've introduced some positivity into their day. Smile, dance, interact with passers-by – especially with children. Your attitude and approachability counts just as much as your performance. You don't need a huge amount of material either; you can make a lot of money with just 20-30 minutes of music played over and over again in different places.

The first step is to find a street with a large amount of foot traffic and no vehicles or construction work to



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drown out your music. A commercial street filled with tourists is ideal, as people have change in their pockets and will already be in a “spending” mindset. Crossroads, bridges, and underpasses are often good spots. If you see any authority figures around (police, security guards, etc.), ask them what the local laws are about street performance. Most of the time they'll refer you to some kind of bureaucratic agency, in which case you can just go ahead and play. Sometimes there are very specific rules about where and when you can play, the instruments you can use, and how long you can play for. Either way, as a general rule, don't stay in one spot longer than 20-30 minutes to avoid complaints from nearby shops, and don't play unnecessarily loud or offensive music.

If you see other performers, give them a friendly smile and try to judge whether they're in a good spot. They'll probably move on within an hour, so you'll have a chance to take advantage of it too. Be friendly and give a bit of your change to the other performers – they can often be the source of a lot of useful local advice.

In my experience busking in Europe, a good spot yields about 20-30 Euros an hour. Actually making this amount of money takes a little longer, as you'll have to move between two or three spots in order to play an hour of music, but this is still a very good deal for the cash-strapped hitch-hiker. If you've ever thought of tourist destinations as tacky and degrading, perhaps you'll now

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be able to discover a deeper appreciation for their capitalistic tendencies.

### **Volunteering for food and shelter**

Imagine, for a moment, eating delicious, healthy meals of a quality far beyond what most people experience in even the most expensive restaurants. Flavoursome vegetables harvested only minutes before appearing on your plate; succulent meat from animals who lived happy lives untouched by the infested squalor of the factory farms; dishes prepared lovingly by skilled cooks whose secrets have been passed down from generation to generation. You can eat these meals every day for free.

Imagine spending your time breathing clean air in beautiful countryside, taking pleasure in a relaxed routine that allows you to focus on your own self-enrichment. Physical exercise is an easy, natural part of your life and you feel healthier every day. You are part of a community that cares about you and educates you in their skills and knowledge freely. You are surrounded by people from all stages of life, each of whom are enjoying their own journeys; other travellers whose stories you can relate to and who seem to understand you far better than your friends back home. You are paying nothing for these experiences.

Is this paradise? A communist utopia? A pseudo-spiritual cult? Nope, it's simply volunteering for food and shelter. And if it's used in combination with hitch-hiking, it could potentially allow you to travel indefinitely with virtually no money while living a vastly higher quality of life than if you were working at home. Of course, every volunteer position has its flaws. But the description above is not that far from the truth – volunteering is one of those deals that is so good, it's difficult to believe it really exists.

### **Understanding volunteer work**

Volunteering for food and shelter works like this: you sign up to a website that contains a list of organic farms, communities, and other projects that are looking for volunteers. There are many thousands of these all around the world. You search through the list in order to find a project that catches your interest. Once you've found a project you like, email or phone the people who manage the project and arrange to visit them. They may give you a brief interview over the phone, but it's very casual.

Once you're at the project you'll be expected to work 25-30 hours a week. In exchange you'll be given all the food you can eat, a place to sleep, and you'll be taught many new valuable skills. You have no obligation to stay for any length of time – so if you don't enjoy the work,

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you can leave immediately. It is common to stay for around 2-4 weeks at a project, which is perfect for travelling.

The work itself depends on the project you choose, but you can expect to be harvesting vegetables, tending to animals, operating machinery, painting, demolishing, constructing, cooking, weeding, chopping firewood and so on. It's usually satisfying work with immediate reward. Most of the projects are farms or small communities, but you can also volunteer on boats, in family homes, and in hostels. You choose where you volunteer, so you have a lot of control over what kind of work you actually end up doing.

You don't need a work VISA to volunteer in most countries, which means you can do it no matter what your travel status (do your research first of course). You don't need any qualifications, either, although you must be an enthusiastic and hard worker. There are no age restrictions, but most volunteers are between 17 and 30.

There are some important drawbacks, however. It never costs any money to join a project, but you do have to pay a small fee to access the websites that put you in contact with them. Most projects will require you to take part in some form of communal living: this means that you will be sharing your living space and expected to contribute to chores and general social activities outside of your work hours. You will live with people from all

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walks of life, with many different kinds of beliefs and attitudes, so it is essential to be open-minded.

You also cannot expect to earn any money while volunteering, although it is possible that you will be paid a small amount if you stay with a project long enough. If you're trying to build up your savings for further travel, you'll need to find paid work. Occasionally you can turn a volunteer position into a paid position, however.

It should be stressed that you need to take care to choose projects that will suit you. Vegetarians might want to skip the organic meat farms. Militant atheists should probably avoid strongly religious communities. However, most projects are up front about their beliefs and lifestyles, so it's easy to find one that matches your own outlook on life. There are, of course, communities out there that treat their volunteers poorly – it's worth emailing a few previous volunteers to find out what a project is like beforehand.

Volunteering is an extremely valuable tool for the long-term hitch-hiker. If used correctly, you can find like-minded people to continue your journey with, learn lots of new skills, and live a lifestyle that is far healthier and more enjoyable than the ones most people work full-time jobs for. However, although you benefit considerably from volunteering, remember that the emphasis is always on the *giving*. Don't take advantage of the hosts generosity. Always be considerate and follow whatever

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rules they have chosen to live by for the duration of your stay.

Some good websites for finding volunteer work are listed on page 108. If you've never volunteered, I strongly recommend it – it's essentially the university of travelling

### **Minimising your vulnerability**

In life you can turn any high-risk situation into a low-risk one simply by making yourself aware of the risks and then managing them. For example, jumping out of a plane is a high risk situation; scuba-diving is a high risk situation; even something as simple as driving a car is a high risk situation. People do these things every day because they have been trained to recognise and avoid the hazards inherent in each activity. If you follow a certain set of rules, each activity can become reasonably safe. The same is true of hitch-hiking.

The most basic step you can take to reduce your vulnerability across the vast majority of hitch-hiking related situations is simply to look like you don't have anything of value. Keep expensive clothing and electronics out of sight – don't wear headphones, keep your wallet in your front pocket, and, if you carry a large amount of cash, keep most of it in your backpack. You don't need to look like you're destitute, but you shouldn't

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be trying to impress anyone either. Don't stand out from the crowd.

You can reduce your chances of unwanted attention further by walking with confidence. Move at a brisk pace, staring straight ahead, and smile and make brief eye contact with the pedestrians you pass. Make room for others on the street, but don't cross the road to avoid people late at night. If someone speaks to you, respond politely but don't stop. If you're in an unfamiliar place, don't wander around looking lost with a giant map in both hands. A map folded to about the size of your hand should still be able to show enough of the local area. Memorise the immediate directions and keep it in your pocket the rest of the time. If you need to ask someone for directions, it's safer to go into a shop and ask an employee than to ask someone on the street.

Be wary at first of accepting drinks that have already been opened when making new friends and limit your alcohol intake so that you stay in control. If you're planning to camp outdoors, be vague when talking to people you've just met about where you're planning to sleep. Make sure nobody follows you to your camping spot and try not to camp in the same place multiple days in a row.

Aside from following your common sense, one of the most effective ways to minimise your vulnerability is to just relax. Make rational judgements about the

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situations you find yourself in and don't over-react to them. If you act confidently and comfortably even when you're around people who intimidate you, those people are likely to remain calm in your presence. It can actually be pretty offensive to be afraid of somebody. Showing fear has the potential to cause aggression where none existed before and the vast majority of the time your fears will be unfounded. Even so, if you feel uncomfortable with someone, nothing is stopping you from making your excuses firmly and leaving. Who you spend your time with is always your choice.

Some people feel more confident and powerful if they are carrying a weapon, and it is common to carry a knife of some sort when you are hitch-hiking. However, in reality this form of “protection” will probably only increase your vulnerability. See page 55 for more advice about carrying a weapon.

Ultimately, if you act calmly, confidently, and with good judgement then it's doubtful whether you are significantly more vulnerable as a hitch-hiker than any other normal citizen. We interact with strangers on a daily basis at work, on the street, and during our leisure time – interacting with strangers on the road isn't actually much different.



## PART V: Final Note

That's it, you've reached the end of the guide. We've talked about who should hitch-hike (everyone), why you should choose to hitch (because it's an adventure), and the four hitching commandments. We've gone step-by-step through the entire hitch-hiking process, from planning, to packing, to arriving at your destination. We've also discussed how to live comfortably on the road: how to sleep, eat, earn money, and travel safely. Now it's time to put down this book, step out of the door, and put this advice into action. The whole world is out there waiting for you.

There are some experienced hitch-hikers who, when I told them I was writing a guide to hitch-hiking, asked me “Why?”. To them, hitch-hiking is such a simple act that writing a guide seemed pointless. And the truth is, you can ignore all the advice in this book, walk out your front door, stick out your thumb by the nearest road, and

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you'll probably get to where you want to go. If you forget my advice, or if you don't agree with it, that's fine. If you were to go out, do everything completely opposite to my recommendations, and still have a good experience – I wouldn't be surprised. What you have learned in this guide is only my method for hitch-hiking, which I have discovered through trial and error. These methods have allowed me to travel quickly, comfortably, and happily – but the best methods for you may be different. The world tends to reward positive people who don't mind exchanging a little comfort for a lot of adventure, no matter what they do.

If you've never hitch-hiked before, I hope I've given you an honest view of what it's like on the road. Don't be put off if, at times, this book seems to focus more on the risks and challenges of hitch-hiking. Just being aware of the risks and challenges can help you to deal with them before they become a problem. The vast majority of the time, hitch-hiking is an amazing, fulfilling experience, and you'll finish almost every journey with the satisfying re-affirmation that humans are essentially good after all.

A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single thumb.

Good luck!

## Further Reading

The following books and websites are valuable resources for inspiration or more information about hitchhiking and travelling in general.

### Books

- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. 1957.
- Krakauer, John. *Into the Wild*. 1996.
- Lee, Laurie. *As I walked out one Midsummer Morning*. 1969.
- Orwell, George. *Down and Out in Paris and London*. 1933.
- Ferguson, Will. *Hokkaido Highway Blues*. 2003.
- Hawks, Tony. *Round Ireland with a Fridge*. 2010.

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### Websites

- <http://www.hitchwiki.org/>  
Community-created information and advice about hitch-hiking, including good and bad spots and information about hitching from specific locations.
- <http://www.helpx.net/>  
Find volunteer projects for a small fee. Organic farming, construction, hostels, communities, and almost anything else you can think of. One fee for the whole world.
- <http://www.wwoof.net/>  
Find volunteer projects on organic farms for a small fee. Fee must be paid for each country individually.
- <http://www.reddit.com/r/hitchhiking/>  
Reddit community about hitch-hiking – lots of posts about hitch-hiking culture in general, and a friendly community if you have any questions.





## About the Author

Christopher Drifter is a 24 year old long-term traveller from the UK who has lived in 18 different houses and visited 19 different countries. He has taken several major trips across North America and Europe, covering more than 13,000km via public transport, borrowed vehicles, and hitch-hiking. He currently lives in Andorra and is learning Spanish in the hope that one day he will no longer have to bear the shame of being monolingual in Europe.