

Hitchhiking the U.S. for the Beginner

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The Hitchhiking Mindset

The trick to hitchhiking is learning how to settle into a new set of expectations every time you take a trip. You can't expect everyone to help you out; you can't expect to get consistent rides; you will often be alone or with only one or two other people; etc. This set of conditions can be exhausting at first, and you will have to devise a way to slip into them easily. Social and emotional regulation are the most important skills a hitchhiker can have.

Safety

You will not often feel unsafe hitchhiking. Contrary to popular belief, life-threatening situations and robberies should not be your number one concern. A hitchhiker's most frequent source of anxiety is drivers' driving styles, and most of the time these are not serious enough to be dangerous. I will include information on how to deal with seriously unsafe situations, but you should regard it in the same way you regard fire drills: necessary knowledge with infrequent application. Furthermore, a lot of what is called "safety" is actually about "comfort," so I will use this broader definition.

Day-to-Day Decisions

- You will feel safest asking for rides in person (e.g., at gas stations).
- Thumbing rides is probably safer than most online rideshairs. This is because the majority of people who pick you up when you thumb rides will be people who have hitchhiked themselves. They are passing on the favor. Online a much broader spectrum of people participate.
- When thumbing rides, always talk to the driver before getting into the vehicle. Tell them where you are going and see how far they can take you.
- When thumbing rides, try to remember the license plate. If you have a phone, text it to a friend.
- Always keep your most valuable materials on your body, in case you lose your bag. Losing or forgetting your bag will always be a tragedy, but it will be better if you have IDs, money, a knife, your contacts, etc.
- Interstates are safer than highways and backroads. Highways and backroads are more enjoyable and more scenic, but interstates are safer and faster. Beginners should start with interstates.
- Do not hitchhike after sundown. No one will pick you up anyway.
- Avoid sleeping in cities. Prefer nature-heavy areas. See "Setting Up Camp."
- Do not do drugs while traveling. If you do not have a stable camp, do not do any drugs. If you drink, do not get drunk.

Weather

Hitchhiking safely in the cold depends on a properly packed backpack: bring layers of clothing so you can regulate your temperature. See "Hitchhiking Gear and Necessities." Many hitchhikers I know avoid hitchhiking in extremely cold weather, unless they are setting up camp in a cold-weather place.

Hitchhiking in extremely hot places also depends on a properly packed backpack: a thin, long sleeved shirt and a hat are necessary. Crucially, you should drink water constantly, and you should always leave a populated area with a full water bottle. In most places with extremely hot weather, denying a request for water is illegal.

Besides being potentially unsafe, you cannot hitchhike in rain beyond a light drizzle. People argue with me on this point, but the consequences are almost never worth the slim chance that you will get a ride. If it starts raining while you are walking along the road, your chances of getting a ride go up significantly for a few minutes, and then rapidly plummet. So keep walking for a little, and if you don't get a ride, set up camp or wait somewhere dry until the rain passes. Large plastic bags or ponchos are important items in particularly rainy regions.

Unsafe Rides

The best way to avoid unsafe rides is to *choose your rides*. This may mean literally asking for your rides in person, but it also means assessing offered rides before you get into the car. If you decide you do not want to take the offer, simply decline. "I'm gonna wait for another car" is just fine, but if you feel that this is rude, you can say, "I'm gonna wait for a longer ride."

If you are already in the car, again, simply asking to get out of the car will almost always do the trick. You can also say you've changed your mind, fake car sickness, etc. Of course, you *may* have to face a driver who will not let you out of the car. This may be because the driver is a creep, or because the driver is intoxicated. I have never encountered a creep who would not let me out of the car, and have not yet heard from someone who has directly experienced it. I have been in a car with a non-respondent driver who was swerving back and forth on the road, because I ignored my intuition while assessing him (he was slurring his words). To end the ride, I simply told him I would like him to pull over, several times, until he did. If he had not, I would have had to force my exit, keeping in mind the following advice:

- Never use the handbrake. It will almost certainly lead to a car crash.
- Cause a small accident in the car, like spilling a drink.
- Exit the vehicle while the driver is at a stoplight or stopsign. Grab your backpack before the driver realizes what you are doing.
- Pretend to be sick, noting that the driver will have to stop or the car will be ruined.
- Call an emergency number. You should generally avoid this. See the section below on law enforcement.

Only use these methods in an extreme emergency. Many of them can do more harm than good, like cause an accident or frustrate the driver. Remember that you can always hitchhike out of a foreign place, and that cars eventually need gas. Remaining calm, even while performing the above emergency precautions, is always superior to panicking.

Law Enforcement

See "Flex Your Rights."

Law enforcement officers are unpredictable. They are usually the cause of inconveniences, and are often gruff and heavy-handed because of the countercultural nature of hitchhiking. Dark-skinned hitchhikers will also have a more difficult time with the police (see "Safety and Race"). Even if officials are simply doing their job, this often results in a decrease in your overall wellbeing. You should therefore avoid law enforcement.

Federally, the United States Uniform Vehicle Code allows hitchhiking so long as you do not step onto the *roadway*, defined thusly:

That portion of a highway improved, designed or ordinarily used for vehicular travel, exclusive of the sidewalk, berm or shoulder even though such sidewalk, berm or shoulder is used by persons riding bicycles or other human powered vehicles.

Hitchhiking in the jurisdictions of the National Park Service is illegal according to the Code of Federal Regulations (36 CFR 4.31). This technically includes national parks, national scenic byways, and national recreational areas. Parks vary widely in their enforcement of this law. It is worth getting information inconspicuously.

Some states regulate or ban hitchhiking, usually the “thumbing” method, but the laws are often vague, unenforceable, or unknown by many officers. Beginners have two options to avoid almost any problems with hitchhiking law. First, they can ask for rides at gas stations (see “Three Ways to Hitchhike”). Or, they can stick to interstate on-ramps, always standing *before* the “No Pedestrians” sign:



It is impractical to learn each state’s hitchhiking laws as you hitchhike, so you will want to commit the laws to memory, periodically updating the information. While traveling, you might keep a coded map like the following:

Green: Hitchhiking legal while on the shoulder of the road

Yellow: Hitchhiking legal while off the traveled portion of the road, stay in the grass to be safe.

Red: Hitchhiking is completely illegal.

Gray: Specific laws, check independently.

But again, remember that the laws are vague. For example, for all relevant purposes Nevada bans thumbing rides, but it allows you to walk along highways without sidewalks if you walk toward oncoming



Hitchhiking Laws by State

traffic. In these cases officers will sometimes leave you alone if you stand by the road without a thumb out or with a sign leaning against your backpack (they may even quietly instruct you to do this).

Getting stopped for hitchhiking does not mean you will get arrested or go to jail. I've not heard of that happening even once, unless the person in question had a warrant out for their arrest. However, they will always check your ID and question you. They may give you a warning and they will rarely fine you. Sometimes cops will incorrectly tell you hitchhiking is illegal because they do not know the laws. Do not argue with them.

In sticky situations you can risk a second warning from the police. This is generally a bad idea, since getting fined or arrested is more likely after multiple warnings. But you are more likely to succeed if you wait until after you leave the jurisdiction of the police officers who gave you your first warning. State troopers get extremely irritable by the second warning, so you should not risk another.

Occasionally police will ask you to get into their car. They may be taking you a few exits down the road or to the police station. You will not always immediately know, and they may cuff you in either case, but you should enter the car anyway. Getting rides from cops is not terribly common, and sometimes they will take you to the exit in the opposite direction you were walking ("because it's closer").

Safety and Gender

Women hitchhikers have a few special considerations. In some ways they are disadvantaged hitchhiking, and in some ways they are advantaged.

Women get rides faster than men. The fastest way to hitchhike is as a single woman or a pair of women; then a woman and man; then a single man; then two or more men. Oftentimes women will get

rides from drivers otherwise unfriendly to hitchhikers. Most often these are families or other women who are concerned for the hitchhiker's safety.

Women will encounter creepy drivers more often than men. Women should therefore be much choosier about their rides, and because they receive more offers faster, they can be. Some women hitchhikers reject most rides offered by men.

Besides these two considerations, hitchhiking has about the same safety level for men and women. Women are most disadvantaged when stuck in the city, which is already not a good place for hitchhikers to be stuck in. See "Setting Up Camp."

Queer hitchhikers should avoid signaling their sexual orientation or gender.

Safety and Race

Dark-skinned hitchhikers will spend a longer period of time waiting for rides than light-skinned hitchhikers in most places in the U.S. In some places, you will only get picked up people of your same race. This will also happen more often for dark-skinned hitchhikers. The police are also more prone to treat dark-skinned hitchhikers more forcefully.

White or black, always listen to gossip about ethnic conflict in town. It is in much more of the U.S. than many people realize. For example, in New Haven, Connecticut, whites and blacks are sometimes still divided by neighborhood. Note that you will almost never be in life-threatening danger from local ethnic conflict, but you may find it harder to set up camp. The best sources of information on ethnic conflict are homeless people, since richer classes are often shielded from it (see "Street Rats"). You should almost never ask for the information outright. If you do, only ask people of the same race. Recognize that you do not have to agree with others' opinion on the conflict to glean information from them.

Street Rats

Other street rats will be your most frequent source of conversation and information. It is a mistake to avoid homeless people like many hitchhikers do, although you will have to learn the culture.

Homeless people who do not travel are lovingly called “home-bums.” They are your best source of local information, because they will likely know about things you will want to know about. Not many people know good places to dumpster dive.

Many homeless people are on the streets because of drug use. This is usually not a problem unless the person in question is on stimulants — in which case they are called “tweakers.” They should be avoided. Stimulants make people unpredictable and are more likely than other drugs to cause violent behavior.

Finally, some travelers are known as “oogles,” “crusties,” or “gutter punks.” They are dirty, wear clothes with all sorts of patches and holes, usually have tattoos... They usually have a punk aesthetic and hold vague left-wing anarchist politics. Oogles are loads of fun to hang out with for a temporary period of time, but their method of travel is very different from the kind described here. For example, there are straight-edge travelers, but oogles usually drink. And they frequently get kicked out of places, because their look and social conventions differ so radically from the mainstream. Hang out with them, become friends, have fun, but do not travel with them unless you are willing to adopt their way of life.

Hitchhiking Gear and Necessities

I wrote the information below with long trips in mind. If you are only hitchhiking a short distance, or if you are hitchhiking from one stable environment to another stable environment, you could hitchhike with only the clothes on your back. People have done it.

The Basic Gear

Beginning hitchhikers will want *all* of the following:

- Internal-frame backpack.
- Sleeping bag. I use a three-season synthetic mummy bag. It is heavier than I would prefer, and I hope to move to a lighter sleeping bag as soon as I can.
- Sleeping pad. Do not sleep directly on the ground, or you will wake up freezing. I use a Therm-A-Rest RidgeCrest pad. I am vehemently against inflatable pads. They offer no good advantage and can pop.
- Bivy sack, tent, or hammock. I used to use a hammock, but now I use a bivy. Tents are expensive and noticeable.
- Tarp with stakes.
- Hiking boots.
- Socks. You can never have enough of them. Keep your feet dry.
- Knife. You should be able to skin small animals with it, theoretically, at least.
- Fire lighting materials.
- Camping pots and pans. These should be light.
- Paracord.
- Map. The map should note interstates, highways, major roads, and any significant natural areas, like national parks.
- First aid kit. Almost anything you buy will be inadequate at first. Look up advice on how to make the kit better.

Clothing

You should only bring one, *maybe* two outfits. Try to own clothes you can layer. Lower layers should be appropriate for warm weather by themselves, and as you add layers on they should have noticeable effects on your warmth.

As an example, right now my base layer includes: blue jeans, a thin long-sleeved shirt, underwear, socks, shoes, and a hat. When it gets colder I progressively add: a thin but insulating Under Armour hoody, a thick long-sleeved shirt, a hoody, a flannel. I also have gym clothes for laundry, sleeping, etc. I do not have but probably should have long underwear for cold conditions.

Food

You can get food from a variety of sources:

- Dumpster-diving.
- Foraging.
- Fishing.
- Panhandling. Try to limit this to essentials. Do not become dependent on panhandling. Try flying signs with specific requests, like “Need Food, Esp. Protein.”
- Drivers will often offer you food.
- People will sometimes give you food, especially if you have a large backpack.

Avoid sugar-heavy foods. People may give you lots of snack foods as charity. Do not feel bad about rejecting them or throwing most or all of them away. You should often do so even if you feel hungry. Eating healthily is one of the number one ways you will avoid sickness, and it keeps you from smelling.

When you have money, do not buy fast food. Instead, buy rice, oats, dried corn, canned meats like tuna, and nuts. Eat a moderate amount of protein bars, and try to reserve them for the hiking part of hitchhiking. Avoid meat like SPAM unless you need the calories, and even then prefer to cook it. Eat foraged food whenever you can safely identify edible plants. Drink a lot of herbal teas (a great source of vitamins), but prefer expensive, mixed teas. Beginning foragers can easily identify plants from the mint family, all of which can be safely sampled and make great teas.

Hygiene

Brush your teeth at least every morning, especially when consuming a lot of sugar content.

If you eat healthily, you do not often need a full-body shower. See the chapter on washing in Mark Boyle’s *The Moneyless Manifesto*. You will, however, need to wash your underarms and genitalia. Store a bar of soap in a ziploc bag, and use gas station restrooms, a jug of water, or a stream. You can take full-body showers at truck stops for a price. You can sometimes get truckers to give you one of their vouchers.

Females will have a more difficult time with hygiene when they are on their period. This is true of any woman traveller. I know some women set up camp during particularly difficult menstruation periods and then start hitchhiking again when it’s passed.

The Three Ways to Hitchhike

In-Person Requests

The most comfortable way to hitchhike is to ask for rides in person. The most common and fruitful places to do this are gas stations, although you risk getting kicked out. If you have a large travel backpack, try to find a place to stow it while you are asking for rides.

Thumbing

Thumbing for rides almost always works quickly, but it can feel like it takes a long time, and you should expect widely varying times between offers. You will be more likely to get a ride if you are dressed in clean, bright clothes, and if you interact with the drivers (smiling, occasionally waving, etc.).

Carrying a sign sometimes helps, but the psychology behind signs is interesting. For example, if you put a far-away destination on your sign, drivers may not stop because they think you want a ride that can take you all the way there. Joke signs often work well, but that, of course, depends on the joke.

Thumbing for rides is harder for dark-skinned hitchhikers (see “Safety and Race”) and for visibly older men, but it often still works faster and more reliably than the other options.

Rideshares

I have not found rideshare groups on the internet to be very helpful. Usually there are more requests than offers. When there are offers, they turn hitchhiking into an exchange: the hitchhiker is expected to pay some of the gas or drive. Rideshares are also a very different experience than traditional hitchhiking, without as much of a feeling of freedom and spontaneity. For all these reasons, I recommend regarding rideshares as a supplement to your hitchhiking and not the main method.

The Ride

Your job is to be a companion. Unless drivers explicitly ask to drive in silence or tell you it is okay to sleep in their car, keeping up the conversation is crucial to a good ride. Often a good conversation will convert to a meal, lodging, or a longer ride than originally offered. The way you represent yourself also affects other hitchhikers' success.

Avoid arguments and controversial topics. Politics and religion will come up the most. If the driver insists on pursuing these topics, spend most of your time listening, and in almost all cases you should not explicitly disagree. You never know when the ride is going to end, and you don't want to end on a sour or awkward note.

Decide before you start hitchhiking if you want to connect to people on social media. There are obvious pros and cons to doing so.

You will be asked the same questions repeatedly: "You won't murder me right?"; "What does your family think?"; "What's your final destination?" Some of these are harmless, but others are rather invasive and can get annoying. If you do not plan on connecting on social media, you can have fun telling different stories to different drivers. It is probably best, however, to learn how to push conversations in directions you would like them to go. For example, take opportunities at the beginning of the conversation to bring up something you can be sure the driver will want to talk about for a while.

Setting Up Camp

I wouldn't recommend hitchhiking for many years at a time. Unlike traveling by foot, hitchhiking overemphasizes our social and cooperative instincts. Without drugs, often even with, long periods of hitchhiking may make you irritable or depressed. Since the whole point of the practice is usually to escape the self-sedation rampant in modern life, this is obviously not good. Sustainable hitchhiking requires that you take the time to make new places comfortable. Think of it as being similar to the Inuit's igloos: with the ingenious hunter/gatherer mind, they found that creating the igloo structure would create a small pocket of heat, allowing them to live comfortably and well. Healthy hitchhikers will have to use their same ingenious hunter/gatherer minds to go beyond just living and *flourish*.

Be sure to set up camp before sundown, and try to find a place where you can start a small fire to cook food. Being able to cook your food is necessary to living well as a hitchhiker. See "Hitchhiking Gear and Necessities."

You should also remember to stretch. Among other things, it prevents you from getting charley horses while sleeping or sitting.

Natural Areas

State and national parks are the best places to sleep, then heavily forested areas. They sometimes cost money, although you can usually get around the fee, either by asking or entering the forest unconventionally. Many parks have an honor system for paying the fee.

Roadsides

You can camp on the side of the road when there are large, forested areas. If the weather is clear, do not set up a tent on farmland or in deserts. Instead, sleep in a bivy, which is less conspicuous. Be aware that other homeless people may have set up camp. See "Street Rats."

The City

Cities are the worst place to sleep at night. If you have some money, buying a room at a hostel is usually a good idea. Unfortunately, hostels are not as popular in the U.S. as they are in Europe. If the city you are in has an area where most of the homeless sleep, you can sometimes sleep there without fear, but you will want to ask around for information first. See "Street Rats." Otherwise, you should sleep anywhere that has a low amount of foot traffic and isn't very visible. Sleeping under road bridges is sometimes an option, but often illegal. Try to find local forests and parks if you can.

If you arrive in the city earlier in the day, your options are a lot better. You can look around for religious centers, like churches and mosques, or you can try to find a place to stay through online traveling groups. One I have used, and the only internet-based travel tool I have found to be helpful, is Couchsurfing. I once found emergency housing for three days in Michigan because of Couchsurfing.

The Morning Routine

Your morning routine has a profound effect on your day as a hitchhiker. You should not wake up and immediately begin hitchhiking, unless you are close to a destination where you know you can rest for a while. Instead, you should focus on eating (see “Getting Food”), cleaning yourself (see “Hygiene”), and gathering information. You will usually want to cook or prepare your breakfast and lunch with your dinner the previous night, especially if you are in a place where a small fire could be a problem. Otherwise the first two are obvious.

As for gathering information, you will want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Where am I starting today? Often you will have decided this the previous night, but not always.
- What will the weather be like? Figure this out every day, even if you have been told what the weather will look like for a few days. Predictions change. You might also find it helpful to learn how to detect the weather from natural cues.
- Do I have enough fire material? If it is or will be a wet day, collect some wood and carry it around until sundown. If you don’t have enough fire material, make that a top priority for the day. You might want to figure out the qualities and uses of different types of wood.
- Do I have enough food? Again, if you do not, make it a priority.
- Does my body feel okay? If you have a cut or infection, address it immediately. If your muscles are sore, relax them.
- and so on...

Finally, take a minute to meditate, journal, or pray. Prepare your body for the strenuous but fulfilling activity you are about to undertake again.

The Library of Unconventional Lives

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