

# Hitchhiking

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Asking an experienced hitchhiker how to thumb is like asking a 100 year old woman how to live long. She'll say something like, "I've drunk a fifth of gin every day since I was ten years old!" Some other 100-year-old will swear it's the companionship of cats. And that's as close as you'll get to the secret of living long and riding with strangers; there's a lot of magic and luck involved, and hence, a lot of superstition. What works for me may leave you, thumb high, frozen to death on the ramp. All the same, here are some tips; the magic, luck, and superstition parts are up to you.

Of all the methods of transportation we cover, hitching is one of the more hit or miss methods out there. Now, if you are mere hitching across town, you will have pretty good luck. Just hang at a convenience store and ask around without making too much of an ass of yourself or getting chased off and you should get a ride in a (relatively) short time. However, due to bad press, if you are traveling cross country via interstates, you may be waiting for long periods of time out in the weather. Needless to say, there have been many who have successfully hitchhiked even thousands of miles. It just may have taken very long times to get there.

## Safety

When hitching a ride, especially where the trip will take you through remote areas, you should take a glance at the fuel gauge and size up the vehicle and tires for road worthiness. No sense getting stuck with a break down that is not yours. Assess the driver and do the sniff test. We are cool with drinking and drugs when used safely. But, a drunk or stoned driver is a recipe for disaster.

Have a verbal contract ready before you get in. It must include exactly where you want to be dropped off and also that you have no gas money. The driver must agree before you get in or you set yourself up for trouble later. If they do not agree to your deal, wait for another ride. Be specific, say, "Thanks for stopping. I need to be dropped at exit 44 and I have no cash for gas, is a free ride cool?". Then, if they ask why, explain about a guy who demanded gas money once after you had traveled some distance and you had none. It is rarely a problem, but gas money and free sex are not required to successfully hitch and if you specify that you are riding free it is much harder psychologically for the driver to demand something from you later.

Hitchhiking is considerably safer than it sounds in the lurid urban legends that our foes circulate to keep us afraid of one another; all the same, you may one day find yourself in a ride you don't want. This may not be clear immediately, so pay attention. Know your route, and keep track of where you are going. If the driver changes course, ask why. Keep alert for conversational cues. A huge tip-off is frequent references to sex. It's best to put a stop to this immediately. Change the subject, or casually mention some of your exotic diseases. If the driver is persistent, don't be afraid to insist, with whatever degree of politeness seems necessary, that you'd like to talk about something else. If you become uncomfortable with a ride for any reason, ask to be dropped off at the nearest opportunity. It's rare that I hear of an encounter that escalates to this, but it does happen. If a driver won't stop, consider making a threat, hopefully one you're able to enforce. "I don't care if we both die, but I will stab you to death if you don't pull over right now!" got my friend out of an uncomfortable situation unharmed once.

Many people hitchhike with dogs for safety reasons; a dog can provide the same protection a weapon would, and discourages predatory drivers from picking you up in the first place. If you bring out a weapon, you had better be ready to use it, with everything that entails. Carrying a knife for defense means you must be physically, emotionally, and spiritually prepared to cut a person. If you aren't, pulling one out can only make things worse. Pepper spray is an alternative, but there are drawbacks to applying it while flying down the highway. Standard pepper spray may not be powerful enough to stop an at-tacker; ask for "law enforcement formula" pepper spray at military surplus stores.

# The most important things to remember about hitchhiking are

- Travel light.
- Be neat, clean and polite.
- Always try to look like someone you'd want to pick up.
- Make a large sign with your destination and don't forget your markers.
- Bring food and water - you could be out there for a while.
- Don't bring a weapon or anything otherwise illegal for you to be carrying. Sooner or later, you WILL encounter police, who will lock you up for the night if you're holding anything. Many county or small town jails are way out in the middle of nowhere where no one picks up hitchhikers and miles from main highways.
- **ALWAYS** be specific that you have no gas money or credit cards, you cannot and will not pay for the ride.
- **ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS** specify your exact destination and get confirmation from the driver that he will take you there directly. (From personal experience I find it better to ask the driver his destination before I give him mine. This way you can always politely back out in case you don't trust it.)
- You can always pass on a ride if **ANYTHING** seems weird or the driver makes any demands in exchange for the ride. Remember, hitching is free.
- If you're a little sketched out (or even if you aren't) and you have a phone, make a show of texting the license plate number, your expected arrival time, etc. to a friend.
- Always keep your pack with you within reach at all times. There have been instances where disagreements, having to bail to avoid nasty situations, or even folks being jerks have caused hitchhikers to lose all their supplies, including identification cards.
- **ALWAYS** remember that you are putting yourself in a vulnerable position. If you find yourself wondering if this specific driver is trustworthy, that is more than enough reason to back off.

# Who picks up hitchhikers?

Back in the day everyone picked up hitchhikers. But those days are long gone. Various media pushed a bunch of lame stereotypes and rare horror stories for viewership. Nowadays, the people who pick you up will generally be:

- Men looking for sex. This applies whether you're male or female and describes the plurality of people who'll pick you up. These range from the awkward/benevolent types who will give you a ride and not push sex once they realize you're not that girl from the album cover to the mean troll who'll quickly try to get you out of the car when you aren't interested. Actual rapists are rare to nonexistent. Still, be careful.
- Religious/political extremists. Don't be shocked if they try to convert you to their sect, but this can also work in your favor. You can carry long conversations about your distaste for how things are run. (That is, if you're politically active). One thing they tend to bring up is the 9/11 attacks being an inside job, which most would be surprised to hear from the right-wing.
- The armed dude. We have ridden with people in Amerika who tell us they are wearing a gun. These guys tend to be no problem so far in our experience. They tend to be right wingy if you talk politics, but are confident you will not jump them and so they are relaxed. Ask them about Obama, martial law, and gun bans and let the good times roll.
- The con-artist. Rarely, a desperate con artist will surprise you and try to pressure you to pay for fuel at some point in the trip, especially if you are at the gas station and he is filling up while you are flashing cash to buy yourself junk food. You should be fine as long as you are specific before you get in that you won't be paying for fuel or anything else.
- The flake. This guy wants somebody to talk to and figures any ride or any progress at all is a good ride for you and a big favor from him. Always ask the drivers destination and route before saying where you are going. These guys might feel charitable and agree to overshoot their destination to help you out but after a few hours of driving get tired and cranky, sometimes kicking you out in a bad hitching near their destination but miles from your destination. Never take rides from people offering to go very far out of their way especially at night.
- People who may expect you to chip in for gas and/or tolls. No crime in that, but you can refuse the ride and wait or agree up front and pay your share especially if that is the only way for get a hitch to a better location. Compare bus prices, though, if you are in this situation.
- Nice, bored people. Yeah, they do still exist. But, they will be a minority of people who pick you up.

# Truckers and CBs

Your best bet is to ask around at a truck stop, many truckers like to have a rider to talk to. Stick to private truckers. Most large corporations like UPS, FedEx, and CSX strictly forbid riders in their marked trucks. Women especially, but men too, should watch out at truck stops. These places are frequent workplaces for prostitutes or “lot lizards” in CB lingo. Partnering up is a good idea in this sexist world. Even if a trucker is not interested in giving a ride, ask if he will CB or ask inside for someone heading your way. Talk to your ride first and set up how far they will take you for free - no tricks later. Especially at a truck stop where there are plenty of rides, please make sure the driver is cool. There is no reason to ride with a creep, no matter how bad you want to get where you are going sooner. Never put your bag in the back! Snuggle it to yourself so you will have it if you decide to bail out.

If you were not carrying enough already, a small CB hand held radio can be used better than your thumb, call out to truckers even on the highway, talk directly to trucks you see wave and ask them for a ride. Of course when roadside hitching a big sign and CB channel if you have always helps too, be sure you are on the correct side of the highway heading in the direction where you want to go.

When truckers are helpful, they can be very helpful. They are also quite familiar with the cast of characters that live on the road. Truck stops bustle with drivers, prostitutes, and, of course, hitchhikers. At larger truck stops, you will find just as many drivers who are waiting until they are sober enough to drive again or until some warehouse opens as drivers who are actually going somewhere. Even if a driver isn't going your way, he might be willing to make use of his CB radio to advertise your plight, asking around the lot if anyone is going your way. Alternatively, bring your own CB radio and do the same! In common trucker CB radio talk, “hand” is the expression for hitchhiker. It can help to call out individual truck names as they're driving off, asking them which way they're headed. If you sound like a trucker, or at least someone who knows what's going on, you're more likely to get a ride. Listen to people speaking over Hitchhiking the CB, and learn what you can of the vernacular. “How 'bout it, anybody out at this Pilot 300 headed north? Can you give a hand a lift?”

If you are working the truck stop route, you should know that “Lot Lizard” is the term for prostitutes who hang out at truck stops. Don't get in a truck with anyone who describes you that way or is looking for one.

## Maps

Most states offer free maps which you can either order from the official state website, the state tourism website, or from welcome/info/tourist buildings as you enter the state. Always have a highway map and good compass so you can keep yourself on the right road and headed in the right direction. A small map book of national highways which includes exit numbers is essential and worth the extra weight if going beyond the local area, don't trust a GPS and be sure your map is up to date. Your map will be important in your relationship with drivers; you'll frequently have to tell them where you want to be dropped off, and you'll want to choose wisely and explain it precisely. From time to time, you may even have to help a driver navigate.

# Road repairs

If you plan on long range hitchhiking there are some useful things to carry in your pack to help you save yourself if your ride breaks down. The two most likely problems are engine cooling system problems and blown tires. If you carry a pair of large hose clamps you will be able to repair some burst hoses if the leak is near the end of the hose. A tube of radiator stop leak powder is very small and can be added to the radiator to repair small leaks. It might take half an hour or more but you can use a bicycle pump to refill a flat tire, it is a bit tricky finding the hole and adding a tire plug to a mounted tire but we have done it before in a pinch. Most of the time it is just as simple as helping somebody on the roadside change to a spare tire, add/remove snow chains, or add water to the radiator once the engine has cooled.

If you want to go the trading route, make your offer of work for ride up front and confirm destination again after the handshake and before work starts. Confirm that they will not decide they are scared or weird out once you are finished. Confirm you are fixing their car for a ride, not for free. Unless you can get your cash up front do not expect to actually get paid for fixing a car. Besides, it is good karma to help breakdowns on the road for free. Do not offer your mobile phone. If there is a need for an emergency call, you can make it. Otherwise, you can expect the driver to spend all of your minutes in exchange for his valuable and generous offer of a ride. Above all, be very reluctant on taking a long ride in an iffy vehicle. The last thing you need is to break down a car in the middle of the mountains that you had already needed to fix once.

See Cars for more on the gasoline automobile and nasty problems that can come up.

# Event Caravans

People heading to some protest groups, renaissance fairs, Rainbow Family gatherings, Burning Man, hemp festivals, role playing conventions, and many other scenes are occasionally known to be open to offering rides. If one of these is your destination or something you want to check out in your journey, it may be worth your time to check for. It is usually safer to ride with those sharing common goals. This can be a large group of folks with multiple cars loaded down or just one or two people driving there.

The culture amongst attendees of some events sometimes lends itself to varying degrees of camaraderie - even amongst strangers - at least until it is over. At some events this closeness is so thick, it is almost inescapable. Others, it is just a vague acknowledgment and politeness and maybe a few room parties with shared booze and other party favors, if that. The friendlier the culture, the better chance for shared rides.

Be aware that many may rightfully want you to put up a reasonable (but far less than a bus ticket) amount of cash up front for gas. The whole object of a caravan is to get to the event on the cheap through shared gas, after all. You will usually be on your own for housing, food, and any entrance fees when you get there.

Leeching is discouraged and be cool. There have been tales, although rare, of the obnoxious being dumped along the way, shunned by the community while there, or stranded after the event is long over. Not fun. If you are short on funds and still want to go, consider getting in touch with the organizers and volunteering instead. You will get in for free, and sometimes housing and food are offered gratis out of the event's budget. Your enjoyment may be affected and you may have to do actual work, though. The further in advance you talk to the organizers, the better luck you will have with this approach. Some places culture is cooler than others about this.

The best way to find these is to ask around on the forums on the website of the event organizers. Craigslist and ride share sites can occasionally help as well. It is possible to catch a ride through word of mouth, too. Some areas have places and circles of folks that make the gathering an annual event. If you are roughly within a two state area of the location of the event (the closer, the better!) or can meet them along the route, you stand a much better chance of hopping on such a caravan.



# Weather

Make sure you are prepared for the elements. You don't want to get badly sunburned if Weather you have to stand by the road all afternoon, and holding up that sign in a freezing wind can really be hard on your fingers. Your bags should be waterproof, in case the clouds Hitchhiking, burst and you can't get out from under them in time. Few drivers will want to pick up a hitchhiker who is literally dripping wet, but mildly bad weather may win you sympathy and a swift rescue. Hobo folklore tells that in Alaska, it's illegal not to pick up hitchhikers during the winter.

# Bicycles

Hitchhiking with a bicycle limits the number of drivers who can pick you up; it can also get you rides from people who might not pick up ordinary hitchhikers, but make an exception for what appears to be a bicyclist in distress. A bicycle is certainly an invaluable tool when you are within a few miles of a truck stop or town, or trapped in the middle of one you want to leave.

# Traveling Together

Traveling with a partner is always safer, and probably will not slow you down like one would think. Of course, if you are both large men with Charles Manson beards and bleeding head wounds, you will have to wait a long time for a ride. On the other hand, some men may find that they are picked up more quickly when they hitchhike with a female partner. Whatever your team looks like, talk about your approach before you go, be understanding of each traveler's needs, and look out for each other.

Talking through the process in advance is especially important if one partner is more experienced hitchhiking, or feels safer with strangers than the other, or benefits from social privileges that the other partner does not. An example is the case of a man traveling with a woman or trans gendered person. Before you set out, establish together what your expectations of one another are, how you will handle trouble, and how you will communicate your needs in the presence of others. During the trip, stay aware of your partner's comfort level, and always defer to the less comfortable person's judgment. This might mean declining a ride that you would accept if you were alone; it might mean that you do the talking or make the requests if the conversation takes an unpleasant turn. Good communication can also mean not putting yourself in the role of protector unless you are invited to do so. Be aware that there may be vibes that your traveling partner is affected by that you don't notice. Never make someone feel foolish or cowardly for feeling unsafe.

# Alternatives to the Thumb

If you don't feel comfortable standing by the road letting drivers choose you, you can choose them. Do some research beforehand, and bring a list of hostels along your route. Go there and strike up conversation with travelers; that way, you can form an impression of a person before you ask for a ride. If the hostel scene doesn't sound right for your needs, think about other places you are likely to meet traveling people with whom you have something in common besides a destination.

You can also hang out at a travel plaza, rest stop, restaurant, or gas station and approach drivers with whom you believe you would feel safe. Talk to each driver a bit before deciding whether to ask for a ride; this makes it easier for the driver to evaluate you, too. Using this method, you can end up with kindly drivers who would never have stopped to pick you up by the road.

Bulletin boards are another recourse for travelers without a car. Universities often have physical ride boards with separate sections for those needing rides and those driving. Online message boards can be useful, as well.

## Tips

You can improve your chances of being picked up and treated well while hitchhiking, not to mention getting away with other things, by dressing in dark pants and a white shirt with a tie and perhaps a name tag — that is, as a young Mormon on a mission! Pick up some free Mormon bibles at your nearest tabernacle for authenticity, and if anyone asks serious questions, what better form of cultural terrorism than to spread a little fun misinformation?

# Helpful Links

- <http://www.craigslist.com> - arrange a ride share
- <http://www.digihitch.com> - lots of (modern) hitchhiking info, discussions, etc.
- [www.hitch-hiking.org](http://www.hitch-hiking.org)(<http://www.hitch-hiking.org/>) - Great site with a lot of information all about hitchhiking (English and German language)
- <http://hitchwiki.org> Hitchwiki.org
- <http://www.liftershalte.info/> Liftershalte.info - Worldmap showing hitching places.
- <http://www.hitchbase.com> hitchbase.com - Database with hitching places
- <http://abgefahren.hitchbase.com> Abgefahren e.V - the first german Autostop Society; ideas, tips, projects,..
- <http://tramprennen.org/> Tramprennen - primarily a hitchhike race for charity, tips and hitchhike forums (English and German)



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