



Tools For Better Travel

How to Hitchhike Across the United States

Most people have two reactions to this article. The first is “this is horrible; it just encourages people to do dangerous and stupid things, like hitch-hiking. The second is, “Cool I always wanted to hitch-hike around the country”. So for full disclosure, “Neither I, nor onemeandream, condone hitchhiking as a viable alternative to travel”. Although it is the cheapest way of travel, it is also the most dangerous especially if you have no street smarts, and are fragile, timid, afraid, female, poor, blind, male, rich, and insane or carry a gun. Anyway, now that we have included everyone, let’s look at a few pointers.

WHO PICKS UP HITCH-HIKERS

- Past hitch-hikers, or people who like to help others.
- People who want someone to help drive or want company.
- People who are predators and insane (which is what makes it so dangerous).

APPERANCE MATTERS

- Never sit down (makes you look lazy and apathetic).
- Stay well groomed and dress nicely (most people won’t pick up people who look “smelly or unkept”).
- Most of all stay happy and upbeat.
- Keep your bag on the side, and stay away from large overbearing backpacks.
- Remember sometimes they are more afraid of you than you are of them, so try to look as normal and nice as possible.

HOW TO GET A RIDE

- **If they can’t stop, they won’t.** (Find a place that’s easy for them to pull over)
- **The best locations** are on flat areas with high visibility (one time I got stuck on top of a mountain pass at night, and had to walk a long way down the hill to find an alternative spot).
- **Find a position** they can see you well in advance (many take a while to make up their minds).
- **Stand up straight**, tall and make sure they can see you, and your thumb.
- **Walk backward slowly**, and face the traffic (Few will pick you up if you can’t even get off your lazy butt).
- **Walk backward and look like you’re in a hurry** it really helps.
- **Make sure you smile** (I was often told that my big happy smile, was the main reason they picked me up).
- **Traveling with someone** is safer, but more people lower your chance of getting a ride.
- **Having a sign** limits opportunity, because only those going to your destination will stop. However, if you are looking for one long straight ride, try a sign.
- **Always ask them** where they’re going first. This way if you don’t like the looks of things, you can turn down the ride by saying, Oh, I am going the other way, or that you want a longer ride.
- **Never hitch-hike** in turnpikes or freeways, because it’s illegal (I was arrested once, and it wasn’t pretty).
- **Stay away** from large cities, (way too many crazy people), and take a local bus to the outskirts of cities.
- **If you have allot of stuff** or a large bag, put it out-of site, because people are hesitant to become moving vans.
- **If you are with someone**, but the best looking person out front (especially if they are female). I know this sounds discriminatory, but I have traveled alone and with people, and it’s funny how fast people stop if they see “Miss America” wanting a ride.

ONCE YOU’RE IN THE CAR

- **First of all** if you feel uncomfortable, or don't like the looks of a situation, don't get in the car in the first place (like having one person in the back, and only the front seat open when they pick you up).
- **If you feel uncomfortable** or want to get out, just tell the person you want out. If you don't want to tell the truth try saying something like - Oh no I left something back at that spot, or I think I am going to go somewhere else, or I really got to go to the bathroom, you can let me out here.
- **If you feel comfortable** driving for them, offer to drive because many will be happy to have a break.
- **Do not reveal** too much personal information that can be used against you, like saying, all I have is three hundred dollars, but I can spare five for gas, or my parents are filthy rich and hate when I do this.....
- **Don't bring up** controversial or argumentative topics, unless you want to get thrown out of the car.
- **Always tell people** where you are going, when you plan to arrive, take a phone with you and something to protect yourself just in case.
- **When it's time to get out**, pick the spot if you can. When I first started, people would say "oh, I know a great spot, I see people there all the time". The meaning of course is people are there all the time, because they can't get a ride out of there and get stuck! So always choose where you want to get out.
- **Take another means** of transportation you cheap-skate.

BASIC NECESSITIES

- **Good weather** (aka not winter)
- **Good mid-sized internal frame backpack** (mobile and easy to handle)
- **Easy to clean / fast drying cloths** (AKA not all cotton)
- **Good walking shoe & pair of slippers/sandals** (lighter is better)
- **Sleeping gear** (small light weight thermal mat, light sleeping-bag, pillow)
- **A few hundred dollars** (depending on means of travel)
- **Snack able-foods** (dried fruit, jerky, nuts, trail mix, carrots, things that don't perish easily)
- **Good attitude** (you're going to need it).
- **Tent** (depending on the means and length of travel)
- **Basic eating wear** (utensils, dish towel, cookware (for longer trips), Frisbee, because they are light and serve as bowl or plate.
- **GPS or Map** (very helpful if you get lost, or need to find alternative routes).
- **Cell phone** (they serve as music, camera, map, phone etc.)

SLEEPING ACCOMODATIONS (Organized from lowest to highest cost)

- **Rest stops**, most rest stops in the US are basically safe to stop and sleep for awhile (but use common sense). They are not designed for camping or extended stays but are plentiful (<http://restareas.appspot.com/>)
- **Couch surfing**: Online websites (<http://www.couchsurfing.org/>) are set up where people let you sleep on their couches. It's a cheap, great way to meet people, but may potentially be dangerous.
- **Off the beaten path**: This may work well for a quick place to sleep, but just be careful where you stop to sleep.
- **Caves or natural shelters**: I had friends who lived in hollowed out redwood tree, and in a cave on a remote beach in Hawaii without incident.
Missions/Homeless shelter: Maybe not the best place to sleep, but if your luck or weather turns it may be the driest and safest place
- **Local Churches**: Some churches have accommodations, so don't be afraid to ask.
- **Abandoned Buildings**: Not recommended but just remember if you found them so can others, so be careful.
- **Camp grounds**: Minimum cost, and great if you have a comfortable car or tent great, if not pray for good weather. (<http://www.reserveamerica.com/>)
- **Hostels**: Hostels typically cost 20-50 dollars depending on location. They are great places to get a hot shower, meals, meet new people, and are fairly safe. (<http://www.hostels.com/>)

- **Vacation Rentals:** These typically are converted residential homes or apartments, and the owner fixes them up for longer rental terms (usually they have a 3 day minimum). They are hit and miss on quality and services, so check them out before hand. (<http://www.vacationrentals.com/>)
- **Bed and Breakfasts:** B&B's are inside people's homes, and the owner rents out rooms and opens up their kitchen/living room areas for common usage, and true B&B's serve a decent breakfast. (<http://www.bedandbreakfast.com/>)
- **Motels:** Motels are basically smaller hotels with less service and you can rent rooms for longer or shorter periods. Hotels: These are great inexpensive places to stay and usually have pools, saunas, room service etc. (<http://www.motels.com/>)
- **Hotels:** Hotels come in all shapes and sizes, and basically refer to anyplace that rents rooms, but provides full service and are staffed 24 hours. (<http://www.hotels.com/>)
- **Resorts:** A resort is basically a large area with numerous accommodations all in one facility. They generally cost more than other hotels, but provide numerous services. (<http://www.luxuryresorts.com/>)

FREE TO LOW COST SHOWERS ALONG THE WAY

- **Rest stops** rarely have shower facilities, unless they are larger.
- **Local colleges** often have large shower facilities in their gymnasium areas.
- **Swimming pools/lakes/beach** areas always have places to shower off (although sometimes outside).
- **Churches or community centers:** Larger community centers or churches have shower facility, so don't be afraid to ask.
- **Health clubs and local Y's:** All health clubs and Y's have day rates which includes showers.
- **Portable showers:** You can buy or make portable showers, which are basically a bag with a hose attached, that you can hook up on something higher than yourself (kind of like water bottles used by mountain bikers). Also a nearby garden hose can be used in a pinch.

EATING (Organized from lowest to highest cost)

- **Community feeding projects:** All you need to do is ask the closest homeless person and they can tell you (although they may choose not to).
- **Local food banks:** Many churches and catholic charities have food banks where food can be purchased inexpensively (or for free).
- **Dollar stores:** Many dollar stores have food isles and its surprising what you may find, although it is usually processed foods, but what can you say for only a buck.
- **Day old bakeries/food outlets:** Day old bakeries generally have baked items that are near their expiration dates. Food outlets usually have canned, boxed, and other types of packaged foods that may be damaged or older, but usually still edible.
- **Picnicking with cheap coolers:** Styrofoam coolers are only a few dollars and can save hundreds over time. So Pick one up with a bag of ice and some fruit, vegetables, bread, sandwich makings, cereal, etc and stop to eat along the way.
- **All you can eat Buffets:** All you can eat salad/soup bars serve as a great healthy and inexpensive way to eat at least one large meal a day.
- **Fast-food:** You can still find dollar menu items in many fast food places and it can a great alternative for a cheap bite to eat.
- **Local hangouts:** One of the joys of traveling is trying the local cuisine, and no better and cheaper place than where locals eat. You can find these by asking around, or looking for the eateries with the longest lines.
- **Fine Dining:** This of course is a great way to treat yourself; however it can also kill your budget so dine wisely.

FREE TO LOW COST ACTIVITES ALONG THE WAY

- **Museums:** Many museums have lower cost entrance fees at certain days or times and some countries like the UK have removed entrance fees altogether

- **National Parks:** National parks have increased entrance fees, but many do not charge if you walk or bike in.
- **Skip tourist attractions:** Many tourist attractions are overhyped and overcharged. Do your research beforehand. You can still enjoy wandering around many, and there are areas to visit without paying fees.
- **Explore off the beaten path:** Many times the greatest sites are nearby tourist attractions, but most don't take the time to explore. My favorite times are always wondering around back streets and through buildings that have no official designation, but have their own treasures to uncover.
- **Art Galleries:** Love to see Picasso, but don't want to cough up the \$25 entrance fee? Don't worry there are many undiscovered Picassos' in retail art studios all around the world.
- **Sites with benefits:** Many times there are also great sites that have entrance fees, but that have things included in the cover charge. For example the Guinness Factory in Dublin gives a pint of Guinness at the end of the trip, and it has lots of cool things to see and do along the way.
- **Public Parks and Buildings:** Many of the great places to visit have been turned into public parks or buildings with little or no cost for entrance.
- **Local schools and universities:** Educational facilities often have low cost events like concerts, plays, science fairs, art shows, and athletic events with times and dates posted all around the campus.
- **Public Libraries:** Public libraries offer more than free access to books and other information, many also provide access to free DVD's, movies, music, books on tape, and often are housed in great historical buildings.
- **Pick up sporting games:** Like to play or try a new sport, many activities occur at parks and courts all around the world. Most people don't mind if you join in, just remember our motto, don't be afraid to ask.
- **Historic Towns:** There are many fantastic historical places to see in America especially along migration trails.
- **Hostels:** There are many great hostels, found on-line, which offer inexpensive activities and are a great place to meet people.
- **Highways:** The US road system is the best in the world, and the interstate system is generally free and a great way to go. American road systems are numbered, and interstate highways that run east and west are even numbered (i.e. 10, 40, 80), and odd numbered highways run north and south (i.e. 101, 5, 55).
- **Smaller cities:** These are great places to stay, people are typically friendlier, and they are easier to navigate, although most have limited public transport.
- **Cities with better public transportation:** Areas like the San Francisco/Bay Area, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, Boston, Denver and NY are great places to visit and have great public transportation.
- **Pick up a guide book or your local activities list:** You would be surprised at all the great things to do around a city or countryside that can provide hours of low, or no cost activities, just by reading about it.
- **Meet local people:** Many times we travel and overlook the people that know the area the best, and that is your everyday citizen of the area. Although typically it helps to approach them during their leisure time, so go to your local coffee shop, pub, and park. So remember, don't be afraid to ask, you might just find a lifelong friend or even a tour guide for FREE!

CHOOSING A DESTINATION AND TRAVEL TIMES

- **Americans love convenience:** The US is very citizen oriented and unlike most countries there are numerous and free public access areas like water-fountains, restrooms (stocked with toilet paper & soap), rubbish bins, handicap access ramps, parking areas, sidewalks, public parks, and other amenities.
- **Do not limit yourself to highly touristic areas:** Many times they are costly, overcrowded, overhyped and disappointing. So do your research, ask around when you arrive, and make sure you save time for unexpected stops and adventures along the way.
- **Watch out for time constraints and crowds:** Climbing the statue of liberty is a great experience, but sometimes there is so many people pushing behind you, that you only have a few seconds to enjoy the

view from the top.

- **Check out down town areas:** Most cities have restored old/down town areas and they are full of activities and things to do.
- **Get off the highway:** For some reason Americans build roads everywhere, and the best times can be had by veering off course and checking out the back roads.
- **Public parks and recreations facilities:** These are numerous in most states and access is almost always free of charge, so check them out.
- **National Parks:** You can typically walk into any national park for free, and use facilities for little or no cost, and most of the greatest places have been turned into national parks.
- **Historic Towns:** There are many fantastic historical places to see in America especially along migration trails.
- **Hiking trails:** The great thing about hitch hiking is you can basically have your home on your back.
- **Hostels:** There are many great hostels, found on-line, which offer inexpensive activities and are a great place to meet people.
- **Highways:** The US road system is the best in the world, and the interstate system is a great way to go. Generally even numbered highways run east and west (i.e. 10, 40, 80) and odd numbers run north and south (i.e. 101, 5, 55).
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