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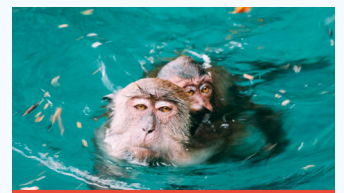
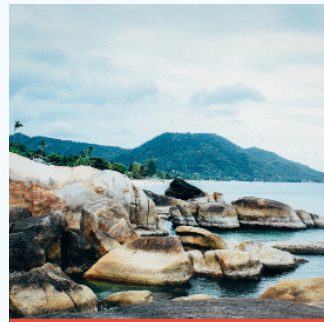
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Become the Life of the Hostel

by Vanessa Van Edwards



They say travel is an itch. For me, it was more like a full-body rash. Was that metaphor awkward? Yeah, I'm not surprised. That's me. My name is Vanessa, and I am a recovering awkward person. Growing up, I was terrified of recess. I couldn't make a friend for the life of me, and my crushes gave me hives. Literally, full-body hives from social anxiety. When I got bit by the travel bug, I hoped and prayed I would be able to do it solo and that travel would obliterate the anxiety I had. I wanted to travel to be an escape from my past and a way to be someone new.

These days I research what makes people tick, what drives our actions, and how to hack human behavior for good at my website, The Science of People. As a recovering awkward person, I'm fascinated by what makes people tick and how we can overcome our social anxiety.

For most of us, it's not easy to make friends or know what to say to strangers — especially ones from a different culture or background. While we all have this image of making beautiful connections when we travel, experience and research have shown me that it's not as easy as we imagine. But, experience and research have also shown me that it doesn't have to be hard either. Here are my favorite tricks and tips for building friendships, starting conversations, and being more interesting while traveling.

I never realized how many hundreds of opportunities there are to meet people while traveling — whether fellow travelers on buses, trains, and planes or locals at supermarkets, museums, and malls. It's best, though, if you can find a way to give people a reason to talk to you. This is where identifiers can come in handy.

Identifiers are objects, clothing, or props that identify commonalities between people. It's something that someone can use as a reason to talk to you. You often want to wear, carry, or showcase in your everyday appearance, such as: a T-shirt of your favorite band A hat with a funny saying, a flag (or flags) on your backpack, a unique or heritage piece of jewelry A sports jersey with a team's logo on it, a classic book visible in your back pocket or backpack

These items make it easier for others to talk to you, whether it's a stranger approaching you on the street or a seatmate on a bus. Why? Because they can start a conversation. They give you and your new friends something to break the ice and talk about. And once you start talking, it becomes easy to just keep talking.

One of my favorite identifiers are my cowboy boots. I wear them when I travel, and people who also love country music and rodeos bring them up and we get to talking.

If you want to meet people, you have to be approachable. I used to sit with my arms crossed, backpack on lap, head down in a book. Then I met Sarah at a hostel in New Zealand. I had been in Christchurch for about three days already when this nice Australian came over to my table in the common room.

"Hey! I saw your Hello Kitty wallet. Love

it." (Yes, I use Hello Kitty sometimes as an identifier to attract nice people with soft hearts.)

We carried on a friendly conversation and she finally said something I'll never forget:

"You know, I saw you the first day at breakfast and the second day at lunch and then this morning. But you always looked like you didn't want anyone to talk to you, so I never said hi. If you want people to talk to you, then you have to look like you want to be talked to!"

Boom! Her statement hit me like a ton of bricks. She was right. I did look closed off... because I felt closed off.

Body language sends so many signals about your intentions to people that it is often more important than what you say. Research

shows that a minimum of 60% of our communication is nonverbal. We send signals with our body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. So use approachable body language, whether that's in the common room of your hostel, at a local pub, or waiting for your luggage at the airport. Make it easy for people to say hello. Here's how:

Keep your hands visible. Our brains need to see people's hands to fully trust them since back in caveman times, humans relied on seeing hands to know they weren't going to be attacked and to check for weapons. To this day, our hands serve as our trust indicators,

If you want people to talk to you, then you have to look like you want to be talked to!



so keep them out of your pockets and out of your luggage.

Leave your limbs uncrossed. Standing or sitting with your legs straight and arms at your side makes you look relaxed and confident. Plus, research shows that people struggle to get along when one or both have crossed limbs.

Think: closed body, closed mind.

Make eye contact with strangers. When two people make eye contact, it triggers the release of oxytocin, a bonding hormone. If the other person is open to connection, this will prime them to want to talk to you. To determine who you should approach, look for the above signs in other people, as they typically signal trustworthiness, friendliness, and openness. A fun example of this is the drone my husband uses. This is not only an identifier — fellow drone lovers like to talk to him — it also helps him be approachable and open.

Traveling in new locations fills you with questions like: Where are the best places to eat? What do I need to do to experience the city like a local? Where can I find [insert activity or place]? So once someone talks to you, here are some other easy, travel-friendly conversation topics you can broach: What's the coolest thing you have seen so far?

Have you met any interesting people while traveling? (If you want to be funny add: "...other than me, of course!")

Any tips for this city/location?

Found any secret spots to get a good ____? (Insert your favorite cuisine or drink)

I would also say DON'T USE GOOGLE. Sure, it's easy. But rather than finding those answers on your own, seek the advice of the locals and travelers around you. This is the easiest way to get insider tips to improve your travels and meet other people.

Studies also show that people who ask for advice are seen as more competent and likeable. Here's why: It validates the other person's intelligence by acknowledging that they have information that you want. Most people feel pleasure from helping others. People have an innate desire to feel appreciated, and when you thank them for their advice, it satisfies that need.

Once you've asked for advice, you've made a great impression and it is easy to build a conversation from the suggestions they give you.

Pro tip: Before you leave, ask everyone you know if they know anyone you can meet when you start traveling. By using your social network, you can have friends waiting for you before you even arrive.

When travel journalists visit new places, they make it their mission to learn as much as they can about the city and local people. They observe, and they focus their conversations on asking people questions. Not only does this give them the information they need, it also helps them establish connections. Similar to the previous tip about asking for advice, this tactic works because it focuses your conversation on the other person rather than yourself. Research shows that the pleasure centers of people's brains light up just as much if not more when they talk about themselves as they do when receiving food or money.

On the airplane, or while hanging out in your hostel's common areas or other public spaces, strike up conversations by asking people questions like: What do you think of [something about your location]? Where are you visiting from? Why did you choose to come here? What do you love about being here? What's been your favorite restaurant and why?

By starting conversations that invite people to talk about themselves, you start your interactions on a high, learn interesting information, and become someone people want to keep talking to.

If you want to meet people while traveling but the thought of approaching random strangers triggers your social anxiety, use travel apps to match with people in your area. Other travelers who use these apps also want to meet people, and so by using them and choosing to go to the same places and participate in the same activities, you automatically become someone they want to get to know. Here are a couple of good ones to start with: Vizeat, Eat With, Flip the Trip. There are amazing events everywhere. Using these apps, we ended up at Le Diner en Blanc, which happens in dozens of countries around the world. You wear white, meet new people, and have a great time.

People can be the best part of traveling — and no one was more pleasantly surprised about this than me! My favorite travel memories involve meeting new friends, getting insider tips from locals, and the spontaneous relationships I have built around the world. So use these tips to be more interesting, have better conversations, and enjoy the benefits of sharing your travel experiences with others. 🌊



How I Made it Across America with All of my Limbs Attached

By Matthew Karsten

It was a chilly and overcast day on the Oregon coast when I nervously stuck my thumb out on the side of Route 101. For the next 20 minutes, drivers passed me over and over again — most with looks of disgust on their faces. But I kept on smiling. Would anyone stop for me? Was I wasting my time? I wasn't completely sure.

Eventually my persistence paid off, and a massive orange pickup truck screeched to a stop in a cloud of dust. A wave of excitement rushed over me as I jogged up to meet CJ and her dog, Trigger. My first ride!

Yet this was just the first of many such pleasant surprises on my journey.

CJ wasn't going far, only to the next town. When I asked why she stopped, she explained that I looked relatively normal and that she'd also done some solo hitchhiking in Montana when she was younger. This would become a common theme over the next five weeks. Drivers will often stop for you to pay back kindness they received in the past.

Before I left on my mission to hitchhike across the United States from coast to coast, I was told that no one picks hitchhikers up anymore. They said that it was dangerous these days, and that the golden era of hitchhiking was, sadly, over.

But after five weeks, 3,500 miles, 36 rides (from both men and women), a motorcycle, a boat, an airplane, a freight train, and a tractor trailer, I can say that those people were wrong. If you've always dreamed of hitchhiking but are unsure of how to do it, where to begin, and how to stay safe, here are 14 tips to hitchhike smart:

Always be confident and look drivers in the eye and smile as they pass. Not in a crazy axe-murderer way, but in a friendly and personable way. Smiling is very important. Pretend the next car is a friend who is planning to pick you up. Try waving hello or holding your gaze expectantly as they drive past. You really only have a second or two to make a positive impression. Think of it as a drive-by job interview, with only your eyes, appearance, and body language to guide the other person's decision. Smiling for three hours straight in the sun or rain despite a constant stream of rejection is not easy, but you'll get better at it. If you look nervous or scared, you will attract the wrong type of people, so be confident.

Look presentable. No one wants to pick up a lazy, stinky-looking hobo. Dress in light or bright clothes. Avoid wearing black if you can. Don't wear sunglasses (people need to see your eyes), and keep your hands out of your pockets. Don't smoke, drink, or sit down on the side of the road.

Additionally, many drivers pick up people who look similar to themselves. I was having a difficult time getting a ride on the border of Colorado and Kansas until I bought myself a cheap cowboy hat! Soon after that strategic purchase, a trucker couple from rural Tennessee pulled over and proceeded to drive me 1,200 miles over the course of two days, country music playing all the while.

Choose a good spot. Cars will not stop for you if they can't do it safely. Interstate on-ramps are great because cars aren't moving very fast and there's usually room to pull over. Other good locations include intersections with stop lights or a stop sign and gas stations. The longer a driver can get a good look at you, the better. Keep an eye out for shady areas with protection from the sun, too. If you have Internet access on your phone, Google Maps in satellite view will show you where the best on-ramps are.

Hitchhiking out of big cities can be very difficult, and sometimes using public transportation to get to the outskirts is your best option. There are some places where it is almost impossible to get a ride, such as spots near sensitive government facilities (employees are forbidden to pick people up), prisons, or neighborhoods with high crime rates.

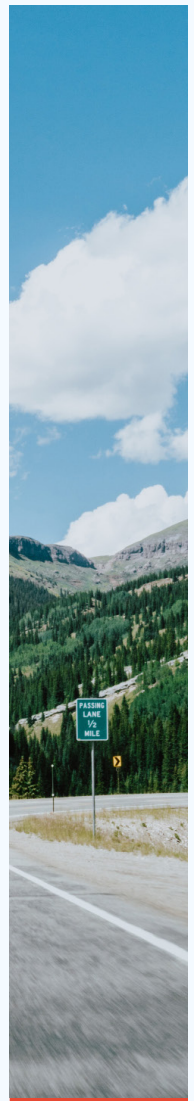
Make conversation, there are many reasons why people pick up hitchhikers. Maybe they're bored and want to listen to fun travel stories. Maybe they were once hitchhikers and want to share their experience (and karma) with you. Maybe they'll try to convert you to Christianity/Islam/Scientology. Maybe they need help staying awake on a long drive.

Providing good conversation is how you pay these people back for their generosity. It can also lead to a free lunch, drinks, or maybe even an offer to host you for the night. Ed the yacht builder was the last ride on my cross-country journey, and he spent his whole afternoon giving me a personal tour of the Maryland coast before taking me out for dinner and drinks at his favorite seafood restaurant.

Always be prepared, pack enough food and water to last a day, in case you get stuck in the middle of nowhere. I like to bring a few bananas, apples, tortillas, tuna, refried beans, and maybe a package of cookies to share. A filtered water bottle will let you safely drink from rivers and ponds. Take a couple of dark-colored permanent markers to create signs, some sunscreen, a first aid kit, warm clothes, and a rain jacket.

A USB car charger and external battery for your mobile phone is a good idea too. They're perfect for listening to music, checking Google Maps, or calling for help in an emergency. A lightweight camping hammock or bivy sack will help you save money on accommodations. I frequently camped in the woods on the side of the road or behind churches on my trip.

Use a Cardboard Sign. A simple cardboard sign indicating a town nearby helps a lot. Keep it short and write in large capital letters with a Sharpie marker. It needs to be readable at a distance from a fast-moving vehicle. Use destinations that are relatively close (within 20–50 miles), and you'll be more likely to score rides. You can then negotiate longer ones inside the vehicle if the driver is going farther in your intended direction.



Funny signs work well too. A few successful ones I used were: "Free Cookies," "Won't Kill You," and "Rabies-Free Since June." That last sign was funny enough that Dan, a retired theater actor and pharmaceutical executive, had already driven to the next exit when he changed his mind and turned around to come get me! You can find cardboard for signs at any gas station or fast-food restaurant, either by asking inside or by opening up the dumpster in the back.

Choose your ride carefully, you are under no obligation to get into every car that stops for you. Is the driver in a good mood? Are they looking you in the eyes? Are they sober? How many people are in the car? If you don't feel comfortable accepting a ride, thank the driver and say no. Make up an excuse if you have to. Pretend to be sick, or explain that you'd rather wait for a longer ride. Trust your gut instincts. On my own trip, I only turned down one ride. I was in a sketchy neighborhood (prostitutes were walking around in the middle of the day), and the vehicle that stopped was a truck packed with four young guys, with the smell of weed pouring from the windows. They were also only headed to the next exit. Odds are good I would've been fine, but the situation didn't feel right and I decided to wait for a better opportunity.

Always use common sense, wear your seatbelt, and if the person starts driving erratically, stay calm and polite but ask to be let out at the next safe pullover spot. Avoid hitchhiking (or picking up hitchhikers) at night. Not only is it very difficult to stop on the side of the road safely after dark, but it's also much harder to see pedestrians at night. Not to mention, people are much more likely to commit crimes under the cover of darkness.

Try and stay positive. Hitchhiking is definitely a mental challenge. You're putting yourself out there in public while engaging in an activity that isn't considered mainstream. You'll be judged by everyone who passes you, often in a negative way. People will laugh, flip you off, yell, honk, rev their engines, or maybe even throw things.

Always stay in control. Predators prey on weakness and insecurity. Don't make yourself an easy target. Dress conservatively and steer sexual topics to something unsexy. Make it crystal clear you're only interested in getting to your destination, and nothing else. Maintain an aura of confidence. Keep your valuables on or near your body so if you must escape quickly, you don't lose

I disagreed with his views, I just kind of nodded along and let him talk.

If it's your first time hitchhiking and you're particularly nervous about it, try hitching with someone else who's done it before. This is a fantastic way to learn the ropes and get more comfortable. While it might be more difficult to get someone to stop for two hitchhikers, it will always

It's an absolute roller coaster ride full of emotions: thrilling one minute, then completely discouraging the next. But in the end, hitchhiking might just be one of your most memorable or rewarding travel experiences, as it has been for me.

them. Avoid putting your bag in the trunk if possible, so the driver can't take off before you can grab it. Snap a quick photo of the back of the car with your phone before you get in, then send it to a friend or your Twitter account. Once inside the car, find a moment to call a friend and tell them where you are and where you're headed so the driver can hear you doing it.

Try to avoid talking to your driver (or hitchhiker) about politics, religion, race, or other controversial subjects, at least until you get to know each other a bit and can gauge how they might react. You don't want to provoke them into becoming angry or emotional while behind the wheel. If they attempt to start a conversation on these topics, try to change the subject or give boring/vague answers to their questions until they lose interest or you feel comfortable talking about them. This is how I responded to Captain Kitty Litter's overly racist remarks and questions. Even though

be a bit safer. I'm not saying not to go alone, but if you're worried about safety, hitchhiking with a friend might be a good way to start out.

Enter in to the whole thing expecting to wait. My average wait time while hitchhiking across the United States was about an hour. But there were some days when it took 2–3 hours or more. You must be prepared to wait in one spot for at least a few hours. However, there were also many times when I was picked up after only 15 minutes. You just never know how long it will take.

If you're in a particularly bad spot, it might take days to get picked up, which happened to me once outside Denver. I spent two nights in a motel waiting to get out of there. If you getting sick of waiting? Maybe take a break and go do something else to break up the time. Having camping gear with you can help in these situations too. Walking a few miles to the next exit or catching a taxi to a better location are also options.



You will almost certainly never need to use it, but packing a weapon of some kind to help with self-defense is always a good idea. I like to bring pepper spray along with me. When Captain Kitty Litter started telling me about the time he threw another hitchhiker out of his moving car, I subtly placed one hand in my pocket where pepper spray was hidden (just in case). Luckily I never needed to use it!

My experienced hitchhiker friend Shannon carries a stun gun openly on her belt (this can be illegal in some states). However, a simple pen shoved into the ear or eyes of an assailant should work in a pinch too. In my opinion, a knife should not be your first choice for self-defense unless you've been trained to use it, as it can easily be turned against you if the situation takes a turn for the worse. Please note that using a weapon is an absolute last resort — only use it when communication doesn't work and you honestly fear for your life.

Hitchhiking has become progressively more rare over the years. Irrational fears about hitchhiking are brought on by paranoid horror stories promoted aggressively by the news and then turned into movies by Hollywood. Bad news is what sells, so that's what we're exposed to. I'm still waiting for CNN to do a story about my successful hitchhiking adventure, but I'm not holding my breath. I had a wonderful time, met great people, and nothing bad happened. It's not sensational enough to be considered news.

Based on my own experience and after listening to other people's hitchhiking stories, it's likely that some weirdos will pick you up. But rarely will it result in a dangerous situation. Out of 36 different rides during my own adventure, I had maybe two or three "odd" (socially awkward) drivers.

I was told countless times that hitchhiking would be dangerous. While it's smart to be prepared for worst-case scenarios, in reality you don't have to worry about these horror stories too much. Most of the people I met while hitchhiking were friendly, fascinating, and full of entertaining tales. But that doesn't mean you should let your guard down.

While hitchhiking is not nearly as dangerous as some people make it out to be, there is risk involved. If you choose to engage in this activity, you are accepting those risks. Crimes are committed against hitchhikers from time to time, as well as against drivers (although much less frequently).

If you ever feel threatened or uncomfortable once you're already in the vehicle, first ask the driver to stop and let you out at the next exit or gas station. Make up an excuse if you want to. If the driver still fails to stop, remind them that you sent a photo of the car and plate number to friends. In an absolute emergency, you can always grab the steering wheel or handbrake and cause a small accident. Remember, only use these techniques as a last resort, when you genuinely fear for your life. Even small accidents can kill you or someone else. It's not something to take lightly.

One Final Legal Note

Hitchhiking in the United States is legal. The confusion lies with the United States Uniform Vehicle Code. The law states: "No person shall stand in a roadway for the purpose of soliciting a ride." Sounds illegal, right? Yes — until you read its definition of "roadway:" "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." What does that mean? It's illegal to stand directly on the road (for obvious safety reasons), but standing on the side of the road, the shoulder, or a sidewalk is fine. Each state also has its own laws, though, and a few specifically ban hitchhiking. These include New York, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wyoming.

However, getting caught hitchhiking in these states doesn't necessarily mean you'll go to jail. Police officers may stop and question you, give you a warning, or fine you. In fact, hitchhikers may experience this from authorities even in states where it is technically legal, due to ignorance of the law or boredom.

Hitchhiking will definitely be a challenge. But it will also open your mind, build your confidence, teach you patience, and introduce you to new friends. There's something magical about the open road and the uncertainty that comes with sticking out your thumb with no plans.

You could meet a friendly school teacher who's never picked anyone up or an ex-con with hilarious stories to share. Or maybe you'll meet the inventor of the Ultimate Pancake Sandwich. I was picked up in fancy Land Rovers, an airplane, a boat, a motorcycle, and a car held together with duct tape. You don't know who will stop, if anyone will stop, or how your day will unfold when someone eventually does. That's what makes hitchhiking so special. It's the unknown.

It's an absolute roller coaster ride full of emotions: thrilling one minute, then completely discouraging the next. But in the end, hitchhiking might just be one of your most memorable or rewarding travel experiences, as it has been for me. I'll never forget the feeling of accomplishment I experienced when jumping into the Atlantic Ocean at the end of my long journey. 🌊



European Hostels: The Cure for Expensive, Lonely Travel

By Rick Steves

If you want to save money while traveling, consider hostelting. Several thousand hostels provide beds throughout Europe, in cities, towns, and the countryside, for \$20–40 per night.

For this rock-bottom price, you get “no frills” accommodations in clean, stark dormitories. And many hostels have a few doubles and some family rooms (book ahead for these). It’s a great way for couples and families to enjoy some privacy while saving money.

As Europe has grown more affluent, hostels have been remodeled to provide more plumbing and smaller rooms. Still, hostels are not hotels — not by a long shot. Many people hate hostels. Others love them and will be hostellers all their lives, regardless of their budgets. Hostelting is a philosophy. A hosteler trades service and privacy for a chance to live communally with people from around the world.

For students, travelers on a budget, solo travelers, groups or families who can take a whole room, and those hoping to meet other travelers, hostels can be a great option.

A youth hostel is not limited to young people. You may assume hostels aren’t for you because, by every standard, you’re older than young. Well, many countries have dropped the word “youth” from their hostel organization’s name, and for years Hostelling International has given “youths” over age 54 a discount on membership cards. Even the last holdout, the German state of Bavaria, has finally dropped its youths-only restriction. If you’re alive, you’re young enough to hostel anywhere in Europe (with the rare exception of some independent hostels that have age cutoffs of around 40).

The average hosteler is 18–26 years old, but every year there are more seniors and families hostelting. As a reader wrote on this site’s Travel Forum: “My partner and I stayed in a ‘youth’ hostel for the first time by Lake Como and thought we’d be the oldest people there. Not so! At our table was a 60-ish couple from Sydney and a 79-year-old British woman who was backpacking alone through Europe. All three were a delight, but especially the backpacker, who said she stays in hostels for the evening company.”

Expect differences between official and independent hostels.

Official hostels belong to the same parent organization, Hostelling International, and share a booking site. They used to adhere to various rules (lockout during the day, curfew at night), but nowadays most are more flexible. Independent hostels tend to be more easygoing and colorful, but not as predictably clean or organized as official hostels. Independent hostels don’t require a membership card or charge extra for nonmembers, and generally have fewer rules. Many popular European destinations have wild and cheap student-run hostels that are popular with wild and cheap student travelers, but some independent hostels are tame and mature.

Hostels provide “no frills” accommodations in clean dormitories. Hostels were originally for hikers and bikers, but that isn’t the case these days — some newer hostels are downright plush. Still, expect humble conditions. At official hostels, the sexes are segregated, with 4 to 20 people packed in a room full of bunk beds. Many independent hostels have both segregated and mixed dorms. Hostels often have a few doubles for group leaders and couples, and rooms for families are increasingly common (and affordable). Strong, hot showers are the norm, but some very rustic, off-the-beaten-path hostels (or mountain huts) might have no showers at all.

Bedding is usually included. Pillows and blankets are provided. Sheets are typically included in the cost, but occasionally you’ll be asked to pay about \$5 extra to rent them. Hostellers who are used to bringing their own sleep sack should check ahead before packing it. Concerned about bedbugs, many hostels now require you to use their linens even if you have your own.

Get out of your social bubble. Solo travelers find a family in every hostel and can always find a new travel partner; those with partners do well to occasionally stay



in a hostel to meet some new companions. A hostel's recreation and living rooms are my favorite hangouts. People gather, play games, tell stories, share information, read, write, and team up for future travels. Even if lights go out by 11 p.m., bunk-bed conversation can rage long after. You may well find yourself propped on your elbows staring intensely into the darkness, passing around travel tales like a bucket of popcorn.

Save money by eating in. A simple breakfast is often included in the price of your bed. Hearty, super-cheap meals are served at an extra cost, often in family-style settings. A typical dinner is fish sticks and mashed potatoes seasoned by conversation with new friends from Norway to New Zealand. The self-service kitchen, complete with utensils, pots, and pans, is a great budget aid that comes with most hostels. Larger hostels even have small grocery stores. International friendships rise with the bread in hostel kitchens.

Hostels can be like mini-tourist offices. Most hostel lobbies are littered with brochures and bulletin boards alerting you to local tours, events, and public transportation. There's almost always Wi-Fi as well as a public computer. Remember that your roommates breakfast companions

can also be great sources of local advice.

Get to know your host. The people who live in and run some smaller hostels (sometimes called "wardens" in Britain) do their best to strictly enforce rules, quiet hours, and other regulations. Some are loose and laid-back, others are like Marine drill sergeants, but they all work toward the noble goal of enabling travelers to better appreciate and

enjoy that town or region. While they can be overworked and harried at busy times, most hostel employees are fine people who enjoy a quiet cup of coffee with an American and are happy to give you some travel tips or recommend a special nearby hostel. Be sensitive to the many demands on their time, and never treat them like hotel servants.

Hostels have drawbacks. Some hostels — especially official ones — have strict rules. Some lock up during the day (usually from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.), and a few may have a curfew at night, when the doors are locked. Keep in mind that a curfew can be a big advantage — hostels that don't have curfews, especially in big cities, are more

likely to have hostellers (often drunk and rowdy) returning at ungodly hours. The sounds you'll hear in bigger dorm halls just after everyone's turned in remind me of summer camp — giggles, burps, jokes, and strange noises in many languages. Snoring is permitted and practiced openly.

Hostel rooms can be large and packed. School groups (especially German) can turn hostels upside down (typically weekends during the school year and weekdays in the summer). Try to be understanding (many groups are disadvantaged kids); we were all noisy kids at one time. Get to know the teacher and make it a "cultural experience."

Theft can be a problem in hostels, but try this simple safeguard: Wear your money belt (even while sleeping), and don't leave valuables lying around (but no one's going to steal your tennis shoes or journal). Use the storage lockers that are available in most hostels.

Hostel selectively. I've hosted mostly in northern Europe, where hostels are more comfortable and the savings over hotels more exciting. (This is particularly true in Scandinavia, where you find lots of Volvos in hostel parking lots; locals know that hostels provide the best — and usually only — \$30 beds in town.) I rarely hostel in the south, where hostels are less common and two or three people can sleep just as cheaply in a budget hotel.

Big-city hostels can be most overrun by young backpackers. Rural hostels, far from train lines and famous sights, are usually quiet and frequented by a more mature crowd. If you have a car, use that mobility to visit places without train service and enjoy some of Europe's overlooked hostels.

Be skeptical about hostel ratings. The ratings on hostel-booking websites can help you get a feel for a hostel, but shouldn't be the end-all in your decision making. What matters most to me are a hostel's ratings in the areas of safety, location, and character. Seek a hostel where you and your belongings will be secure, in a central location (or easily linked to the center by public transit), and with a good vibe (if other people enjoy their time there, you likely will too). I don't pay much attention to ratings for cleanliness or helpfulness of the staff (which can be negatively influenced by former five-star hotel guests who weren't ready for a hostel experience).

Getting a hostel bed in peak tourist season can be tricky. The most popular hostels fill up every day. Most hostels will take telephone or email reservations. I always call or email ahead to try to reserve and at least check on the availability of beds. But don't rely solely on advance reservations, because many hostels hold some beds for drop-ins. Try to arrive early. If the hostel has a lockout period during the day, show up before the office closes in the morning; otherwise, line up with the scruffy gang for the 5 p.m. reopening, when any remaining beds are doled out.

Hostelworld is the standard way backpackers search and book hostels these

days, but also try Hostelz.com and Hostels.com. If you're staying at a mix of both official and independent hostels — as most hostellers do — Let's Goguidebooks offer the best all-around listings.

Some hostels have a reservation system where, for a small fee, you can reserve and pay for your next hostel bed before you leave the last one. You can also book Hostelling International locations online (\$3 nonrefundable booking fee plus 6 percent nonrefundable deposit per location booked, balance due at hostel on arrival, 10 percent discount for members at check-in); they accept Visa and MasterCard and also sell hostel membership cards. Book at least a day ahead. Hostel bed availability is unpredictable. Some obscure hostels are booked out on certain days six months in advance. But I stumbled into Oberammergau one night during the jam-packed Passion Play festival and found beds for a group of eight.

Consider getting an HI membership. If you plan to spend at least six nights at official HI hostels, you'll save money if you buy a membership card before you go (\$28/year for full benefits, free if you're under 18 and \$18 if you're 55 or over, stripped-down \$18 emembership does not include frills such as insurance and currency exchange; available at your local student-travel office, any HI hostel office, or through Hostelling International's site). If you think you may not spend six nights at HI hostels, don't buy the card in advance. Nonmembers who want to stay at HI hostels can sometimes get an "international guest card" at their first hostel and pay about \$5 extra per night for a "welcome stamp." Once you have six welcome stamps on your card, you become a member. As independent hostels become a more popular option, this "pay-as-you-go" system for official hostels makes sense for many travelers (rather than buying your membership up front). 🌈

Try to arrive early. If the hostel has a lockout period during the day, show up before the office closes in the morning.

How to Stay Safe When You Travel as a Female

by Kristin Addis

One of the chief concerns for most would-be solo travelers is safety. Can I stay safe on my own? How can I convince my friends and family that I'll be okay? The good news is: yes, you will be safe on the road. It's easier than you think because you already have the skills you need — the same methods you use to stay safe at home are relevant abroad as well.

Most people are scared before taking off on their first solo adventure. It's easy to be nervous before heading somewhere new. There are a lot of unknown factors (will you make friends? will you be safe?) that you'll turn over and over in your brain.

But it's all in your head. Your brain is creating worst-case scenarios that aren't likely to happen. I've found that following a few simple rules is enough to keep me (and you) safe on the road.

Safety Tip #1: Trust your gut instincts

There's much to be said about the power of intuition. If something or someone gives you an uneasy vibe, there's no shame in walking away or saying no. If your gut is telling you that something doesn't feel right, listen to it. This sense naturally becomes more heightened over time as a solo traveler.

Some people thought I was crazy and even stupid to hitchhike through China, but after years on the road, I trusted my intuition enough to sound the alarm bells if something didn't feel right. There were times, such as late at night in Rome when I've been offered a ride and immediately said no because I knew something was off. It's surprising how much listening to that little voice in the back of your mind can steer you in the right direction.

Safety Tip #2: Don't be afraid to say no

Don't be afraid that you will disappoint people by only saying yes when it feels right. Sometimes in bars and hostels, the group mentality to keep drinking and the pressure to partake in yet another round of shots is present on a daily basis.

Getting too intoxicated can lead to serious problems. Keep it to a few drinks at most if you're alone without anyone to look out for you. I can't tell you how long my list is of friends who have been robbed in alleyways in Spain or mugged in an otherwise safe Berlin because they became too intoxicated. It can happen easily, especially when in party areas or with party people. For this and other personal reasons, I have quit drinking alcohol completely, at home and on the road, and that not only has kept me safer but also led me to meeting people on my travels who are interested in things other than partying, and that's led to more enriching experiences overall.

Safety Tip #3: Keep a dummy wallet and whistle

In order to keep your most important valuables safe, some travelers suggest using a dummy wallet, which is a fake wallet that contains some canceled credit cards and a little bit of cash. It's enough to make a would-be thief think he's getting something worthwhile while keeping your real valuables well hidden.

Another important tool is something that makes noise. A whistle has come in handy more than once for me, especially when I remembered the tale of another solo female traveler who once used it to ward off rabid monkeys in Indonesia. I did the very same several months later when, in a split second, I remembered to use my whistle as an angry monkey was lunging toward me. It goes to show that you never know how useful something so small can be.

Safety Tip #4: Get advice from locals

Make full use of the platforms available online to understand what to look out for in the area you are traveling to, especially if it's your very first time traveling solo in the area. There are many online communities such as TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, and Facebook groups where updates are shared by locals, expats, and experts. I find asking

safety questions on these platforms is sometimes more reliable than some travel information websites as they are much more current, though it wouldn't hurt to research common scams and dangers in your destination on them. For Americans, that would be the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Ask employees at your hotel or guesthouse which scams to look out for. Find out not only what you should see during your visit but also which areas to avoid. Nobody knows this better than the people who live there year-round. Finally, a reputable walking tour at the beginning of your trip in a new city is not only a great way to have a proper introduction to the area, but also an opportunity to ask questions get more safety tips from your local guide.

Safety Tip #5: Dress appropriately

Dress like a local in order to blend in. By standing out, you risk more than just annoying catcalls. It's a sad reality, but in some countries, women can't dress as they please and need to cover up.

In traditionally Muslim countries, for example, wearing shorts and tank tops is not advisable and can be perceived as offensive. It's best to at least cover the shoulders and the knees. Do some research on what's appropriate to wear before packing.

That seems obvious, but it's still all too common to see topless girls on the beaches in Thailand, or super short shorts and crop tops in Malaysia and Indonesia. In order to be respected, it's important to respect the locals' customs and modesty levels.

Safety Tip #6: Don't walk alone at night

WIn some countries, it's perfectly safe to walk alone at night. In others, it could be dangerous. Going out at night in groups or asking to be accompanied by someone else at your guesthouse or hotel is always smart.

Unfortunately I learned this the hard way after someone grabbed me in the dark as I walked along a dirt path in Nepal. The local police and my guesthouse owner were both

bewildered, saying that kind of thing never happens there. Well, it turns out that it does, and I made sure never to be alone at night thereafter in Nepal, and now I make sure to not walk alone late at night.

Safety Tip #7: Make copies of your important documents

Although we always hope nothing will happen, it's important to be prepared for a worst case scenario. Make copies of your important documents, including your passport, identity card, and insurance cards, and keep them in all of the bags you carry. Keep electronic copies as well, should the worst occur and you lose the paper copy along with the physical document. Take photos of all of your important documents and store them on your phone and laptop, in addition to uploading them to a secure cloud server.

I also recommend taking photos of electronics you are traveling with and uploading them to a cloud server. This will help prove you owned the item in case you need to make a travel insurance claim.

Safety Tip #8: Know the local emergency numbers

Look up the local emergency number online before you depart or ask the staff at the front desk wherever you're staying. There are also apps, like TripWhistle, that provide emergency numbers from all over the world. Of course, the best-case scenario is that you never have to use it, but it's always smart to be prepared in case you do need it.

Safety Tip #9: Let friends know where you are

Make sure someone (a friend, family member, or fellow traveler) knows your itinerary and where you should be at any given time. Try not to go off the grid completely or for long periods of time, especially if you have worried parents back home. If you do change your plans — because it's bound to happen sometime — don't forget to let someone know. Internet cafes are generally easy to find, and many countries have inexpensive SIM cards (\$20 or less) that will help you keep in touch if you have an unlocked phone. Besides, if you're on the move, having Internet access for booking travel arrangements and finding directions is often a godsend.

In closing, traveling solo is marvelous. It allows you to make all of your own travel

decisions, promotes personal growth and independence, and can even be a bit safer since you can take in more of your surroundings than if a friend were around distracting you. Solo traveling helps to sharpen intuition and, despite typical worries, is often no more dangerous than your hometown.

The same common sense you use at home is relevant abroad. It's not rocket science, and as long as you're smart about it and follow these simple tips, you're in for a positive adventure. 🌊

***“Safety Tip #1:
Trust your gut
instincts”***

***“Safety Tip
#4: Get advice
from locals”***

***“Safety Tip #7:
Make copies of
your important
documents”***

***“Safety Tip #9:
Let friends know
where you are”***



How I Jazzed Up My Trip to Paris

By Matthew Karsten



I think I've become a "typical tourist." Ya know, the kind that hits the major tourist sites and a few off-the-path attractions, Yelp's a few local restaurants, and moves on. I get my basic overview, learn how to save some money, and continue to the next destination.

And that's left me feeling that my travels have become too vanilla lately. There's a spark missing. I mean, I don't think I go to boring places, but there's just a part of me that feels there's been less adventure and pizzazz in my travels, that I haven't done anything really cool, interesting, or off-beat for a long time.

So, I had an idea: What if I traveled with a theme? Instead of just trying to see the usual well-known sites, what if I went with a specific focus in mind? What if I went to see only the jazz clubs of a city or the modern art museums? Or only hiked trails that begin with the letter M? Or went to learn about a destination's wine industry? Or decided I'd only eat at Japanese restaurants with a local food expert? Really, it could be anything, as long as it hyper-focused my travels around one idea that forced me to look at a destination in a different light.

(I'm sure I'm not the first person to think about this, but it's something I've never done before.)

For example, I've been to Paris countless times. I've hit all the big sites multiple times over. When I returned to Paris recently, I wanted something different and new. I wanted a purpose. So I decided to experience Jazz Age Paris. I wanted my own private Midnight in Paris. I wanted the spirit of the 1920s: jazz, cocktails, and literature.

As a result, I spent time in Montmartre, ate at Les Deux Magots, enjoyed jazz in the Latin Quarter, drank in speakeasies and wine caves, wandered the bookshelves of Shakespeare and Company, and got lost in the streets of the Left Bank. It might not have been the '20s exactly, but I ate at restaurants I'd never been to, went to music venues I'd never heard of, and saw parts of Paris I didn't know existed (including a

So I decided to experience Jazz Age Paris. I wanted my own private Midnight in Paris. I wanted the spirit of the 1920s: jazz, cocktails, and literature.

wonderful cobblestone street filled with tiny cafés in a 1900s covered market).

It was the most fun I had had in the City of Lights in a long time...because it was different. Designing my travels around one theme forced me to plan differently.

And it's something I plan to continue. After being consistently on the road for a decade, I need to spice things up a little bit.

You develop a routine after traveling for a long time. Like everything else, you fall into a certain complacency. Sure, you're in cool destinations doing cool things — but it's often the same type of things. So from now on, instead of just going to places, I'm going with purpose.

(Besides traveling with a theme, I've also decided to use only the sharing economy for transportation (when I can), as well as to start looking for more tours on Vayable and meals on EatWith as a way to have more unique and interesting experiences and meet more locals.)

If you're in a destination for the first time, of course by all means see all the main sites and attractions — but try to add a little theme to your trip that forces you off the beaten path toward some different or unusual attractions, sights, and events.

How to Travel with a Theme

vSo how do you do this? It requires a bit more research than opening up a guidebook! Here's how I planned my trip:

Step 1 – Pick a Theme

This is an obvious first step. You can't do any of the other steps without it. For me, I had 1920s Paris on my mind, so I decided I'd try to relive that era. But it could be anything: learning about cheese or wine production, the vegan food scene, jazz culture, the modern art scene — whatever suits your fancy! And, if you're not sure what theme to pick, think of things that interest you the most and see that destination has stuff related to it or just Google "What is (x) famous for?" and see what comes out!

Step 2 – Research Online

After picking your theme, go more in depth on your search. Local blogs, general travel blogs, our forums, Lonely Planet, Time Out, Yelp — these are all websites I use in my research. Then I go to Google and type in a number of keywords to cover all my bases. For my '20s trip, for example, I typed in "books on 1920s Paris," "how to see 1920s Paris," "1920s Paris sights," "Paris speakeasies," and "best jazz clubs in Paris" and found a number of references to consult and various places where I could experience that '20s vibe. This allowed me to compile a list of potential places to visit.

Step 3 – Plan Your Itinerary

While I didn't want to overplan any trip, I kind of wanted a plan of attack. There was a lot to see in Paris and I didn't have much time, so I prioritized what appealed the most. First came the food, then the bars, then the sights. This allowed me to come up with a general framework for my trip. Tagging sites on a Google Map can help you see how far apart things are and then plan your optimal route!

Step 4 – Contact Locals and Experts

Couchsurfing groups and Meetup.com are incredible places to find locals who share your interest. They are going to know the ins and outs of the city and probably have lots of suggestions. Additionally, the group meetups are a fun way to meet locals who share a similar passion, making conversation easier and breaking down that awkward language barrier. Lastly, Vayable, a website that lets locals set up their own walking tours, is also a way to find local experts and unique walking tours.

Step 5 – Read a Book (or Three)

To get context, read a book on the subject. While I already knew a lot about the '20s Jazz Age, I ended up picking a few more books on the subject: *When Paris Sizzled* by Mary McAuliffe, *Everybody Was So Young* by Amanda Vaill, *Shakespeare and Company* by Sylvia Beach, *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties* by William Wiser. Books also might clue you in to some other attractions too!

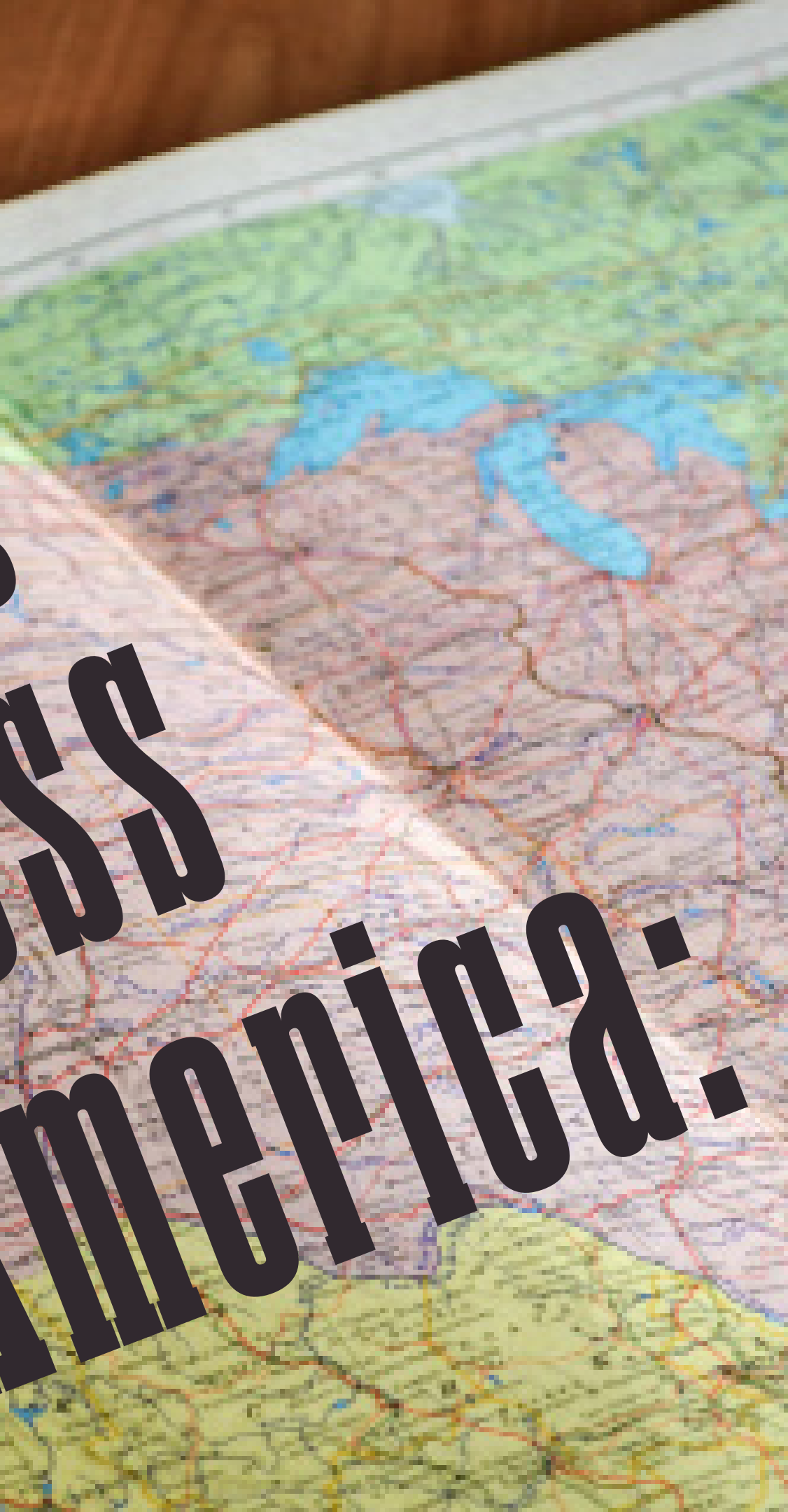
When you do something for a long time, it can become sort of stale. It can lose its luster. When it comes to travel, sometimes that just means sitting down, relaxing, and watching Netflix until you gain your mojo back. Other times, it means brining back the spice and excitement of those first moments, trying to get that first high back.

I know travel so well that it's become too easy. I'll be traveling with a theme much more often, so more of my upcoming posts will be like this Paris post, trying to hunt down cool and unique things about destinations. I already have two new themes in mind for my return to NYC: the best swing dance clubs and the best Japanese izakaya bars. And, for my return to Portland this summer, I'm thinking food trucks only (there's even a food truck tour!).

Because, as much as I love the popular things (they are popular for a reason), I want to add something a little different and unique into my trips that spices them up in a way I never would have thought about before. ~~~



Hitchhiking
Acro



One Ride At A Time

By Matthew Karsten

Day 1 of my cross-country hitchhiking journey begins as I strap on my pack and walked to the edge of Seaside, OR. It was chilly and overcast outside. I grabbed a piece of old cardboard from the hostel I slept at the night before and sat down in a field to sketch out a road sign.

There wasn't much space, so I simply wrote out the name of the town I was headed to in big red block letters. Astoria, Oregon.

I stood on the side of Route 101 — the sign in one hand, my thumb out with the other. Attempting to look as friendly and sane as possible while smiling to passing drivers. And pass they did. Over, and over, and over again.



Ride #1: CJ The Redneck

About 20 minutes into my wait, a giant orange 1976 Chevy finally skids to a stop in a cloud of dust behind me. I jog up to find a young woman named CJ behind the wheel. Beside her on the bench seat sits Titan, her super friendly 5 year old Husky mix rescue dog.

CJ lives in the area, and was heading to the town of Warrenton, about 11 miles away. She could drop me off at a good intersection there. She told me she doesn't usually pick up hitchhikers, but I looked pretty normal.

She's also done some hitchhiking in the past herself. CJ spent a few months camping in the Montana wilderness around Glacier National Park when she was younger.

Ride #2: Bruce The Hawaiian

From Warrington, I threw up my same "Astoria" sign and quickly landed a ride from Bruce only 5 minutes later. He's a recently retired paper-mill worker whose family is originally from Hawaii. We chatted about things to do around Astoria while driving into town.

In addition to the Goonies House, he recommended I check out the view from the Astoria Column. Bruce dropped me off in the center of town near a coffee shop where I could recharge my gadgets and get some work done.

Astoria, Oregon

Astoria is where the Steven Spielberg film "The Goonies" was filmed. One of my favorite movies of all time! Because it was so close, I couldn't possibly head East without stopping by for a quick visit to the famous Goonies' House and dance Chunk's Truffle Shuffle out front.

The city has a long history of fishing and shipping industry via access to the Columbia river, and you can still see plenty of giant cargo ships loaded up with timber, cars, grain, and other goods as they pass back and forth along the river to Portland.

After a day of exploring Astoria and working a bit, I decided it was time to find a place to camp for the night. So I walked up into the wooded area near the Astoria Column around sunset and searched. But the forest out here was pretty damn thick with vegetation and thorn bushes, so it wasn't easy to find a place. Even with my awesome camping hammock.

Bruce the Hawaiian



CJ the Redneck



Ride #3: Laurie The Nurse

After my night in the woods, I hitched a short ride back into town with Laurie. I only had to wait for 5 minutes. Laurie is the Director of Nursing at Clatsop College in Astoria. She immediately told me she NEVER picks up hitchhikers...

So why did she pick me up in the early morning on the side of the road in the middle of a forest? Apparently I don't look like a drug addict.

Plus she has a few of her own hitchhiking stories from her 20's while backpacking around New Zealand. She wanted to help out a fellow adventure seeker — so she dropped me off at Safeway where I bought breakfast.

She easily would've brought me farther if I'd asked her to.



Laurie the Nurse

Ocean City, MD

Washington D.C.

Ride #4: Susan The Hula Hooper

Next it was time to get out of Astoria and head South back to the town of Seaside. After walking to the edge of town, I picked a busy spot with a large parking lot for potential rides to pull into, threw up a new cardboard sign and stuck out my thumb.

This time it took 25 minutes before anyone stopped. Still not too shabby!

Susan's car was loaded up with a bike on the trunk and a few giant hula hoops in the back seat. Before I could get into the car, she made me promise I wasn't going to murder or rob her.

Susan is a medical records auditor from Tacoma, WA and was on her way to Seaside for a short vacation. She's a big hula-hoop fan, and actually makes her own out of PVC pipe!

We decided to eat lunch together at Norma's Seafood & Steak when we arrived in Seaside. The clam chowder at Norma's was excellent!

Ride #5: Scott The Children's Author

After splurging on a hotel room in Seaside and finally taking a shower, the next morning I walked to a gas station and found some cardboard in a dumpster for my sign. Again it took 25 minutes before someone pulled over.

It's interesting to witness the reactions different people have as they drive past you. Some smile and wave, others look sorry they can't pull over (full car, not going far, etc.). Many quickly look away like they're ashamed or disgusted with you.

But when Scott pulled over in his shiny red Jeep Liberty, he offered to bring me all the way to Beaverton on the outskirts of Portland (a 1.5 hour drive) where he was visiting his 20 year old daughter.

Scott was full of great stories. He spent a few months in prison for causing a bad car accident when he was younger, went on a hitchhiking journey up the West coast to Canada, worked as a salesman most of his life, and is currently writing a children's book.

Oh, and he almost died when his heart failed at a Pink Floyd concert.

In Beaverton Scott bought me hot wings and a few beers at WingStop, where he also proceeded to kick my ass. In video trivia. Then he dropped me off at a metro station so I could take the light-rail into Portland.



Day 5 of my cross-country hitchhiking journey across America begins with me tracking down hobos in Portland to learn how to hop freight trains. There's just something magical about the thought of riding a train through the countryside.

Traveling the rails like many did during the Great Depression. Escaping 20th century traffic congestion and advertising on the highways to watch the scenery roll past on a set of train tracks. Smelling wildflowers in the fresh mountain air.

Yet a small community of modern railriders still exists even today.

So I read books, asked questions in obscure online forums, and spoke to a few freight riders in person. Attempting to prepare myself as best I could to prevent getting injured or arrested. Because riding freight trains is pretty dangerous and definitely illegal.

The first obstacle is locating where you can even catch a train. They slow down or stop at specific places: inside rail-yards for loading & unloading, at "sidings" (where one train will stop to let another pass), and crew-change points.

Then you have to decide what direction the train is going. It could look like it's pointed East, when in reality it may turn South a few miles later.

Next you need to select a rideable car. There are a few different types, but some can be downright deadly to ride in if you don't know what you're doing. In fact just maneuvering around a stopped or slow-moving freight train can be extremely dangerous.

Of course avoiding getting caught is also a priority. The rail police (aka "Bulls") are constantly on the hunt for illegal train riders. This will result in a ticket or even a few nights in jail depending on the location.

Other railriders can be a threat too. Drug addicts or criminals may be riding the same trains as you. There is a lot to think about!

Lacey, WA

Riding Trains Isn't Easy

Portland, OR

Ride #6: BNSF Railroad!

My initial goal was to hop a freight train heading East out of Portland. But it took me 3 nights and over 18 hours of waiting on the side of the tracks to catch one — and when I did, it was headed in the wrong direction!

On the 3rd night of attempting to "catch out", I found some thick bushes and made myself comfortable as the sun began to set. Stuffing my face full of tasty ripe blackberries that grow wild along the tracks. A few trains came by, but they were moving too fast.

It was around midnight (4 hours later) when an opportunity presented itself. A "junk" train began pulling out of the rail yard next-door and onto the mainline where I was waiting.

Junk Trains pull cars with less valuable cargo. Grain. Oil. Coal. Lumber. Steel. Fruit. Etc. They cruise the tracks at 40 mph or slower.

Hot Shots are loaded with shipping containers full of valuable merchandise.

Cars. Electronics. Designer clothing. Each container can easily be packed with over \$500,000 of stuff. These fly by at 70 mph.

As my junk train rounded a corner onto the main track, it was only traveling at about 5 mph. Perfect.

I spotted a few rideable cars too. So after rushing up the embankment I began running alongside a refrigerated boxcar (aka "reefer") covered in graffiti. It was closed, but there's a small cubby-hole area in the back that houses the refrigeration unit. I grabbed the ladder, jumped up, and squeezed inside with my pack. Success!

After a few miles the train picked up speed and I made myself as comfortable as possible. The landscape passed by under the glow of a full moon. But my car was very loud. Not only from the grinding steel sound on the tracks, but the refrigeration unit kicked on and off every 30 minutes — so it wasn't very peaceful until I threw in some headphones and turned on Bob Dylan.

When I eventually checked the GPS location on my phone, I discovered we were headed North instead of East. Whoops! No big deal. I knew there was a chance of that happening.

Because we were headed North, I assumed the train was traveling to Seattle. But after a 3 hour ride, we pulled into a brightly-lit rail yard and stopped.

I was forced to throw a brown tarp over myself & my pack to hide from the yard-workers walking by. After an hour of no movement, I realized that we were not just



waiting for a faster train to pass, but this was the last stop.

My fear was confirmed when I peaked out to discover the two engines up front were no longer attached...

Packing my gear I soon left the safety of the boxcar to search for another train in the yard that would be heading North as the sun began to rise. But after looking for a while, I made the mistake of climbing out into the open in front of a rail cop's white pickup-truck about 100 yards away. *Shit!*

He hit the accelerator and drove right at me. To avoid getting caught, I scrambled back over the train and ran towards him with a mile-long string of cars between us. Unless he left his truck and chased on foot, there's no way he'd find me in this maze of trains.

With my adrenaline pumping despite a lack of sleep the night before, I escaped from the yard as quickly as possible and made my way to the roadside. Now covered in train grease and looking like a proper bum, no one would pick me up. So I was forced to walk 4 miles into the town of Kelso, WA.

Once there I splurged on a Motel 6 bed, hot shower, laundromat, and a tub of Ben & Jerry's.

Day 8 of my cross-country hitchhiking adventure begins with me rolling out of bed at Motel 6 after hopping a freight train from Portland the night before. My mission was to get to Seattle by nightfall.

I stopped by the Subway shop in Kelso, WA to grab a sandwich as well as some fresh cardboard for a new road sign. The ladies working the counter surprised me by handing over a bag full of the previous day's cookies — twenty of them in total!

While sitting down to write out "Seattle — good stories" on the cardboard with a Sharpie, a man named George strolled over and offered to buy me a train ticket directly there...

I explained to him that I wasn't destitute, and was hitchhiking to meet cool people and have an adventure. Just more proof of my theory that most people around the world are kind & generous.

Ride #7: The Hot Tub Men

Another pleasant surprise interrupted my morning when Bret offered to drive me 47 miles North to Great Mound, WA. Not all the way to Seattle, but better than nothing!

He saw the cardboard sign and overheard my conversation with George, so it wasn't even necessary to leave Subway to locate my next lift.

Bret was on his way back from a hot-tub delivery in a work truck with 2 other guys, Trevor & Shaun. In their free time the three of them fished, hunted, rode dirt-bikes and wake-boards.



The Hot Tub Men

Ride #8: John the Ex-Hippy

Now it was time to see how well my Seattle sign would work. Standing in the glaring sun at the side of an on-ramp for I-5, John picked me up after a 30 minute wait. Not bad!

John's thumbed his share of rides around the United States in the 70's. He estimates a total of about 8400 miles. Plus a few long-distance road trips in a school bus with a group of hippies.

These days he's a computer technician working for the small Chehalis Native American tribe. He drove out of his way to leave me at a better exit for hitching my next ride.

John the Ex-Hippy



Ride #9: Wendy & Christine The Faeries

I wasn't even holding up my sign when Wendy & Christine pulled over in their Honda minivan 15 minutes later. I jumped in back and was attacked (with love) by their little dog Tucker and his hilarious underbite.

They weren't going far, just up the road to Walmart to pick up a tent for the Faerieworlds Festival that weekend...

Oh, and by the way. Would I like to join them? It's just a crazy 3 day party in the woods where everyone dresses up as faeries...

Now normally I'm pretty open-minded about stuff like this. But I'd have to commit to 3 days, and I'd just spent 4 days in Portland. My hitchhiking trip thus far was moving a bit slowly, and I was feeling a push to move faster. So I reluctantly declined their generous offer.

Ride #10: Nan The Gymnastics Coach

I walked out to the highway on-ramp in Lacey, WA and threw out my thumb once again until Nan stopped in his pickup truck after about 40 minutes of road-side rejection.

Nan is an ex-Marine who's working as a gymnastics instructor and personal trainer. He spends his free time training in mixed martial arts. We had a good conversation about false first-impressions and what life in the military is like.

He dropped me off in Tacoma, WA. I soon learned how difficult it can be hitchhiking out of cities, when after 2 hours of waiting I received no lifts.

A few different police cars passed me, some more than once. But none of them stopped. Eventually the sun fell below the horizon and I walked to the nearest local bus station. No one picks up hitchhikers after dark. So I purchased a \$3.50 ticket to Seattle and spent the night at a hostel.

Wendy & Christine





Pam the Tour Guide



Ride #11: Pam the Tour Guide

The next morning I got some work done before meeting up with my friend Pam from Nerd's Eye View for breakfast. She's a talented writer and ukulele rockstar.

The ferry ride over the bay to West Seattle was beautiful. We chowed down in the sun at Ma Kai, a Hawaiian restaurant on the pier. My tasty Korean fish taco and a giant Spam Musubi hit the spot!

Then Pam was kind enough to give me a tour of the area on the back of her bicycle. She even offered to lend me her sweet-looking (literally) watermelon helmet. Safety first...

Ok, so we only traveled about 5 feet before we realized it wasn't going to work. But hey, when you're hitchhiking, every mile (foot?) counts.

All the hostels and cheap motels in the area were completely booked up that weekend for the Capitol Hill Block Party. While I'm a big fan of not over-planning your travels, sometimes it backfires.

No worries. Social media to the rescue! I jumped onto Facebook & Twitter to ask for a couch to crash on, as well as throwing up a last-minute couch request on Couchsurfing.org. Soon the offers came rolling in.

I decided to stay with an old friend from my college days in Montana. Justin is a talented breaks music producer and bartender in Seattle.

We spent the evening at a wild underground warehouse party, complete with 12 foot tall scantily-clad women on stilts, before I finally crashed out on his couch for the night. When I awoke, there was a complete stranger named Deja between my legs. I don't remember exactly how she got there.

She left without giving me her number either... what a bitch!

Day 11 of my trip across the United States starts with a bus ride out of Seattle. Trying to hitchhike directly out of cities is difficult, as urban on-ramps rarely have a decent spot for cars to pull over, traffic is moving fast, and many people are only traveling a short distance.

So I often use public transportation to get away from any metro areas.

Taking the city bus out to Issaquah, I soon discovered that the exit I'd chosen was just as bad as in the city. There was no shoulder for cars to pull over on, let alone room for me to walk out there safely, forcing me to stand around with my cardboard sign at a small gas station nearby.

But after 3 hours and no luck, I walked back to the bus stop and asked a driver to take me to a better area.

Camping Behind a Mormon Church

Arriving in the town of North Bend, I decided to spend the afternoon working inside a McDonalds using their free WiFi. I'd attempt to find a place to camp for the night later. Google Maps is great for this!

The satellite view lets you easily scope out potential urban camping sites nearby.

Churches are often decent places to camp. Not many people hang out there in the middle of the night, and a church is apt to be a bit more lenient with trespassers than a business or private residence would be.



Seaside, OR

I discovered a Mormon church located only a few blocks away. Perfect. I just hope trespassing isn't considered a sin...

Once I was safe & snug in my camping hammock, a truck suddenly pulled into the parking lot. I was afraid I'd been spotted. Luckily they didn't seem to see me hidden in the trees, and drove off a bit later. However the following morning I learned it was actually a friend of mine...

I met Laura & Ted at the Adventure Travel Mexico conference in Veracruz last year. They own a fun travel agency called Go Custom Travel.

It seems Laura discovered I was in their hometown completely at random when she happened to check out the live tracking map I've been using. She sent her husband Ted out to find me & offer a place to crash... it was his truck I saw at the church!

They invited me to breakfast in the morning, followed by a relaxing soak in their hot tub while enjoying some fresh coffee. Oh, and they also packed me a tasty lunch plus a bag of gourmet cookies to bribe my way into the next car.

Seattle, WA



Ride #12: Dave the Plumber

Making sure to write “Free Cookies” on my cardboard road sign to entice someone to stop, I waited along the I-90 East on-ramp for about an hour as at least 50 cars passed me. It was Dave who finally pulled over in his Subaru WRX.

You think your daily commute is bad? Dave’s drive is 2 hours! He’s a plumber & AC repair guy — who makes as much money as some doctors do. When he was younger, he hitchhiked from Florida to Boston.

But these days he’s providing for his 8 kids (that’s not a typo), hunting for elk or fishing for salmon with his free time. He drove me 79 miles through Washington’s beautiful Snoqualmie Pass to the town of Ellensburg.

I spent a few hours attempting to hitch out with no luck, and set up camp near a Flying J truck stop that night. They make some good chili! It comes with a massive brick of corn bread. The WiFi at the truck stop was good and strong, so I actually had a signal from my camping spot 1/4 mile away using the Alpha WiFi antenna.

Ride #13: The Maverick Collectors

In the morning I spent an hour outside with my sign when Paul, Trina, and John called me over from a restaurant parking lot. While eating breakfast they’d been watching me attempt to hitch out with no luck — and decided to offer a lift in their classic 1973 Ford Maverick.

We cruised East past a giant wind farm as the landscape became dry, barren, and hot. Hazy smoke from a wildfire nearby filled the air.

Often when you’re hitchhiking the driver wants to talk a lot. But some people are perfectly happy to enjoy some silence.

Paul & John are brothers, and both work as car mechanics. They actually own a collection of old Mavericks. We didn’t talk much though, which was actually nice for a change. Trina handed me a can of Coke and a few small packages of Cheese-Its for ride.

They dropped me off about 29 miles later at a gas station in the town of Vantage alongside the Columbia River.

There’s a beautiful bridge that crosses the Columbia River at Vantage, and a petrified forest too. The only problem is not many people stop here.

I quickly learned it wasn’t the best place to hitch a ride out of.

After 2 hours standing under the blazing hot sun, only 10 cars had passed me. My hitchhiking prospects weren’t looking good here. I began to believe I’d be stranded in Vantage for the night...

But then I was saved by the inventor of The Ultimate Pancake Sandwich.

Ride #14: Pancake Sandwich King

John is from Seattle. He was on his way East to Idaho for business. What kind of business? The pancake sandwich type of course!

He owns a company that created The Ultimate Pancake Sandwich.

I totally scored with this ride.

Our world needs a microwaveable breakfast sandwich that’s actually tasty and made with fresh local ingredients. F*ck Hot-Pockets, the Ultimate Pancake Sandwich is quick to prepare, not messy to eat, and tastes fantastic!

But to prove it, John loaded me up with a few of his epic creations to taste-test for myself.

The 2 hour drive to Spokane flew by as we talked about social media, following your dreams, not obsessing about things in life you can’t control, and international travel.

John’s never hitchhiked before, but picks up hitchhikers often. This guy has plenty of good karma coming his way in the future. Keep an eye out for his delicious pancake sandwiches in a supermarket near you!

Day 14 of my epic hitchhiking journey through the United States starts in Spokane, WA. After hopping onto a city bus to the edge of the city, I walk towards the on-ramp for I-90 East. But I’ve got competition!

A very large lady is already standing on the side of the road with her thumb out. “Precious” was a bit wary of me, and didn’t want to talk much.

Soon a female driver pulled over for her, also looking at me with distrust, giving her a lift out of there. Probably in order to rescue her from the suspiciously friendly hobo with a shaved head. That was fine with me. No more competition for rides!

Ride #15: Captain Kitty Litter

In less than 20 minutes a beat-up Chrysler K-Car pulled over while I was flashing my “Montana — Won’t Kill You” cardboard sign. I was overly excited to score a lift so quickly, and made the mistake of not properly vetting just who it was picking me up... Once inside I knew this would be an interesting ride.

David isn’t exactly the cleanest fellow around. In fact, I’d describe him as a hoarder of trash. It took him a few minutes to clean all the crap out of the passenger seat for me to sit down.

When I did, I soon noticed the kitty litter box full of shit on the floor between my feet.

But there was no sign of a kitty. Unless of course the poor creature was buried beneath the mountain of refuse piled in the back seat. Which frankly wouldn’t surprise me.

Over the next 30 minutes I would learn that David used to be in the Navy, builds wooden boats that his friends cut up into firewood, has a serious problem with

road-rage and racism, drives erratically, collects sand from Arizona, and once threw a hitchhiker out of a moving car for not wearing a seatbelt — running over his foot in the process.

My hand moved a bit closer to the small pepper-spray canister in my pocket.

I steered away from controversial subjects and tried not to piss him off until he dropped me off on the outskirts of Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. David was the kind of guy everyone warned me about on this trip.

A lunatic.

Ride #16: Daniel The Mechanic

After picking up some food at a nearby gas station, I shouldered my pack and walked over to the next on-ramp under the hot sun. It was located right next to a busy bike path. Lycra-clad cyclists on fancy bikes stared at me as they rode past — curious about what I was doing.

It took an hour for someone to finally stop. And it wasn’t the ride I was expecting.

Daniel pulled over on his 1986 Suzuki Intruder to ask if I wanted a lift into the heart of the city on the back of his motorcycle. Hell. Yes.

Idaho doesn’t have a helmet law if you’re over 18, so I jumped on and grabbed the backrest as we merged onto the highway. It only took a few minutes to travel the 7 miles into town at 70mph.

It wasn’t until we stopped that I learned Daniel was going to school to become a mechanic. Preferring to commute on his bike for the great gas mileage. Plus it’s more fun.

Time for a new sign! I began to ask followers on Facebook & Twitter for ideas.



Dave the Plumber

Seattle, WA

Coeur d'Alene, ID

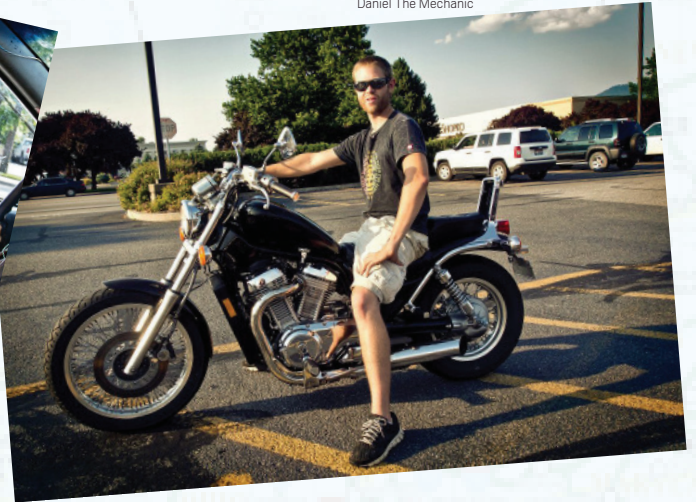
Seaside, OR

Portland, OR

Captain Kitty Litter



Daniel The Mechanic



The Maverick Collectors



Pancake Sandwich King



Kate McCulley suggested this gem. You wouldn't believe some of the reactions I received while using funny signs like this...

My conclusion is that there are WAY too many stuck-up pricks with no sense of humor living here in the US. I can't tell you how many drivers gave me looks of disgust or contempt. I mean, how could you not laugh at this??

Don't get me wrong, plenty of cars found it hilarious. But most people gave me the evil eye. If I'm hitchhiking, it obviously means I'm the scum of the Earth. Probably a murderer or rapist on parole. It was fascinating to witness the different reactions.



Ride #17: Dan The Actor

Luckily Dan has a healthy sense of humor. He found the rabies sign so funny that he actually turned around at the next exit and drove back just to pick me up.

Dan is a retired logistics pro who worked for a pharmaceutical company. But his real passion is theater and politics. A former actor for Shakespeare in the Park, pilot, and political organizer. He was in the middle of a road trip out to Montana.

We stopped to see the historic silver mining town of Wallace, ID and he filled me in on the history of the Great Fire of 1910, the largest recorded forest fire in US history.

All together we drove 166 miles to the college town of Missoula, MT. Sick of camping, I decided to check into a Days Inn motel for the night.

Ride #18: The Hilarious Murphy Brothers

The next day I worked on some projects from inside a Starbucks, and walked to a laundromat to wash the grime off my clothes. In the afternoon I boarded the city bus towards a promising on-ramp. Writing out a sign that simply said "Bozeman". My next destination.

About an hour later the Murphy Brothers pulled over in their Land Rover. On their way back from a job training people how to maintain industrial batteries, they were heading through Bozeman on the way to Livingston, Montana.

In the back of the truck I met Mojo, the little dog who made himself comfortable in my lap for the 3 hour ride. We were flying down the highway making great time at 90mph. Driving along large open ranches and winding through steep mountain passes. The Murphys are funny guys, and kept me laughing most of the journey.



The Murphy Brothers

Visiting Old Friends

Bozeman is where I went to college for Business & Economics at Montana State University. So I was excited to stop in and say hi to some friends I hadn't seen in a long time.

Lindsey let me crash in her spare bedroom for the night, and we all went out the next evening, meeting up with my friends Chad, Ryan, and Rye. I was a house-music DJ in college, and these guys would always come out to dance at our shows.

Ryan & I worked together as lifeguards & swim instructors at the public pool too. Such great memories!

Bozeman closes off Main Street once a week during the summer for Music on Main while local bands play and people drink craft beer, stuffing themselves at the food carts.

After the festivities I was handed off to Ryan & Rye for the night, waking up the next morning ready to continue my hitchhiking trip, but sad to leave our little reunion so quickly. Being back in the mountains of Montana reminded me of how much I love the Gallatin Valley & the people who call it home.

Day 17 of my hitchhiking trip across America starts early in the morning. I have a deadline today. An old friend has just told me he's getting married, and wants me to attend his wedding the next day. If I'm able to make it in time.

Walking a mile out to the freeway from

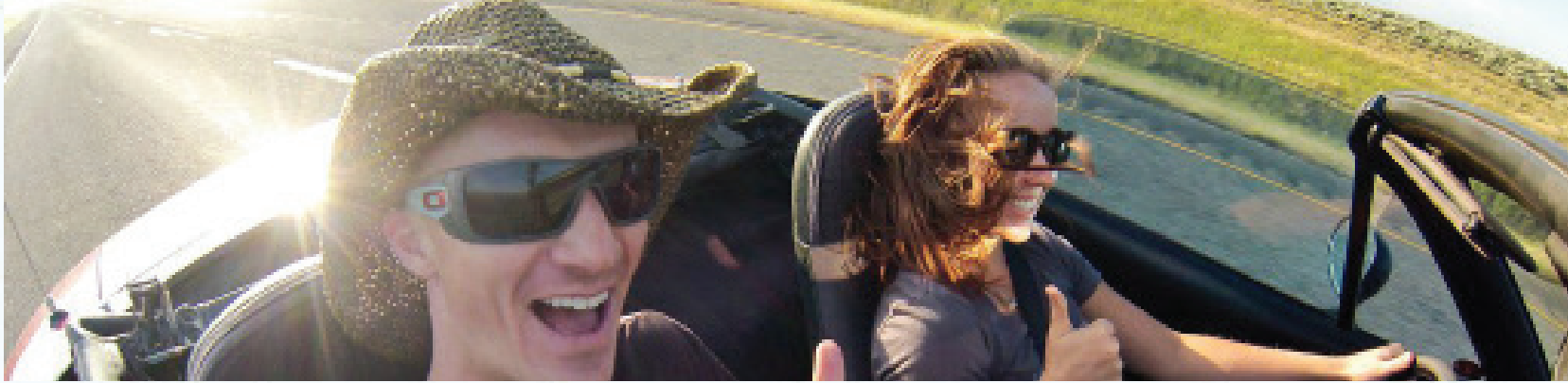
Bozeman, I run into Jack the Hobo. He's hitchhiking across America too. But much slower than I am. He's heading to California to find temporary work picking fruit. Jack started in Louisiana 4 months ago. He isn't homeless though. Jack owns 21 acres in Louisiana. This is just the style he prefers to travel, and he's been doing it for 20 years. Travel is an experience for him, not a vacation.

Ride #19: Chuck The Cattle Buyer

My sign today reads "Never Pick Up Hitchhikers". A little reverse psychology! It works too, when 30 minutes later Chuck pulls over in his Kia Forte sporting a giant black hat and fancy cowboy boots. He's heading to Billings, MT which is very close to where the wedding will be held.

Chuck buys cattle for a living. And apartment buildings. Not for himself, but as investments for his wealthy friends. He got into it after meeting some of the millionaire ranchers who call Maui home while working at a country club there.

He's met quite a few celebrities too like Willie Nelson, Owen Wilson, and Woody Harrelson. When he lived in Seattle, he once let a junkie kid play his guitar for a bit, a few weeks later discovering the kid was the lead singer in a new band called Nirvana...



Dani & Her Convertible

Ride #20: Dani & Her Convertible

In Billings I settled down at a cafe to wait for my next ride. Dani is a friend of the bride, and was passing through town later that day. She pulled up in a bright red Mazda convertible, walked into the cafe and asked some random customer if he was "The Hitchhiker". He was not. That would be me.

We sped off down the highway with the top down. Our destination? The rural farm town of Hardin where we would help with decorations for the wedding. Dani works for a small auto customization & videography company called Mob Theory that specializes in filming road rallies.

She's learning how to be a rally driver herself actually.

Gabe and I know each other from college at Montana State University. We were DJs who teamed up to throw a bunch of parties around campus. But we hadn't seen one another for 8 years. These days Gabe runs the day-to-day operations of a 35,000 acre cattle ranch owned by a Venezuelan banker. I've never spent much time on a ranch before, and was very interested in how it all works. Their cattle are bred hormone-free, and shipped off to Europe. Because the EU doesn't allow hormones in their beef. The ranch also grows corn, wheat, hay, and other products too. But most of it is used to support the cattle operation. So what do you do on a giant mega-ranch for fun? Zip around the property on 4x4 quads and

shoot big guns of course!

The Wedding Crasher

On the day of the wedding, I became the official wedding mascot. Rumors of "The Hitchhiker" were spreading amongst the guests. It was a beautiful and unique ceremony, with Gabe singing his vows to his new bride! That takes major balls. Even though I just met her, I could tell that Nikki is the perfect match for Gabe. For fun, I made a cardboard sign to direct guests towards the reception from the side of the road. It was hilarious, but really only for us, because I think it just confused everyone else who wasn't in on the joke.

After spending a few days on the beautiful ranch learning about high-tech farm equipment, meeting great people, and blasting away with 50 year old Mosin-Nagant rifles, it was time for me to continue on my journey.

Day 20 of my hitchhiking trip through the United States starts in Montana. While crashing my friend Gabe's wedding I meet his cousin Curt who plans to drive South to Colorado soon after. I explain what I'm doing, and he offers to give me a lift.

Seattle, WA

Bozeman, MT

Seaside, OR

Portland, OR



Curt the Jail Builder & His Wife



Ride #21: Curt the Jail Builder & His Wife

Ride #21: Curt the Jail Builder & His Wife

Curt and his wife Cody pick me up at a gas station near the highway in a Nissan Armada. They're heading home to Fort Collins, CO through Wyoming. Curt owns a company that builds jails all over the country. He bids on contracts to construct jail cells for state & local law enforcement. Cody works as a Dental Hygienist. There's not much to see in Eastern Wyoming.

The highway scenery consisted of rocky desert wasteland visible in all directions. It's beautiful, in a desolate kind of way. We passed through the cities of Sheridan, Casper, and Cheyenne — stopping a few times for food and gas. I slept in the back of the comfortable SUV for most of the 6 hour drive.

Ride #22: Morgan The Hygienist

Ride #22: Morgan The Hygienist

Fort Collins is a cool little town. But

I'm only there for an hour before my friend Morgan picks me up at a coffee shop and we drive down to Denver. Morgan also works as a Dental Hygienist. I Couchsurfed with her for a few days while she showed me around. Denver is a bike-friendly town. We spend a day touring the city on bikes while visiting local restaurants and the beautiful Denver Botanical Gardens.

I'd left Montana with 2 giant t-bone steaks from the ranch (payment for my wedding mascot services) which we decide to grill up one night. The fresh hormone-free beef melted in your mouth like butter. Best steak I've ever tasted!

Eventually Morgan drives me to the suburb of Aurora where I'll attempt to hitch out. But it doesn't go as smooth as planned. Turns out Aurora isn't exactly the best town to hitch out of.

I proceeded to spend the next 3 days either working on my computer at McDonalds or standing on the side of the road for hours (sometimes in the rain) before finally getting a lift.

Ride #23: Will & Debbie The Truckers

Ride #23: Will & Debbie The Truckers

It was early in the morning on the 3rd day when I hopped onto a city bus to try my luck from a different on-ramp. I bought myself a slick \$20 cowboy hat at a Flying-J truck stop, hoping it would help. It does.

After just 1 hour of waiting, Will & Debbie pull over in a giant maroon colored tractor-trailer truck. They are long-haul truckers from Tennessee who work as a team. Debbie drives at night, Will drives during the day. This partnership allows them cover great distances in a short period of time. They work for a trucking company, which means if they get caught picking me up, they'll be fired. Insurance doesn't cover hitchhikers in an accident. That doesn't stop some drivers from doing it anyway. Truckers have been picking up hitchhikers for decades.

Will & Debbie are hauling a 26,000 lb. load of shipping packages from California to Ohio. We begin the journey cruising East through Kansas on I-70 in their brand-new 2014 Freightliner. It's fascinating to see all the technology in the truck. The rig is super fuel efficient motoring along at 7 miles per gallon! But in the trucking business, that's actually pretty good. Most trucks only get 5 miles per gallon. The dashboard is full of digital gages, a GPS unit, push-button gear shifting, and bluetooth connectivity for

Seattle, WA

Bozeman, MT

Seaside, OR

Portland, OR



making phone calls. Like all semi-trucks, the seats each have independent suspension systems, making for a comfortable ride. You have enough head room to stand up and 2 sleeping bunks are located in back. They also have a microwave, refrigerator, and storage cabinets for food & clothes.

Life As A Trucker

Over the next 2 days we make our way through Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio while chatting at length. I learn about Will's time in jail for DUI and how Debbie's pet bobcat could only be handled with welding-gloves. There are more ridiculous stories too; lounge lizard (hooker) tactics, horrific truck accidents, and hauling strange loads like used tampons, dynamite, or rolls of US currency paper.

A tire explodes in the middle of rural Kansas forcing us to wait for repairs. We pull over at truck-stops to eat, shit, and shower along the way. We all take turns sleeping on one of the bunks in back. The top bunk is spoken for — it's holding an inflatable hot tub they just bought for relaxing at home.

Welcome To Ohio

My new trucker friends drop me off at a Walmart in Columbus after traveling together for 1250 miles through 6 different states. They fed me, entertained me, and probably shortened my life a bit with all the chain-smoking, but I had a great time.

Later that night I set up camp behind an industrial building in the pouring rain.

The next day it was time to wash my clothing at a laundromat before heading to the office McDonalds to research municipal airports in the area for the next leg of my adventure.

Day 29 of my hitchhiking adventure starts in Columbus Ohio at the Wayfaring Buckeye Hostel located on the Ohio State University campus. The place is completely packed, but they manage to squeeze me in for a night. Inside I find multiple dorm rooms, 2 kitchens, and a hot tub in back. Which I happily use to soak away road fatigue with a beer in one hand while chatting to a fun group of travelers from around the world. The next day I made my way to the Ohio State University Airport, planning to try and hitch a flight out heading East. Yup. Hitchhiking on an airplane. Insanity! Right?

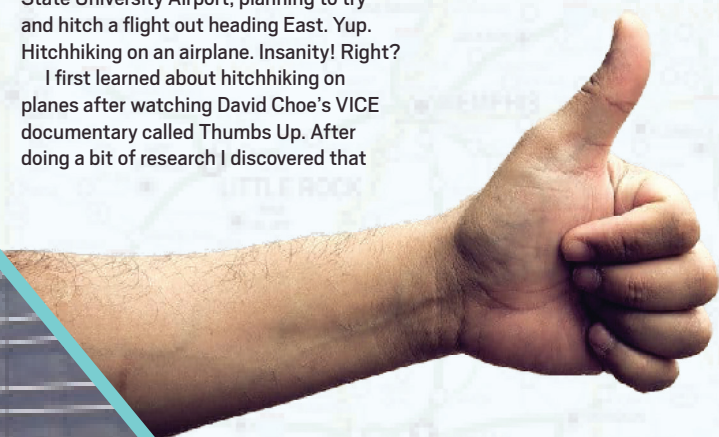
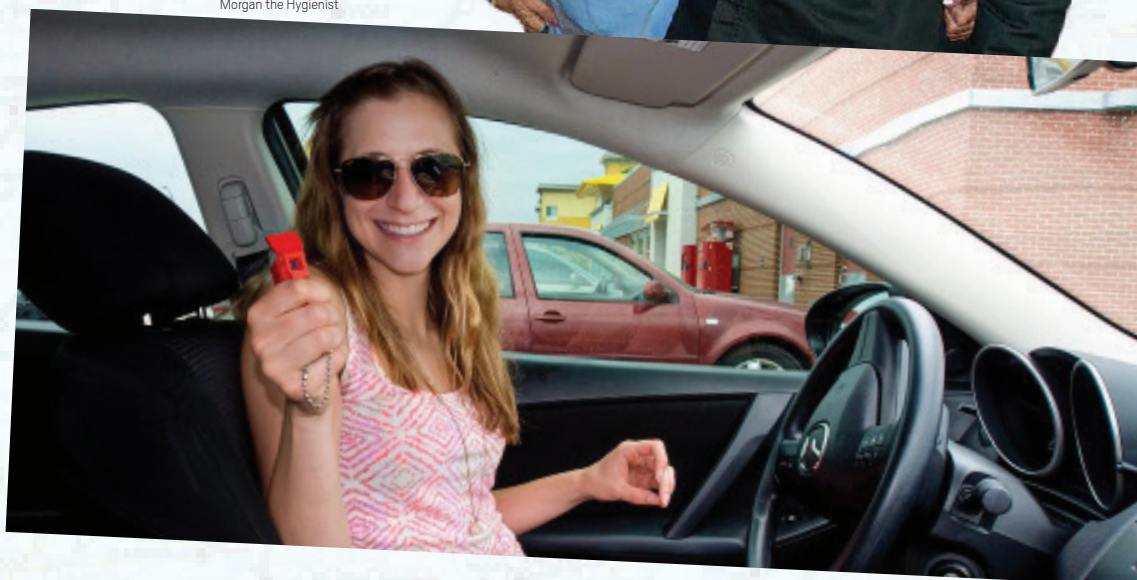
I first learned about hitchhiking on planes after watching David Choe's VICE documentary called Thumbs Up. After doing a bit of research I discovered that

while it's rare, it's not new. People have been hitchhiking on small private planes since the 60's. The key is to hang out at General Aviation airports, the much smaller local fields that cater to pilots who own their own aircraft. Like single engine Cessna's with 2-4 seats. These pilots can fly with whoever, whenever, and wherever they feel like. I'd just have to convince one of them to fly with me.

Will & Debbie the Truckers



Morgan the Hygienist



Denver, CO

Columbus, OH

I stopped by the airport's FBO (fixed base operator) office to let them know what I was up to. The cute girls working the front desk didn't seem to think I'd have much luck. But they offered to post the note I'd written up on the bulletin board. Then I walked outside and made myself comfortable near the entrance with a cardboard sign that read "Flying East?" I was prepared to wait around all day if needed, hoping a pilot would be intrigued enough to stop. Over the next hour, maybe 10 cars drove into the airport past me, some of them laughing, others looking confused. None stop to talk. Eventually an older ground-crew employee (who looks like a supervisor) walks up to ask what the hell I'm doing.

"Hitchhiking" I say.

"Don't you know this is an airport?"

"Um, yes."

"You can't hitchhike from an airport!"

"Why? Is it illegal?"

"No one is going to give you a ride. Plus it's private property".

Damn. He pulled the trespassing card on me. Hitchhiking on airplanes is not illegal. But it makes people like him nervous. He seems to think I'm wasting my time too. Not wanting a confrontation or for the police to show up, I agree to leave. However he's not aware of my backup plan.

Mark the Aviation Mechanic



In the cockpit



Ride #24: Mike the Pilot

A few days earlier, I used Twitter to let people know I would be attempting to hitchhike on an airplane. Hoping that maybe someone knew a pilot in Ohio. My friend Rachelle tweeted me back saying she knew a few pilots there. Her buddy Mike was going to be in the area, owned a plane, and sounded interested. We chatted on Facebook. Mike works in finance, but in his spare time he flies rescue dogs around the country with an organization called Pilots N' Paws using the single-engine Cessna 182 he co-owns with a few other pilots.

After I was kicked out of the OSU airport, I messaged Mike to ask if he was still willing to pick up a hitchhiker. But would the airport even let me back in? I wasn't sure...

So I walked to a grocery store & bought cookies to bribe airport authorities.

Flying First Class

Strolling back into the FBO office, I offer my irresistible cookie bribe to the front desk girls in exchange for allowing me to hang out in the lounge to wait for Mike. They accept. Who in their right mind would refuse cookies? Later Mike arrives with his friend Steve, also a pilot. They explain that Steve came along to help Mike practice flying blind (with instruments only), but I think the real



Mike the Pilot

reason is to help throw me out of the cockpit if I try any funny stuff.

We all meet for the first time, chat for 15 minutes, then walk out to the runway. Right past the same supervisor who kicked me out earlier. The look on that guy's face was priceless!

The engine roars to a start and we take off into the clouds, spending the next hour talking as we fly to a municipal airport in Morgantown, West Virginia. Our personal electronic devices remain on the whole time, with a cell signal for much of the flight! It's fun to listen to radio chatter through the headset, and my new friends explain the world of General Aviation to me, pointing out cool stuff along the way.

Ride #25: Mark The Aviation Mechanic

Landing smoothly on the small runway in Morgantown, there's no one manning the tower telling us where to go. So we just pull up to the building and disembark. It's amazing to me how flying is much less strict and regulated at these small airports. I share my last cookies with Mike & Steve and thank them for the lift. The airport is a ways out of town, so my plan is to wait for another flight

to land and ask for a ride in with crew or passengers. While hanging out in the pilot's lounge I meet Mark. He works as an aviation mechanic, but he's also a pilot.

After explaining my hitchhiking adventure, he offers to drive me back into town once he's finished working on an aircraft GPS system. He also offers to get me on a plane heading to Alabama the next day. Mark has flown hitchhikers around before. In fact, one time he picked someone up in his truck, then flew him to Georgia! While I would have loved to continue on to Alabama in another airplane, I was beginning to run out of time and needed to concentrate on making it to the Atlantic coast as soon as possible.

Day 30 of my hitchhiking journey starts in Morgantown, West Virginia. After spending the night in the woods on the side of the road, I walk to a McDonald's and get online for posting photos and responding to email. When logging into Instagram I discover a comment from a stranger named Brad. He lives a few miles away and wants to know if he can help. How about a two hour ride into Maryland? He said yes!



Brad the Festival Promoter



Sean the Fish Guy



Seattle, WA

Bozeman, MT

Seaside, OR

Portland, OR

Ride #26: Brad The Festival Promoter

Brad picks me up in his car, and we head East on Route 68 towards Maryland. He works as a music festival promoter in West Virginia, designing & publishing a local festival magazine too. An avid kayaker and whitewater rafter, he explains that West Virginia has fantastic rivers that boast some of the best whitewater East of the Mississippi. He'd been following my adventures after coming across the blog a while back. A like-minded soul following the philosophies of Tim Ferris & Rolf Potts. Design your own lifestyle and make travel a priority.

We stopped halfway through the drive to grab a beer in a town called Cumberland before continuing on to Hagerstown, MD. Pulling in as the sun went down. Brad then drove me around to search for a good camping spot where I could spend the night.

Slinging my hammock between two trees off the side of the road, I fell asleep watching deer & rabbits out for a late-night stroll under the stars. Apparently I'd set up near a wildlife trail.

Checking Google Maps satellite view on my iPhone the next morning, I couldn't find any good onramp spots to hitchhike from at this exit. So my best bet would be walking about 2 miles to the next one. But first, I'd need some cardboard for a sign. Grocery stores (like Safeway) are usually best, because you can just walk in and ask someone stocking the shelves. But when that isn't an option, I go dumpster diving! Restaurants, gas stations, and retail shops usually have a separate dumpster out back specifically for recycling cardboard. So you don't actually wade through rotten food or anything. Most of the time it's not necessary to climb in either.

Ride #27: Sean The Fish Guy

After climbing a chain link fence I make it to a nice spacious on-ramp area for I70 and pull out my brand new "Take Me To Your Leader" sign, hoping to get a ride into Washington DC. But it doesn't seem to work at first. So I proceed to dance like a fool in a bid to entertain passing cars and entice someone to stop. While I get plenty of laughs, it takes 90 minutes before Sean finally stops for me.

Sean works as a customer service rep, and collects tropical fish in his spare time. He also frequently gives rides to homeless people. Sean thinks I'm homeless.

Well, technically, I guess I am. But I'm not destitute. So he's a bit confused at first as I fill him in on what I'm doing. It's a short 30 minute ride, and he drops me off at a burger joint in Frederick, MD.

Ride #28: Carrie-Anne The Florist

With no place for me to stand safely at the on-ramp in Frederick, I loiter in front of a gas station with my sign. Soon the attendant comes outside and asks me to leave. The same thing happens at the next gas station. I give up for the day and hang my hammock in a grove of trees in the middle of town that night. Yay urban camping!

The following morning I score a ride from Carrie-Anne while standing in the rain at a different on-ramp a few miles away. Bad weather can be a hitchhiker's best friend. People feel sorry for you.

Carrie-Anne is a retired florist. Who also rides Harley Davidson motorcycles. That's a pretty bad-ass combination if you ask me. She's not going far, but gets me to the town of Clarksburg where she grew up.

Ride #29: Walter The Environmental Scientist

In Clarksburg it didn't take long before I was picked up by Walter, a quirky older man on his way into Washington DC. He hit the breaks and squealed to a stop on the rain-soaked road. He never picks up hitchhikers, but thought I looked harmless. Plus it was raining. Although before I could enter the truck, he asks if I'm wearing cologne. Nope. I actually hadn't showered for a few days either. "Perfect!" he says. Um, ok... It turns out Walter is severely allergic to chemical fragrances. It's called Multiple Chemical Sensitivity. So stinky body odor was actually preferable to deodorant. Who knew that being smelly could be an asset while hitchhiking! Walter used to work for the Department of Energy, specializing in environmental cleanup and toxic waste sites like Yucca Mountain in Nevada. He wasn't comfortable with me taking his photo. But he dropped me off in the heart of Washington DC.

Day 34 of my hitchhiking adventure begins in Washington DC. I meet a local guy through Couchsurfing.org who offers to host me at his place and possibly show me around the city.

Tanabe lives right outside of DC in Virginia, and he's an active member in the Couchsurfing community. He picks me up near the White House and we head to his place to drop off my bag, grab a bite to eat, and find an Irish pub to have a few drinks.

Stealth Camping



Tanabe the ER Nurse



Don & Kevin the Rednecks

Ride #30: Tanabe The ER Nurse

The following day Tanabe impresses me with his piano skills, then plays tour guide around Washington DC. We spend the morning walking through the National Mall, including a stop at the White House to grab photos with my "Take Me to Your Leader" hitchhiking sign.

He was sure I'd be locked up as a lunatic for waving my cardboard sign in front of the the President's house. Unfortunately President Obama wasn't home that day. It sure would've been nice of him to give me a lift out of the city on Marine One.

Later that afternoon Tanabe also offered to give me a ride to Annapolis, MD. Dropping me off in the heart of the old city with it's beautiful red-brick paved streets and historic buildings.

Annapolis is home to the United States Naval Academy, and was once a temporary capital of the United States itself. Walking through town I was impressed with all the sailboats and yachts docked around the city. Hmmmm. I've already hitched rides on a freight train, a motorcycle, a big rig, and an airplane on this trip... why not a boat?

So I spent the afternoon visiting marinas and asking crew-members if anyone planned to sail across the Chesapeake Bay. I wasn't having any luck though. One captain recommended I check out Sandy Point State Park, where recreational boaters often

launch to go fishing for the day.

It was getting late, and if I wanted to get near the park before dark, I'd have to jump on a local bus. The bus brought me to a small town called Arnold, where I set up camp in a wooded area behind a Safeway supermarket.

Ride #31: Don & Kevin The Rednecks

Early the next morning I stocked up on food at the supermarket and began making my way down the road towards Sandy Point State Park and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Rather than hang out in one spot, I decided to try hitching on the move while walking down the road.

It didn't work very well. Only after 2 hours walking in the hot sun did someone finally stop.

Don & Kevin are construction workers who pulled over in a large pickup truck and told me to jump in back. They then sped off while I held on for dear life. I think they were having a little fun with me. But every ride helps! About 10 minutes later they pulled into a gas station to let me climb out, where I thanked them and asked for a quick photo.

Columbus, OH

Ride #32: Lisa The Waitress

So it was back to walking in the hot sun. But only 20 minutes into the walk, I was surprised when a car stopped without warning — as I didn't actually have my thumb out at the time.

Surprise soon turned to shock when a pretty woman rolled down the window and asked if my name was Matthew.

Why yes, that's me...

"The Hitchhiker?" she asked.

Um, yes. Do we know each other?

"No, but I've been following your adventure on Instagram, and just passed you on my way to work! Wanted to turn around and ask if you needed a lift."

Hell yes! I'd love a ride!

Turns out Lisa lives nearby, and was heading to her day job as a waitress. She'd just graduated from college with a degree in Business. She also goes boating on the Chesapeake all the time, and had a special gate code to get us into the park for free.

I thanked her for the lift, and she offered to drive me across the bridge if I couldn't hitch out on a boat.

Lisa the Waitress

Washington D.C.

At Sandy Point I found a picnic table near the docks and sat down to scout out potential rides. But it was the afternoon, and rather than boats heading out, they were returning for the day. I managed to ask a few, but none were going very far so they turned me down.

Looks like I'd need to spend a night in the park and try again in the morning.

I waited until sunset before searching for a good place to hang my hammock out of view of the park rangers. Because camping isn't allowed in the park. While walking to a secluded section of beach I discovered a whole family of deer munching on grass. They ran back into some trees as I approached, and it was there I found a decent camping spot with a view of the beach and the bay. Early the next morning I snuck into the park's public bathroom to clean up and shave. I'd need to be presentable for someone to trust me enough to take me out on their boat.

Ride #33: Joey The Funeral Home Owner

Plenty of trucks began pulling into the docks that morning with boats. I started the process of asking everyone for a lift. It's never easy to walk up to a complete stranger and ask them for something... While I've certainly become better at it on my hitchhiking adventure, I'd still get a bit of anxiety every time. I'd start by complimenting them on their boat, and asking who was the captain (if not already obvious). Mentioning the good weather too, just to get a conversation going.

"So, I've got a strange request for you."

I'd then explain my cross-country hitchhiking adventure, and how I really wanted to hitch on a boat to finish with a great story. Most were intrigued, but not enough to change their plans and take me 4 miles across the Chesapeake Bay. But after getting denied by 5 different boats over 2 hours, Joey arrived. He was launching his speed boat for a day of fishing, preferring weekdays to avoid the busy weekends. Once I assured him I wasn't carrying weapons, he agreed to change his plans and bring me across the bay. Joey owns 2 successful funeral homes, affording him the luxury of fishing in the middle of the week. Death and taxes, after all. We sped across the bay and under the beautiful Chesapeake Bridge in style.

Day 37 of my journey across the United States began with a boat ride across the Chesapeake Bay. With no good places to catch a lift on the opposite side, I'm forced to walk about a mile into the town of Stevensville. There's a Cracker Barrel in town. I decide to treat myself to a large breakfast. This could well be my last day hitchhiking, after all. With a belly full of eggs, grits, and buttermilk biscuits, I attempt to locate some cardboard for a sign. After finding some in a gas station dumpster, I scrawl out "OCEAN" in big block letters with my oversized sharpie.



Joey the Funeral Home Owner

Ride #34: Nebraska The Alligator Chef

I then walk towards the edge of Route 50 to assume the position. Sunglasses off, sign in one hand, thumb out with the other, and a big smile on my face. A run-down Buick pulls over 10 minutes later. The guy inside leans over and says he can drive me to a town called Trappe about 40 minutes away. I climb in and learn that Nebraska (that's his name) used to travel the world as a military brat with his parents. A hardcore Pittsburgh Steeler's fan, he was recently laid off from his factory job. These days his passion is cooking (and eating) alligator meat. He explains that deep-fried alligator tail is a dish not to be missed. I promise him that I'll try some next time I see it on the menu.

Nebraska drops me off at another gas station where I grab a snack and decide to try a new sign. A few readers following the trip in real-time on my Facebook page recommend I try one that simply says "Travel Blogger". So I spend 15 minutes sitting on the curb putting it together.

While I'm working, a pair of delivery guys walk up and ask if I need a lift West. "Wrong direction" I say. "I'm headed to the ocean. But thanks!". And here I thought hitchhiking on the East coast was going to be difficult...

Ride #35: James The Marine

With my new sign complete, I find a spot along the road with enough room for a car to pull over. But that's not necessary, as a young guy walks over from the parking lot to offer me a lift after only 10 minutes. James is a US Marine currently studying environmental science under the GI Bill. He's never hitchhiked himself, but occasionally picks people up. He and his friend were headed to the town of Salisbury, another 40 minute drive. I hop in the truck and we take off down the road. This day is going great so far! James drops me off at yet another gas station on the outskirts of Salisbury. I ditch the travel blogger sign and pull out my "OCEAN" one again, standing near the entrance.



Nebraska the Alligator Chef

James the Marine

Ed the Boat Builder



Ride #36: Ed The Boat Builder

Most people need a really good look at you before they'll commit to picking up a hitchhiker. Which is exactly what Ed did before he pulled over. He saw me on the way in, contemplated it while he purchased gas, and made the decision on his way out. I jumped into my 2nd Land Rover of the trip and we drove towards the coast. Ed builds yachts for a living. Including the world's fastest propeller powered speedboat called The Phenomenon. He's also an ex-Navy explosives diver who helped put out oil well fires (using explosives) during the Gulf War. Ed is one interesting guy.

When Ed discovers he's my last ride on this epic adventure, he offers to give me a personal tour of the Maryland coastline. We stock up on "beverages" and drive out to Assateague Island.

It seems Maryland has its very own population of wild island ponies! Assateague ponies are a unique breed of feral horses that live on the island. Numbering about 300, each year some are rounded up and auctioned off to breeders nationwide to pay for local fire fighting equipment. Next we grab some food (soft shell crab) at a place called Captain Joe's Shrimp Boat, more drinks, and Ed drops me off in Ocean City. My final destination.

Ocean City is one of those slightly cheesy beach towns with a boardwalk, carnival rides, resort hotels, and saltwater taffy on every corner. To make my coast-to-coast trip official I'd need to go for a dip in the ocean. So I whip up one final cardboard sign and walk to the beach. On the hot sand I meet Shai, Marina, and Laurentia, a group of sunbathing bikini girls, who help me celebrate the end of my journey in style. Hitchhiking across the United States has been one of my favorite travel adventures so far. Something I've always wanted to attempt. Everyone told me it would be dangerous or impossible these days. They were wrong. Most of the people I met were friendly, sane, and fascinating. Succeeding in this only strengthens my desire to do more of it.



Bozeman, MT



Denver, CO



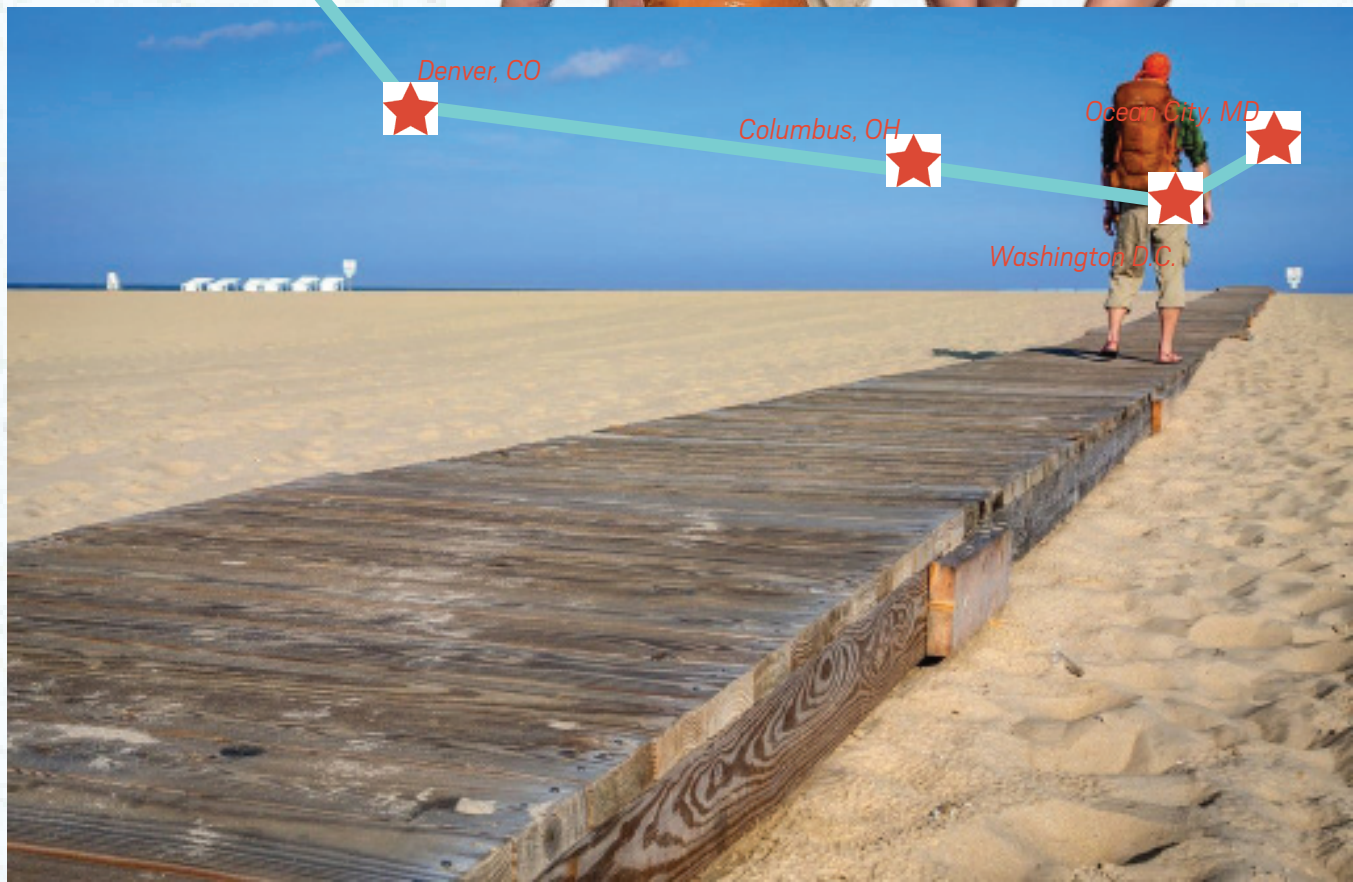
Columbus, OH



Ocean City, MD



Washington D.C.





Taipei.



Taiwan

“Touch Your Heart” is the slogan of the Taiwan Visitors Association and a visit to Taipei does just that. The capital city of one of the most densely populated countries in the world, Taipei has much to offer tourists. From truly magnificent buildings and peaceful gardens to exciting sporting activities and colourful festivals.

Hot, crowded and chaotic, Taipei may, at first glance, overwhelm the visitor, but scratch the surface and you will find a city that is warm and welcoming with an energy that is intoxicating. Taipei has grown from a simple farming settlement to a world class metropolis in an extraordinary short period of time. Standing testimony to its growing power are the skyscrapers, towering above the city's ever rising skyline. The soaring Taipei 101 tower, till some time back the world's tallest building, is not only an amazing tourist attraction for those who are fascinated by heights, but a symbol of Taiwan's growing economic and financial strength.


Down on the ground, Taipei is home to an amazing mix of people from different cultures with their collective influence reflecting in the city's buildings, cuisines and way of life. In fact Taipei is a gourmet's delight and is packed with excellent restaurants. The Taipei Chinese Food Festival hosted in the World Trade Centre is the icing on the cake allowing you to sample Chinese cuisine from across the country.

When the sun goes down, Taipei's night markets light up. Tourists and locals throng the narrow alleyways that are filled with the tantalizing aromas of the food stalls. The city is full of bars and nightclubs and its red light district in Zhong Shan is one of the most legendary in Asia.

If the city heat gets to you, head to the northwest hills to relax and rejuvenate in the many spas that take advantage of the curative properties of the hot springs of the Bei Tou area. Once charged, hike through the Yang Ming Shan National Park to fully experience Taipei's unique beauty.

Taipei has long been underestimated as a tourist destination and it is only now that people are realizing that the city has much to offer. Here is a list of some of Taipei's must-see attractions but perhaps the city's most important attraction is its culture.

National Palace Museum: Located on the outskirts of Taipei amidst beautiful surroundings, the National Palace Museum houses the world's largest collection of priceless Chinese artifacts



numbering more than 650,000. The museum is a must visit for the history enthusiasts who can trace China's dynasties to the present day.

Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall: Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall is an imposing tomb and shrine to Taiwan's famous and controversial leader. The Hall also houses on its grounds the National Theatre and National Opera House where you can enjoy traditional performing arts.

Taipei 101: It was the tallest tower in the world till the Burj Dubai stole its limelight. Still this imposing skyscraper is a major tourist destination and not just for its height. The 101 floors offer a host of entertainment and eating options— the Taiwanese idea of heaven. You'll find everything here from bars, restaurants, a health club, to cinema and designer boutiques. And of course, you have to take the fastest lift in the world up to the observatory for the ultimate views of the city.

Lungshan Temple: Taipei is home to thousands of temples, with the most famous being the Lungshan Temple. The temple, which was first built in the 1730s, has been destroyed several times both by natural disasters and during World War II. Each time the temple was carefully rebuilt. You can admire the architecture and partake in the activities of worshippers shrouded in incense clouds.

The Wisteria Tea House: Named after the old wisteria vines growing along the building eaves, the Wisteria Tea House occupies a central position in the political culture of Taipei. In 1997, the tea house was designated a historical site. The tea house served as the setting for the Ang Lee film 'Eat, Drink, Man, Woman.'

Landis Pause Resort: Taiwan is fast emerging as a world class spa destination given the fact that it has a high number of hot springs. You can pamper your mind, body and spirits with a dip in sulphurous springs in the forested mountains at the Landis Pause

Resort. You can also check out Wulai, where apart from relaxing in the lap of nature, you can also enjoy aboriginal traditional dancing and cuisine, and cherry blossoms in spring.

The Lantern Festival: Held in February, the Lantern Festival welcomes the zodiac animal of the Chinese New Year. The main celebrations are held in front of the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall.

The Taipei Chinese Food Festival: Held in the month of August, this festival is especially worth checking out if you are a food enthusiast. You can sample a broad range of Chinese cuisine found throughout Taiwan.

Taipei Dragon Boat Festival: Held in the month of June, the festival re-enacts the tragic story of poet Chu Yuan, along the Keelung River.

The Ghost Festival: This is a month long carnival that is held in temples and on the streets where worshippers burn paper tributes to honor ancestral spirits.

Accommodation

Taipei has enough accommodation options to suit all tastes and budgets. You'll find numerous hotels spread across the city. If you seek the ultimate in comfort and luxury you can pamper yourself to the world-class services provided by the

luxurious five-star accommodations. At the other end of the spectrum are

the numerous hostels offering basic facilities in comfortable surroundings. Between the two extremes are a wide array of mid-range accommodations ranging from business class to moderately priced.

Luxury hotels: You will find both international and regional chain of five star hotels offering impeccable service and the facilities associated with luxury establishments, such as business centres, swimming pools, modern exercise facilities and restaurants serving both Chinese and international fare. The five star hotels are spread across the city and you can choose to stay in one that is near the shopping/entertainment areas or near your business centre or airport. If you really want to stay in a luxury hotel but your budget does not cover the listed rates, you can keep a look out for special promotional packages which may just make your stay within reach.

Moderate: You can easily find modest rooms and facilities if you are on a traveller on budget. In most cases, these hotels offer a continental or buffet breakfast that is included in the cost of the room. Facilities include a clean room, a telephone, a television, and of course, friendly assistance. Hotels worth checking out include the Leofoo or Golden China Hotel.

Inexpensive: The hotels that fall under this category are usually the "rent-by-the-hour", though you can also rent based on per night stay. These hotels mainly cater to those seeking quiet and discrete privacy on a short-term basis. In fact they are more or less like the Japanese "Love Hotels", although they are not as outrageous as their Japanese counterparts.

Dining Options

Ask the Taiwanese living abroad what they miss about their country and the unanimous answer will be food. In fact eating seems to be Taiwanese idea of heaven. Taiwanese cuisine includes seafood dishes with distinct flavour and slightly heavier sauces. If you like Chinese food you will definitely eat very well in Taipei. The city has an unrivalled reputation as a gourmet's paradise, boasting cuisine from every region of China.

The places to eat are as varied as the menu. At one end of the spectrum are the high end restaurants and at the other are the night market food stalls; in between are the inexpensive and moderately priced eateries.

If you are in an unknown area, simply walk into the place that is most crowded. Chinese restaurants on the whole focus on the quality of food rather than providing a beautiful setting for eating. However this is slowly changing and you will find many restaurants trying to liven up the surroundings. Here is the catch though, a good ambience will mean an expensive bill and so the general rule is if you are on a tight budget, don't worry about the plastic flowers on display. Just sit down in a clean restaurant and savour the best Chinese food you have ever had.

If you prefer Western food, you can eat in Tien Mu or a hotel. You will find a large number of restaurants in hotels

serving Indian, French, German, Swiss, Middle Eastern, American, Greek, Mexican, Indonesian, Thai, Korean, and Spanish specialties. For variety and value, you should check out the teatime, lunch and dinner buffets offered by these hotels. For great Western food and breakfasts, Grandma Nitti's Kitchen is the place to head for.

If you crave fast food, there is hope for you. American, Japanese and Chinese, burgers, noodles, chicken, and pizza joints are easily found throughout the city. Given the fact that many Japanese live in Taipei, you'll find Japanese restaurants just about everywhere. The only problem is that most of them serve Taiwanese Japanese food. If you want to try something that is authentic, you could try the restaurants in the luxury hotels.

For a cheap and delicious meal, you can dine in the food courts found in the department stores. You can check out the basement Food Courts in department stores such as Mitsukoshi, Sogo Department Store, Takashimaya, and Asiaworld Shopping Center.

To sample street food, you can visit the stalls in the night markets. You can choose from delicious fried and steamed meat-filled buns, oyster-filled omelets, refreshing fruit ices, and much more.

Shopping

Taipei is an important shopping destination in Asia. You can buy almost anything under the sun, from designer names, antique curios, electronics and original jewellery to hand-painted scrolls, fragrant tea and toys for children.

And of course, if you are in Taipei, you simply have to visit the city's night markets. Filled with people and enticing aromas, the night markets are integral to the unique cultural experience of Taiwan. There are many such markets in the city that stay open till midnight. The ShihLin night market is the largest, while Huashi

Street night market, a few paces from Lungshan Temple, is the most famous. This night



market comes alive once the sun sets and the action continues well past midnight. Here you can buy anything from snake soup to painted umbrellas and also pamper yourself to shoulder massages. You can stroll through a bewildering number of stalls and stores selling everything from clothing to pets, souvenirs to DIY tools. Taiwan's national obsession is food and there is no place like the night market to treat your taste buds to the most exotic of Chinese cuisine. The atmosphere is nothing less than a fair with games adding to the genial din.

If you prefer to shop in the comfort of air conditioned malls, you can head to the Living Mall or Living Hell as locals would prefer to call it— it is the largest shopping mall in Asia and it's easy to get lost! Here you can shop for all international brands from Armani to Louis Vuitton. If it is designer labels you are looking for, you can try out the Breeze Center, which also has to its credit designer labels, good restaurants and a cinema.

Dihua Street, the oldest and largest trading area, is the best day market and giving it competition is the Chinese Handicraft Mart, a one stop shop for inexpensive traditional items. To find everything under one roof, check out the Japan's Mitsukoshi department store on Sung Kao Road. It covers three blocks and occupies 12 buildings. Just across the road is the Eslite Bookstore, which has six floors of books (many in English) intermingled with a host of brands from around the globe.

Excursions From Taipei

Taroko Gorge: This popular day excursion takes you to the spectacular marble canyon of Taroko Gorge in one of Taiwan's seven National Parks. The trip includes a walk through tunnels and across a rope bridge below towering cliffs. You can also visit one Taiwan's most picturesque temples.

Sun Moon Lake: This largest natural lake in Taiwan is a major tourist attraction. Situated in Yuchi, Nantou, the east side looks like a sun and the west side a moon and hence the name. The area around the Sun Moon Lake is home to the Thao tribe, one of aboriginal tribes in Taiwan. At the lake you can take a row boat to the tiny island called Lalu.

The best nightlife in Taipei is to be found in the commercial district of Anho Rd in East Taipei and the older Shi Men Ding or West Side. Anho boasts numerous bars and

restaurants, including the Champagne Bar and American-style Carnegies, which plays rock music.

Taiwanese tend to eat early so you'll find that most restaurants close by 9:30PM, but with no licensing limits many bars are open until 2AM or 4AM, and some all night.

Taipei has its fair share of bars, pubs and restaurants. Apart from these, you can also check out the Shao yen or snack bars in the nightlife areas. Besides there are night-time diversions such as the neighbourhood night markets, which, apart from being a shoppers' paradise also offer excellent street food. The biggest and most famous is Shihlin, which is now easy to reach on the new mass transit.

Another well known nightlife haunt is Shi Men Ding. The area has an old world atmosphere with lots of tiny little bars and atmospheric tea and coffee houses in its narrow alleys and traditional night markets.

The beer houses in the city have outlandish decorations and serve salty, spicy seafood. Beer houses worth checking out include Indian and Jailhouse, in the lively Shihmenting district. It doesn't take much to guess that Jailhouse is decorated like a prison, and the waiters dress like inmates. You can put on some manacles and have your photos taken in a mock jail cell.

As far as clubs go, you can check out Barcode in Taipei 101, which has more of a lounge atmosphere. The favourite haunt of the A-listers is Opus Bar in Breeze Center. Then there is Luxy 201, which boasts a three-tiered themed venue. Plush in The Living Mall, Core Pacific City features International visiting DJs.

For pubs with a laid-back atmosphere, you can try out the Shi-Da University district. The bars there attract college students, teachers, and foreign expatriates who live in the city.

The busiest bar in Taipei is without doubt, Roxy 99. The place attracts a slice from every demographic in Taiwan, from the Chinese students, to western students, local university students, and foreign professionals.



Koh Samui,





Thailand

Koh Samui, the third largest island in Thailand, is becoming one of the world's most sought after holiday destinations. Blessed with outstanding natural beauty, stunning beaches and a relaxed laid back lifestyle it has everything to make your tropical escape a very special experience.

A part of the Angthong archipelago, Koh Samui's major claim to fame is the untouched Angthong National Marine Park, an area so exotically beautiful that it inspired Alex Garland to pen his famous book, "The Beach." Explore the inner reaches of this stunning marine destination and discover why it is considered nothing less than an earthly paradise.

Koh Samui is also a haven for water sports. Scuba diving, sailing and kitesurfing are just some of the popular activities that you can indulge in the beaches fronting a spectacular coastline. Chaweng Beach is easily the most popular area on Koh Samui. This endless sandy beach promises a fun-filled day of activities and at night it transforms into a lively entertainment area with the choicest of clubs, bars, and restaurants vying for your attention.

Enjoy the palm-fringed serenity on the quieter towns of Bophut, Maenam and Lamai. Offering fantastic views, these beach areas are an idyllic escape from the stresses of everyday life.

Farther afield, is the neighboring island of Koh Phangan, renowned for its monthly full moon party on the crescent shaped Haad Rin beach. Bringing together revelers from across the globe, the event is like none other you would witness on this planet. For the rest of the month, the island is quiet, relaxed, and promises a perfect escape.

Festivals and Events

Songkran: The Thai New Year is celebrated on the full moon in mid-April. The event is marked with religious and family duties. Trucks drive around the ring road with barrels of water and passengers armed with super-soaker water pistols drench everyone. Much music and merriment results and everyone gets sopping wet and is covered in talc.

Koh Samui International Regatta: Held in the first week of June, the annual Koh Samui Regatta is an important event on the island. The clubs, restaurants and bars host regatta parties for sailors and spectators.

Loy Kratong: Loi Kratong, the beautiful ceremonial festival of lights, is held in mid-November. The scene of small floating offerings made from flowers, leaves and candles set off to float on the rivers and ocean is truly enchanting. The main venues are the beaches of Bophut, Chaweng, and Lamai. The bobbing ocean-bound candles, combined with the air-borne lanterns dotting the sky create a mesmerizing scene.

Accommodation

Koh Samui offers a remarkable selection of accommodation options to suit all tastes and budgets. You can choose from standard beach villas to luxurious hotels and beach resorts.

Though there is no shortage of upmarket hotels and resorts dotting the beaches, a large part of the island still remains covered with coconut groves and rice paddies and you can find a quiet villa in which to stay, far

from the madding crowds.

Chaweng Beach: The longest and most popular beach on Samui has accommodation options along its entire length. The beach is home to a vibrant nightlife and has a high concentration of restaurants and shops.

Lamai Beach: Samui's second-largest beach also has a fair share of accommodation options ranging from top-end and mid-range to budget. The restricted area on and around the beach means that a majority of housing is actually found on the surrounding hills.

Maenam: Located on the North coast, the beach offers a wide selection of budget accommodation with a sprinkling of top end luxury resorts. Maenam is also home to many of the new villa developments on the island, in fact this was one of the first areas on the island to feature such developments.

Big Buddha: Home to the island's most important landmark, the Big Buddha itself, the area has some relaxed and relatively low priced resorts.

Bophut: One of Samui's recently developed villages, Bophut combines traditional Thai charm with a distinct Mediterranean feel. The area is more relaxed given the fact that there is less traffic here. You'll find a number of converted shop-houses that are perfect for fine dining.

Dining Options

Dining is one of the greatest pleasures of life and more so if you are on a vacation to an exotic locale. In this respect, Koh Samui does not disappoint. The island offers outstanding dining options from casual dining to more sophisticated fare.

While we recommend that you try the simply delicious Thai food, you can also traverse the long trusted road and stick to the food you are familiar with, be it Indian, Mexican, English, Japanese, Scandinavian, Italian or French. You can pick up one of the local guides listing the restaurants or just stroll around and dine in one that catches your fancy.

Bophut is particularly famous for its laid-back evening ambience and great selection of high-end restaurants. Try out Starfish and Coffee with its decent food and stunning décor. For tasty steaks, The Shack is a must visit. The beach also has a number of good Thai, Italian and Indian restaurants, all within a short stroll. If you are looking for a romantic evening out in Bophut, Shades and Smile house is just the place to head to. For fine dining in outdoor setting, you can try Zazen Boutique Resort & Spa.

Bang Rak is also a famed venue for dining, popular with expats and frequent visitors. For a very personal service and a cozy atmosphere, you can check out Ocean 11.

The eateries and restaurants in Lamai, Chaweng and Maenam also serve fresh seafood. Some good quality eateries in Lamai include Rocky's and The Pavillon. In Maenam, the old-school Café Talay serves cheap and delicious Thai and foreign food.

Chaweng boasts of the highest number of top-end restaurants. Check out Bellini's and Rice for Italian, Poppies for Fusion, Zico's for Brazilian, and The Page for contemporary Thai for good food, elegant style, and beautiful settings and décor.

If you are a holiday on Samui, you simply have to try the local food. You can check out the ubiquitous 'som tam' – a spicy papaya salad served with grilled chicken and sticky rice – for around a dollar, on roadside stalls around the island. The stalls and cafes in Nathon, and in the market of Laem Din (Chaweng) also serve sumptuous local dishes. For more upmarket, or 'Royal' Thai cuisine, head to the Baan Chantira Royal Thai Restaurant at Baan Taling Ngam Resort and Spa. Lai Thai at the Napasai Resort on the tranquil Ban Tai beach and serves authentic and delicious Royal Thai cuisine.

Shopping

Chaweng is Samui's main shopping hub. The entire length of the beach is dotted with stalls selling souvenirs and electronics, as also high end stores stocking designer clothes and renowned brands.

You can shop for sculptures and Buddhist icons carved from various types of wood as also beautifully embellished fabrics of cotton, silk or a mixture of both. Of course, you have to shop for silk,



Thailand's most famous exports. The traditionally designed silk products include anything from sarongs to scarves and shawls.

Sunglasses, low price bags or backpacks, money pouches, sarongs and sandals are just some of the products that you can purchase at bargain prices.

You can buy electronic goods such as DVDs, CDs and computer games at a tenth of price that you would pay back home but beware of pirated copies.

If you're looking for something really special to remind you of your time on Koh Samui, you can pick up some local art pieces easily available in the numerous local art houses that line the island's beach roads. Handicrafts are another good bet, and although almost all come from Chiang Mai there are plenty of vendors and night markets selling a wide array of products that make fine gifts.

Beaches in Koh Samui

Koh Samui's exquisite palm-fringed beaches are perfect for relaxing and taking in the scenery resting in a hammock. Those looking for something more active, can find pleasure in the various marine activities such as kayaking, swimming, snorkeling and diving in the sparkling waters of the ocean. Each beach has its own distinct ambience and different options for things to see and do.

Chaweng Beach: Considered to be one of Thailand's finest beaches, Chaweng beach has masses of people sunbathing during the day and a crowd of party-goers letting their hair down by the night. The beach offers plenty of amenities and facilities with shops, bars and restaurants close by. It is one of the few spots on the island with surf. You can choose from a good selection of water activities including daily boat trips to the famous Marine Park, sailing, diving and sea kayaks.

Lamai Beach: The beach with its soft white sand is ideal for swimming and admiring the spectacular tropical scenery. The northern side of Lamai beach is home to graceful granite boulders, which are often enjoyed as fishing perches by local fishermen. Activities on the beach include windsurfing, kayaking, water-skiing, and scuba diving.

You can also admire the Hi Ta and Hin Ya, the weathered formations known as Samui's grandfather and grandmother. You can also take in the strange sight of tourists clambering around to have their photo

taken with a penis shaped rock. Thai boxing, a violent and exciting spectacle, has a strong presence in Lamai. The beach area also has the highest concentration of book shops on the island.

Big Buddha Beach: Named after the huge golden statue, this is one of Samui's calmer beaches. Its popularity is also due to its proximity to the Koh Samui Airport with people making it their first or the last stop on the island. There are many colorful statues and temples in the area that are all worth a visit.

Bophut Beach: Once a simple fishing village, Bophut still retains its traditional charm even as it has turned into a fashionable center for shopping and dining. The beach is good for families and those seeking a romantic ambience. You must check out the Fisherman's Village, which is home to plenty of restaurants, bars and cafes. The beach even offers facilities for Go-karting.

Mae Nam Beach: This long stretch of beach on Koh Samui's north coast is popular with budget travelers though some expensive residential developments have also taken place recently. If you are a golf enthusiast, you can visit Santiburi, where you will find an international golf course with outstanding standards and superb views of the Gulf of Siam.

Ban Tai Beach: Ban Tai is a group of sandy bays running from the western-most point of Mae Nam through to the north-west corner of Koh Samui. The central beach is a rather long stretch with stunning views over to Koh Phangnan. You can



detox yourself at one of the specialist day spas in Ban Tai that offer a full range of well being treatments including massages.

Taling Ngam Beach: The sunsets over the Marine Park are simply spectacular. Keep a look out for the five islands and the Angthong National Marine Park. You can also get a taste of the local lifestyle at the traditional Thai village, mostly untouched by western influences. Also visit Nathon, the administrative capitol of Koh Samui, with its concentration of shops and restaurants. Even though it is a small area, Taling Ngam has an impressive selection of top quality restaurants including "Five Islands" and those at the Baan Taling Ngam Resort.

Bang Por Beach: This postcard perfect beach offers stunning views of Koh Phangan. The waters are good for swimming and year round sailing thanks to the refreshing breezes over the Gulf of Siam. The Language school Ming Your Language, located here, welcomes all who wish to learn the native language.

Choeng Mon Beach: Choeng Mon Beach enjoys a relatively quieter ambiance. You'll find a number of massage salas on the beach throughout the day, which offer all types of Thai or oil massages and other treatments.

Laem Set Beach: The beach is perfect for a quiet family holiday amidst peaceful surroundings. Walk through the tropical gardens of the Butterfly Farm, nestled in the hills above the beach and admire the scintillating waterfall nearby. You can also see the Samui Aquarium with an interesting display of turtles, sharks, catfishes fish and other coral species. If you are brave enough, you can have your photo taken with a tiger at the nearby Tiger Zoo.

Laem Sor Beach: Situated off the beaten track, the beach is famous for an ancient pagoda located here. There is a meditation forest nearby where you can savour the silence of the scenic surroundings.

You can also visit the man-made lagoon, home to some mangrove trees planted along the ocean side.

There are only a few villas located in this area, so if you wish to stay here you will need to book in advance.

Lipa Noi Beach: Here you can enjoy the fantastic sunsets over the Marine Park. Situated away from the noise and bustle, the surrounding atmosphere is peaceful and attractive. The beach is dotted with many eateries and restaurants providing evening entertainment such as Thai dancing and acrobatics. Pamper yourself at the Dhama Healing Centre, one of Samui's more sought after spas. You can also visit the Paradise Park Farm, which has on display many different species of animals and birds. The entrance ticket covers free use of the pool and its facilities.

Samui Beach Village: Apart from the beautiful natural scenery, the added attraction is the original lifestyle of the local fishermen who reside here.

Secret Beach: Samrong Bay or "The Secret Beach" is a picture perfect remote and private beach on the island. The beach allows for privacy and space, and at the same time it is within reach of the main entertainment areas of the island.

Excursions From Koh Samui

Koh Phangan: Hidden away in the wide expanse of the Gulf of Thailand, Koh Phangan is one of Thailand's best kept secrets. Surrounded by the azure ocean waters and complete with exquisite bays, beautiful valleys, and stunning white sandy beaches, the island is perfect for an idyllic tropical escape.

Koh Phangan is world famous for hosting perhaps the biggest beach party on the planet— the full moon party on Haad Rin beach. The party under the starlit sky is held on the full night every month and attracts more than 20,000 people from across the globe.

The story goes that some people arranged a party along the crescent-shaped beach on a full moon night when the moon was its enchanting best. From then onwards, a party is held on the beach every full moon night and people from all over the world come to join in the celebrations.

The party begins at dusk when the yellow moon makes its appearance on the distant horizon. Thousands of lamps lighting up the beach make it nothing less than a fairytale setting. As the evening progresses, the beach explodes into a dancing frenzy with local and international DJs playing everything from trance, techno, drum and bass to commercial dance and reggae. Jugglers and fire-eaters also pitch in to entertain the crowds.





Shuket, Thailand



Phuket, the largest island in Thailand, is commonly referred as the 'Pearl of the South' and not without reason. The warm blue sea, spectacular sunsets, stunning natural attractions and exquisite beaches invite you to explore the tropical paradise that is Phuket.

Phuket is an ideal holiday destination to soak up the sun in the palm-fringed beaches or explore its incredibly varied terrain. Indulge in world class diving in the Andaman Sea or enjoy a pleasant round of golf in the world-standard championship courses. Take an exhilarating speedboat trip to the surrounding islands or enjoy the spectacular scenery aboard a cruise ship.

Explore the rocky headlands, trek through the forested hills or discover the beautiful estuaries, lagoons, and tropical vegetation. Visit the exotic Phi Phi islands with their classic beaches, stunning rock formations, and brilliant turquoise waters teeming with colorful marine life. From the triple canopy rainforest of Khao Phra Thaeo National Park to the mud flats and mangrove swamps of Koh Siray, the natural wonders of Phuket are to be seen to be believed.

Enjoy one of the most beautiful and scenic drives in the world along the south coast of the island between Kata Beach and Promthep Point or visit the nearby Phang-Nga Bay to appreciate the striking rock and limestone formations and spectacular scenery of the surroundings.

Phuket seduces with a smooth blend of ostentation and seediness. Four of Phuket's hotels have been named as some of the best in the world. The sandy miles of the coastline fronting the Andaman Sea boast of delectable restaurants and swanky resorts. If the days are full of activities then the nights are more vibrant than ever. Phuket's nightlife, mainly concentrated in the beer halls and girlie bars of Patong, is loud raunchy and utterly unapologetic. Explore the various facets of the island and you will realize that Phuket is as cosmopolitan as it is colorful and has something to satisfy every appetite.

Tourism is the main industry of Phuket; over three million tourists visit the island annually to explore its attractions. The island is well connected by a good network of road allowing visitors easy access to Chalong Bay and Rawai Beach on the east coast, Cape Prom Thap at the southern-most point and the Phuket's celebrated beaches such as Nai Harn Beach, Kata Beach, Karon Beach, Patong Beach and Kamala Bang Tao on the western shoreline. You can take advantage of the many tours to explore the island.

Phuket Town: Phuket Town, the largest city on the island, is best explored on foot. You can stroll past the Sino-Portuguese buildings or browse through shops selling arts and crafts, hand woven silk and cotton textiles, pewter, and jewelry. There are many restaurants here that have authentic Thai and Chinese cuisine on their menu. There is a picnic part atop Rang Hill (Khao Rang) from where you can enjoy great views over the town and the islands beyond. Phuket Town is also home to the Phuket Orchid Garden and Thai Village, the Thalang National Museum, the Phuket Butterfly Garden & Aquarium, and the nearby Two Heroines Monument.

Phuket Orchid Garden & Thai Village: The area is home to restaurants and handicraft shops. Daily cultural shows are held in the mornings and



evenings. This is a good place to see displays of Thai martial arts and dancing.

Phuket Aquarium: Managed by the local Marine Biological Centre, the Phuket Aquarium is home to a host of marine attractions and colorful freshwater fish. There is a 10-metre / 33-foot underwater tunnel which is perfect to view the underwater creatures. On display are large turtles, electric eels, and many other native species. The place is of special interest to the scuba divers who can get an idea of what to expect around Phuket's many beautiful coral reefs.

Phuket Butterfly Garden: Considered to be one of the finest butterfly gardens on earth, the Phuket Butterfly Garden plays host to hundreds of brightly colored butterflies fluttering around freely beneath a huge dome. Other attractions in the garden include ponds and large fish, waterfalls, and native birds. There is an Insect World nearby which houses an enormous collection of specimen insects and invertebrates, such as giant millipedes, bird-eating spiders, and scorpions.

Phuket Zoo: Located in the southern outskirts of Phuket, the zoo attracts people of all ages. There is a wide array of animals including elephants, monkeys, crocodiles, and tigers. There is a lovely aquarium with an entrance in shape of a giant crocodile's mouth wide open. Besides, there is also a bird park with many large and exotic birds. The orchid garden with its colorful flowers is truly refreshing.

Simon Cabaret: This all-male show features a number of Thailand's most beautiful 'ladyboys' and transvestites. The show is suitable for the family and includes dancing, singing, and general showgirl-type entertainment.

Thalang National Museum: The museum houses a number of ancient artifacts tracing Phuket's history as also exhibits detailing the famous Battle of Thalang in which the 'Two Heroines' defended the island against the Burmese in the 18th century. Besides there are exhibits that record Phuket's tin mining history, the indigenous Sea Gypsy culture and the island's Chinese heritage. A major draw is the huge

statue of the Hindu god Vishnu that was uncovered from forest overgrowth in Phang Nga in the early 1900s. The statue dates from the 9th century A.D.

Phuket Sea Shell Museum: The museum has a spectacular collection of valuable seashells from all over the world. Also on display is the world's largest golden pearl (140 karats). Equally impressive are the large sections of sedimentary rock containing shell fossils that represent the earth's earliest life-forms and a shell weighing an unbelievable 250 kilograms.

Wat Chalong: The legendary Chalong temple attracts thousands of visitors year-round. In fact there is a saying that you haven't really visited Phuket until you've been to this temple. Wat Chalong is believed to have been built during the reign of King Rama II in the nineteenth century. It was later relocated and since then has been renovated and augmented a number of times with the latest addition being a special chedi, 61.39 meters high to house a fragment of a bone from the Lord Buddha.

Wat Prathong: The area is famous for a half-buried golden Buddha statue called Luang Poh Prathong in its grounds. There is an interesting story that goes that the statue is 'Untouchable' in that who ever has tried to dig it out has been cursed. The area also houses a reclining gilded Buddha that is listed as one of the attractions in the Tourism Authority of Thailand's 'Unseen Thailand' programs.

Phuket Island has a host of accommodation choices to offer to its visitors. The island witnesses two seasons, the dry season from November to April and the Monsoon season from May to October. The monsoon season is characterized with tropical rains that make activities along the west coast dangerous so during this season you should plan your stay in the east coast of the island. On the plus side, hotel rates are usually low during the wet season and so you can really take advantage of 'special packages' on offer to attract the tourists. No matter what season you are visiting, be sure to book in advance, 2 or 3 months in advance for the low season (May to October) and 4 to 5 months in advance for the high and peak season (November to April).

Most accommodation options are located in the Phuket Town or near the celebrated beaches such as Patong, Kata-karon, Laguna, and Bang Tao. You can choose from a wide range of hotels, bungalows, guesthouses and resorts depending on your budget and taste.

Phuket Town: Phuket Town, the provincial capital of the island, is packed with hotels and restaurants. Top end hotels include the Metropole Hotel, Royal Phuket City Hotel, Phuket Merlin Hotel and the Thavorn Grand Plaza Hotel. The Thavorn Hotel, the oldest in the town, has an interesting collection of historical memorabilia.

Patong Beach: This is the most



celebrated beach on the island and accordingly has a number of accommodation options ranging from modest to luxury. The beach area is extremely popular for its attractions as also for its nightlife and entertainment options. At the luxurious end are the

Amari Coral Beach Resort, the Club Andaman Beach Resort and the Diamond Cliff Resort & Spa. For middle-range establishments you can check out the Patong Bayshore Hotel, the Phairin Beach Hotel and the Phuket Grand Tropicana. For the budget travelers there are the Baan Lamai Beach Resort, the Deva Patong Resort and the Royal Palm Resort to choose from.

Kata-Karon: The beach is similar to Patong but relatively more quiet. You can find a number of high-end hotels in this area. The Kata Beach Resort is an exclusive boutique hotel and the Mom Tri's Boathouse boasts the award-winning Mom Tri's Boathouse Wine & Grill. There is also the Kata Thani Hotel & Beach Resort, at the back of which are several small restaurants.

Panwa Cape to Rawai Beach: You can find many upmarket rooms at the Panwaburi Hotel and more moderately priced ones at the Panwa Beach Resort and Panwa House Hotel. There are a number of inexpensive bungalows at the southern end of Chalong Bay for the budget traveler.

Bang Tao Beach and Laguna Phuket: Some of the most luxurious resorts of the island are located here the most famous being the Laguna Phuket Complex consisting of the Banyan Tree, Dusit Laguna Resort Hotel, Sheraton Grande Laguna, Allamanda Laguna Phuket and Laguna Beach.

Phi Phi Islands: These offshore islands are considered to be among the most beautiful islands in the world. You can find both luxury and budget accommodations. On the top-end side there is the Holiday Inn Resort.

Rice is the staple food in Thailand and can be found in most dishes. Besides, the country is blessed with abundant fresh fruit and vegetables so it is very rare

that frozen produce is used in the preparation of Thai dishes. Phuket itself is famous for seafood caught fresh from the waters of the Andaman Sea. A typical breakfast in Phuket consists of Khanom Chin – Thai rice noodles with a curry soup made from minced fish or shrimps. Other traditional food includes fried noodles such as Mi Hokkien with

fresh shrimp, pork, shellfish and green cabbage and Mi Sapam with seafood and gravy on top. If you want to try local food, you will find the best dining locations in Phuket Town, Chalong Bay and Patong Beach.

Phuket Town: You can savour some great Chinese food at Fortuna Pavilion in the Metropole Hotel. The Metropole Cafe in the same hotel serves popular luncheon buffet comprising a vast array of Thai dishes. For some delicious Italian fare, you can check out La Gaetana.

Chalong Bay, Rawai Beach and Nai Harn: You will find some of the best seafood in this area. Popular eateries include Kan Eang 1 & 2. Then there is the Klaus and Mouse restaurant which is greatly patronized by the Germans. If you are at Rawai Beach, you must dine in the eateries where you can eat sitting on mats at the water's edge.

Kata: Here you will find the upmarket Mom Tri's Boathouse Wine and Grill. To dine in informal setting you can head to Gung Cafe.

Patong Beach: Given its popularity as a major tourist destination, there is no lack of eateries here. Sam's is considered by the people to be the best steak house on the island. For Japanese cuisine, you can check out Otowa and Rengaya, and for Italian food, the popular name is Da Maurizio. Then there is Sala Bua, which boasts a romantic setting by the ocean side.

Kamala and Surin Beaches: For a fine dining experience, you must visit FantaSea, the ultimate cultural theme park. Other popular establishments include the Toto Restaurants and Old Siam Nakalay, which serves sumptuous Thai meals in a beautiful tropical garden setting.

Shopping

The most exciting place to shop in Phuket is Patong Beach. In the evening the beach transforms into a large night bazaar where you can buy handicrafts, silk scarves, sarongs and a variety of beach clothes, leisure wear, leather goods and luggage, CDs, computer games and



electronic gadgets and toys. The streets are clogged and everything is chaotic but fun and more so if you are good at bargaining. Given that Patong beach is a major tourist attraction, the shopping is aimed at the tourist market so prices are a bit higher than you would find in other places in Phuket. The main night market is along the beach road and into small secondary soi (lanes).

Jungceylon Shopping Complex is a shopping centre where you can buy anything that you can think of. The complex is situated on Rat-U-Thit Road diagonally opposite the eastern end of Soi Bangla. The two main stores in the complex are Robinson and Carrefour.

There is a market behind the Holiday Inn hotel which sells high quality local goods plus One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) items. OTOP is a government initiative to encourage self-sufficiency in Thai villages through the development of small-scale manufacturing and design businesses.

For souvenirs, crafts, luggage, tailor made clothes, sportswear and jewelry you can check out specialty stores such as Rosewood Lamps & Seeka.

Cruises: Cruising is a great way to discover the spectacular beauty of the islands. Dinner cruises are especially popular and include refreshments and full-blown meals. The young at heart can enjoy lively party cruises with on-board games and dancing.

Adventure Activities: Phuket's varied terrain is ideal for a number of adventure activities ranging from river rafting and scuba diving to elephant rides and jungle safaris. There are many experienced tour operators who offer these activities.

Snake shows: Thailand is home to more than 50 species of snakes including some poisonous varieties. You can watch spine tingling snake shows at various places across the island such as the Phuket Shooting Range and the Andaman Cobra Show on Soi Ta-iad.

The main attractions of Phuket are without doubt its exquisite beaches. The winding coastal roads along the west coast provide easy access to some of the world's finest beaches. Some

prominent beaches include:

Patong Beach: This is the most famous, or shall we say infamous, beach on the island. Promising a wild, unforgettable nightlife the beach is also home to literally hundreds of restaurants, chic lounge bars, beer bars and discos.

Karon Beach: Relatively quieter than Patong, Karon with its long stretch of beautiful white sand, features a full range of facilities including dining and entertainment.

Kata Beach: The beach is popular with surfers and offers facilities for a wide range of water activities. The beach is also popular with families and has a lively but not raucous nightlife.

Kata Noi Beach: Visit this beach if you are looking for some peace and quiet. This small bay of stunning white sand offers spectacular views of the Andaman Sea. Water activities include snorkeling and swimming.

Bang Tao Beach: This is again a very peaceful beach though it has its share of luxurious resorts and villas along its 6km (4 mile) stretch.

Surin Beach: This breathtakingly beautiful beach is known as 'Millionaires Row' due the top-end celebrity haunts Amanpuri, Twinpalms and The Chedi as well as luxurious villas that overlook the Andaman Sea.

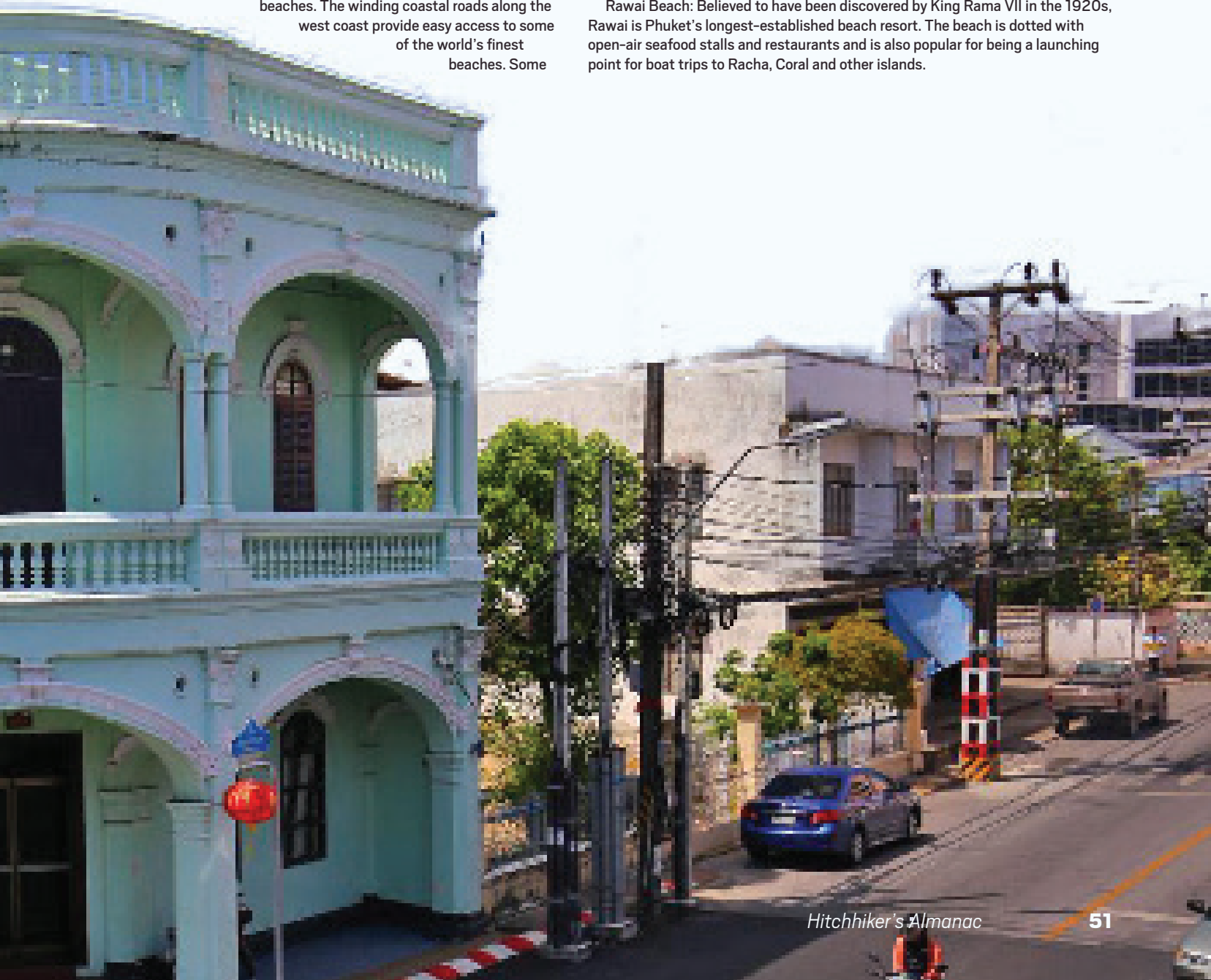
Pansea Beach: This tiny cove of glittering white sand is only accessible to the rich and famous guests of The Chedi and Amanpuri Resorts.

Kamala Beach: This well-enclosed bay and fishing village is popular with families and has some good snorkeling points at its rocky north end.

Nai Thon Beach: The beach is one of Phuket's best-kept secrets. You can reach this incredibly beautiful beach with silky white sand through a spectacular drive that takes you through forested hills and a lovely valley.

Ya Nui Beach: The beach is a charming little cove good for snorkeling, kayaking, and fishing.

Rawai Beach: Believed to have been discovered by King Rama VII in the 1920s, Rawai is Phuket's longest-established beach resort. The beach is dotted with open-air seafood stalls and restaurants and is also popular for being a launching point for boat trips to Racha, Coral and other islands.



WHAT I PACK FOR MY TRAVELS

By John Smith

Over the years, what I carry in my bag has changed a lot. Most of that change has to do with the fact that I now carry a lot of gear related to blogging, but it also reflects the fact that I've learned a lot about packing since I first hit the road in 2006. And while many websites have packing lists, I want to combine all my previous posts on the subject (there are about three) into one updated post that reflects my current views on what people should pack on their trip.

First, the short answer to what you should pack: take as little as possible. I take only the essentials, and if I really need something, I buy it. It's not that hard to find medicine, clothes, or an umbrella overseas. I also try to stick to the same climate during my trips to avoid carrying lots of different clothes. I don't want to be lugging sweaters around Thailand!

However, plans can change, and if that happens, I buy a light jacket. I keep it until it is a burden and then I leave it behind. The more I travel, the more I realize I don't need a lot of stuff. Everything I own fits into one backpack. Packing light is a cliché, yet one that has a lot of truth to it.

Special tip: Buy a small backpack so you won't be tempted to overpack. We subconsciously like to fill empty space, so if you have a big bag, you're more likely to overpack just so you don't waste space.

I've found that this list leaves me wanting for nothing. I'm sure many of you will read this and say "But what about X?" or "You really don't need Y." Well, that works for you, and this list works for me. Tailor your list to suit your travels.

I write this post not because I think there is one perfect way to pack but to answer a recurring question about what I pack and why. I haven't touched upon this subject in over three years, and people keep asking me "What should I pack when I go away?" This is my guideline and suits my "chase the summer, live in hostels" lifestyle.

But the real point I want to emphasize is that you really don't need a lot when you travel. Before I go on a trip, I write down a list of what I think I'll need and then cut it in half. You never need as much as you think.

In the end, there is never a definitive packing list. Everyone has different needs. My list suits my needs. It might not suit yours. 🌊

CLOTHES

- 1 dress shirt for when I go out to a respectable place in the evening
- 1 pair of jeans (They may be heavy and not easily dried, but I wear them a lot. A good alternative can be khaki pants.)
- 1 pair of shorts
- 1 bathing suit
- 6 t-shirts
- 1 long-sleeve t-shirt
- 1 pair of flip-flops
- 1 pair of sneakers
- 8 pairs of socks
- 1 pair of black dress socks
- 1 pair of dress shoes (heavy to carry around, but when I visit local friends, we usually go somewhere not sneaker-friendly)
- 7 pairs of boxer shorts
- 1 towel

TOILETRIES

- 1 toothbrush
- 1 tube of toothpaste
- 1 razor
- 1 package of dental floss
- 1 small bottle of shampoo
- 1 small bottle of shower gel
- Hair gel so I can keep the fro down between haircuts
- Comb
- Deodorant

GEAR (for those blogging, taking video, or anything else)

- Laptop
- Nikon Camera
- iPhone
- Tripod
- Wireless microphones
- Universal power adapter

MISCELLANEOUS

- A key or combination lock (everyone should have this, too!)
- Zip-top bags
- Plastic bags

SMALL MEDICAL KIT

- Band-Aids
- Hydrocortisone cream
- Antibacterial cream
- Eyedrops
- Earplugs
- Doctor-prescribed antibiotics
- Tylenol
- Hand sanitizer

