



A Guide to Hitchhike Success!

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Dear (about to become) adventurer,

You have come into the possession of a guide that is based on about three years and 25000 kilometres of hitchhike experience. To put that into perspective, for every word you read in this guide, I have hitchhiked a little over 2 kilometres. With this guide I will try to introduce you into the wonderful world of hitchhiking and how to make it as easy and comfortable as possible. I have to add that this is a guide which tells you how to efficiently and safely get anywhere in Western European countries, which actually makes it less of an adventure and more a calculable way of transportation. I am focused on crossing large distances in a short period of time on the highway and less on short routes and 'village hopping' as usually is seen in countries with less developed motorways. Although a lot of people see hitchhiking as something that should be unplanned, spontaneous and being based on luck and fate, I believe that getting introduced into a safer and more reliable version of hitchhiking will help you appreciate it easier and allows you to get into the more risky variants when you feel comfortable with it.

Hitchhiking is a beautiful practice and it allows you to experience the world from an entirely different perspective. You will learn a lot from the interactions with people, how others look at things and how different classes in society have different ideas on certain topics. But you also give something back to the kind strangers you will meet along your trip. When you are in their car you are part of their life for a short period of time as much as they are a part of yours.

The amounts of aspects covered in this guide are quite vast and not everything that I say is as effective in all situations you might come across. It is after all only based on my personal experiences and you could discover different ways which work better for you. I therefore would recommend to only read through this guide to get a very good general idea on how hitchhiking works. Printing this guide is an option, but you are on the wrong track if you need to grab this guide on your trip for every occasion you don't know how to react to. Hitchhiking is also about learning things about yourself and how YOU react to unexpected situations. I hope that you can pick up the things that are useful to you and prevent you from making 'beginner mistakes' which could get you in unnecessary trouble. I hope most of all that this guide will inspire you to start your own journeys and adventures. Find trust, have fun and enjoy!

Kind regards,

Lars König

On [page 24](#) there is a list of the most important aspects of hitchhiking with references to the pages in this guide where these points are discussed.

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Getting started

Preparation is everything when it comes to hitchhiking, although spontaneous trips are always possible, you usually won't get far without the right equipment and correct knowledge. Making a thoughtful planning makes a trip way more doable and a lot more comfortable.

Equipment

You cannot go on a journey without the proper equipment. Of the listed items below it is recommendable to have reserves of your roadmap and hitchhike sign because losing them can be disastrous in certain hitchhike conditions.

1. **Roadmap.** The most essential thing you need to have with you at all times wherever you go is your MAP. Your map is your biggest friend and can save you in any country and can get you everywhere you need to be. We are not talking about a standard map printed from Google, but about a road map which shows all major highways and adjacent petrol stations. With this you can easily determine what roads you need to take to get to your destination, and more importantly, show others where you need to be. Whenever you don't speak the language of the people, you can use the map to point at the place where you need to go to and people can also show you where they are going to. Where to get these maps is quite a hard question to answer. In the Netherlands they are obtainable for free as a member of the ANWB, but beside these maps I have not found anything like it in another country till this date.
2. **Hitchhike sign.** A hitchhiker's second best friend has got to be his hitchhike sign. Although a hitchhike sign's effectiveness can be disputed (see 'Sign Usage' [page 12](#)), having one with you is always a great help when you need to travel a small distance or to get back onto the highway. The sign can be of carton, but **plasticizing an A3 sized yellow paper** is way more efficient. A plasticized sign is much more durable in the rain, can be used infinitely when writing your destinations with a whiteboard marker and it can easily be carried around with you. It is also way more visible in the dark.
3. **Identity.** Make sure that wherever you go you can always identify yourself. Take your identity card or your passport with you and keep it where you can easily reach it. You will be asked for it many times by (border)police. Also make sure that you are aware of what visa's you need to have to be able to travel through certain countries. This can be very difficult for some countries because they require you to have proof that you will leave the country (by having a plane ticket for example), which is very hard as a hitchhiker.
4. **Bag.** One thing you need to achieve is to have all your stuff as compact as possible. A backpack usually does the trick, but anything in which all your luggage fits is sufficient. You want to have as less stuff with you as possible so that it is easier to get into a car. It also helps to not forget stuff if you only have one thing to carry around with you.
5. A sheet with a summary of standard sentences ('What direction are you going to? We want to hitchhike to ...' etc.) in the specific language of the countries where you are traveling through really helps a lot. Just like the map, if you can't explain something, just point at the sheet to make clear what you are trying to say.

Anything else you need is just for convenience, but I will highlight a few things which I think are still very helpful to have with you.

- **Tent:** You can never be certain if you will reach your destination in one go, therefore it is always a huge help if you do not depend on a roof above your head. A tent also allows for cheap places to stay anywhere you go.
- **Food & Water:** Independent of the distance you have to travel, you will be on the road for an unpredictable amount of time. Therefore it is important to have enough food and drinks with you, also because you might not be at a petrol station to buy something at the time you are hungry or thirsty.
- **Compass:** Maybe a compass comes across as a little bit primitive, but it is extremely useful for navigating in unfamiliar environments. Together with your map you can easily determine your direction and position.
- **Tablet computer:** Maybe this is a bit too 2.0 for some hitchhikers, but it is a great help to have a tablet with Wi-Fi or/and 3G receiver with you on your trip. This allows you to check hitchwiki.org and maps and makes you a little bit more independent.
- **Deodorant:** When you are on longer trips it isn't unlikely that your cloths have gotten dirty and a bit smelly. This is of course very unpleasant for everyone who picks you up. Therefore I would recommend having some deodorant with you to cover up the smell and give the idea of hygiene.
- **Duct tape:** Things will break when you are on the road. Straps of your bag, shoes, belts etc. The easiest and efficient ways to quickly repair those things is with a roll of duct tape. It doesn't take up that much space and it can neglect potential nuisances.
- **First Aid Kit:** A small first aid kit is pretty much recommended for treating minor injuries. I usually supplement the kit with antiseptic ointment and insect bite treatment.
- **Swiss pocketknife:** A pocketknife is just very useful to have with you, if only for opening beer bottles or to use it as cutlery.
- **Camera:** It would be a shame if your awesome trip wouldn't be immortalized because of the lack of photos. So bring a camera!
- **Flashlight:** Very useful for reading your map in the dark.

Things you should NOT take with you

Because you are traveling with other people who trust you and are more likely to be checked by authorities than usual, you should keep in mind that there are some things you should never carry around with you during your trip.

- **NEVER carry drugs with you!** Having drugs on you is illegal in almost all countries and states in the world and are met with serious punishments. These punishments are not only for you, but there are also severe consequences for your driver. Therefore it is a very selfish act to have any kind of drugs with you and morally unjust. If you ever get caught it will also damage the image of hitchhiking and that is the last thing that we all want to happen.
- **Do NOT carry weapons with you!** Although a Swiss pocketknife is very useful, you don't have to bring sharp army knives as cutlery. A variety of knives are deemed as weapons in some countries so it's better to just not have them with you. Hitchhiking is based on trust, and if you don't trust a person than don't get into their car in the first place.

Appearance

Although you usually don't directly think about this when planning your trip, but looks do matter if you want to be picked up quickly. There are many theories on what the best features are, but generally the next one is agreed upon to have the biggest effect:

Bright colours: The strength of having very bright colours is that you can be easily spotted when standing next to the road. You also come across less threatening when you don't wear too many dark colours. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't wear anything dark, I usually hitchhike with my black leather jacket and I still get everywhere, but it simply helps if you wear at least something colourful.

Besides this one feature which seems to have an effect, there are also some ideas on general 'looks' which could help you with getting certain rides. Here are four example looks you could go for:

- **Dress wild:** This is a common tactic used by students, the idea is that the more wicked you look like; the less people take you serious, the less threatening you are. You can combine all kinds of strange clothing with as much bright colours as possible. Do you want to hitchhike from St. Andrews to Prague with blue hair, a kilt and bright yellow sweater? No problem, a friend of mine did this with great success. Expect to get more rides from young folks and generally open minded people. Elderly and civilised couples are more suspicious when it comes to these strange preferences in clothing.
- **Dress poorly:** I have never used this tactic myself, but I know from two friends of mine that they literally were picked up because drivers thought they didn't have any money to get anywhere. Characteristics of this look are torn clothing, inconvenient shirts (a friend of mine wore a shirt with a middle finger on it and the text "f*ck you!", but it should be noted that he is an experienced hitchhiker) and a bad hair day. Caring people are more likely to pick you up, but you probably scare of a lot of potential rides with BMW's and big family cars.

- **Dress classy:** A tight workers shirt or even a suit can make you stand out of the crowd. You will come across very decently, but expect people to look at you with a weird face when you tell them you are hitchhiking. Because you make a wealthy impression, people tend to find it suspicious that you are asking around for rides and might even expect you to pay for it. They might even think you are a Jehovah witness in a worst case scenario, but with a good explanation this awkward prejudice can be moved out of the way. You can expect to get rides with people from higher class and occasional 'How I met your Mother' fans.
- **Dress ordinary:** When you wear simple and normal cloths people are more likely to identify themselves with you and pick you up. It also makes you look less threatening which is always a huge plus. You are more likely to be picked up by people who usually won't pick up hitchhikers and those of more decent classes.

Team composition

With how many people you are and gender composition can determine your odds to get a ride by a lot. Out of a safety perspective it is always better for a girl to hitchhike together with at least one guy. I know quite some girls who hitchhike alone, but it is always safer to hitchhike together with somebody, especially in Italy ([page 22](#)).

Alone. The advantage of hitchhiking alone is that you almost always fit in a car and you pose less of a threat. People however are more suspicious when you hitchhike on your own, because they consider it to be a crazy thing to do for a single person (which it kind of is). I personally really like to hitchhike on my own, because it gives me a great feeling of accomplishment when I reach my final destination. It feels as if it was only me that achieved it without having anything. Traveling alone has quite some downside though. You can get lonely and bored when things aren't going as planned and you have nobody to motivate you (which is very important during hitchhiking).

Couple. This is in my opinion the ideal composition. You can keep each other company and motivated the entire trip and people think it is quite adventurers for two people to go on a trip like that. It is also way easier to get a ride for this reason when you are a guy and travel with a girl. Guy/guy combination is harder to get rides, because you pose as a threat and you really need to convince people that you really are not. Also a big advantage is that you can split tasks at a petrol station, one person can ask around on the parking lot whereas the other person asks all incoming cars who are getting some fuel. The obvious disadvantage is that you are less likely to fit in a car.

Three. I personally don't have any experience with hitchhiking with three people on the highway. I do have quite some experience off highway and I have to say it works surprisingly well. I would imagine that compared to a couple the disadvantages would increase and the advantages decrease. More people means more space required and the more suspicious people get. You can however make a lot of fun next to the road making it more likely for people to take you.

Four or more. Split in groups of two and three. Don't expect to get a ride for four people when hitchhiking on the highway. Although I once got a ride for five twice in France off highway and once a ride for six from Paris to Eindhoven, it still isn't recommendable to aim for such lucky shots.

Planning general route

Planning ahead to what places you want to go to is of course very useful (but not necessary). When planning your route keep in mind how much time you expect it will take. If you hitchhike in Western European countries you can expect to cross 800 km to reach a small village and 1000km to get to a big city within one day of hitchhiking (starting before the morning rush hour and arriving around 10 'o clock in the evening). Keep in mind that in some countries it is harder to cross large distances because of the road network or mind-set of the people. In the chapter "Countries by experience" ([page 21](#)) I share some of my experiences on this subject matter.

Traffic flow

An important aspect of planning your route is to keep traffic flow in mind. When there is more than one route going towards your destination, think about what routes most cars will be taking. Will they likely go to a large town up ahead or towards the beach on a sunny day? During the midweek most people are commuting so it is more likely that they will move to big cities close by, whereas during the holidays you might be more lucky with tourists going towards popular holiday destinations.

When you are planning to go to a small village it is a clever move to print a detailed roadmap from the highway towards this place to guide a possible ride towards this place once you get close. More on off-highway hitchhiking can be found further in this guide ([page 17](#)).

Station Switching

Some petrol station are linked with each other and you can use this utility to your advantage by hitchhiking to one of them and switched to the other side to get more favourable odds in getting rides towards a certain place. Check beforehand which stations on your route have this!

Metropolis

An important challenge that I would like to already point out is that of metropolises. Cities like Paris, Warsaw and Brussels are very easy to hitchhike to thanks to their huge population and touristic attractions, but hitchhiking through them to places behind them is very difficult. When planning your route try to keep in mind that you will have a hard time with getting a ride from the petrol station just before these cities towards one behind the city. Therefore a route on which smaller cities lie could be easier because of the higher chance of people going further than to just one big city. For example, when you start in Amsterdam and you want to get to Lyon, try to take the route Amsterdam – Eindhoven – Maastricht - Luxembourg - Dijon – Lyon instead of Amsterdam – Antwerp – Brussels – Dijon – Lyon.

Wishful thinking

One final thing I would like to add is that you cannot 'demand' a preferable route. Stay realistic about your odds of getting rides into a certain direction. A good example of this is that you cannot expect a ride from Milan in the direction of Geneva, simply because the odd of an Italian going into that direction is very slim. A much more reasonable route would be to hitchhike towards Basel first with the flow of tourist and business people going back towards Germany and then switch at the petrol station just before Basel to the other side and try to catch traffic which goes into the direction of Bern. This route might be 300 km longer, but it gives you a way higher certainty to get rides towards Geneva than when you try to get there directly from Milan.

Planning to leave the city

When you are ready to hit the road, the first (and usually most difficult part of the trip) is getting onto the road. Leaving a city can be a very painstaking process because most people usually stay within the city borders and won't go towards the highway. There are however a few methods to increase your chances of getting a ride out of town quickly. The best information source on finding a way to get out of town can be found on this website http://hitchwiki.org/en/Main_Page . Just type in the city where you are at and it will give a list of options on how to get out of there and into what direction, together with reviews and other general information on increasing your chances.

If hitchwiki.org doesn't cover the town where you like to start, or not well enough for the direction you like to go to you can do research yourself. I usually use Google maps to assess the city where I am at. I need to stress out that **doing proper research on where you want to stand to get a ride out of the city is crucial in preventing unpleasant surprises** which could turn your adventure into a disaster right from the get go.

Road

Try to find a road on which cars are definitely going into the direction of the highway. Along this road you should try to find a spot as close to the on-ramp to the highway as possible where cars drive slow (usually at traffic lights or at a roundabout) and are capable of pulling over. Try to find several spots along this road (or roads) that fulfil these criteria so that you can move to these when you discover your initial selected spot isn't as good as anticipated. Standing in front of a bus stop, next to a bicycle road or any place where cars don't drive really helps, because this gives cars a place to stop. There is more on this in the next chapter "Hitchhiking next to the road" ([page 10](#)). When you did find a nice spot to hitchhike from which can't be found on hitchwiki.org yet, then it would be very helpful if you would add this to the website to help your fellow hitchhikers.

Petrol station

Hitchwiki probably already covers this, but the best thing you should aim for is a petrol station which is linked to the highway within city borders (= reachable by public transport). Not too many cities have this luxury unfortunately; Hamburg (all directions), Berlin, Lyon (North) and Paris are one of the few exceptions, making them great hitchhike places. You should keep in mind that even if petrol stations seem to be reachable on the map, they sometimes have fences around them. Although this can be very demoralizing, I usually can find a way to get around them by just getting onto the highway by foot (can be dangerous and is illegal!) and reach the petrol station anyway. Climbing the fence is of course also an option, but that is usually way too much trouble. When you find yourself at a petrol station then follow the steps as described in the chapter "Hitchhiking at a petrol station" ([page 13](#)).

Hitchhiking next to the road

It probably won't get any more uncomfortable than hitchhiking next to the road to get on to the highway. I usually consider this part of hitchhiking as the most difficult and annoying one, but it can be nevertheless fun and quick if you follow the next steps. But before you read these steps there is one thing you should keep in your mind. **Your goal is to get to a petrol station which is on the highway where cars are going into the direction of your destination!** Don't expect to get a ride to your final destination instantly, so always aim for a petrol station which is on the highway.

Before you start hitchhiking you should first assess the road where you are standing. You should try to find confirmation that the cars are going into the direction of the highway and the on-ramp that leads towards your destination. You are wasting time when cars appear to be going in a completely different direction.

Stand somewhere people can see you.

Sometimes there are a lot of road signs which can block the view of cars that are passing by. Try to stand in front of these signs (but also don't block the view of the cars for these signs, because this is illegal). Also, stand near a lamppost so that cars can actually see when it is dark.

Stand somewhere cars can pull over.

As trivial as it may sound, a lot of hitchhikers make the mistake to stand somewhere where it is impossible for cars to stop. Standing directly next to the on-ramp is an example of a bad spot to stand, because cars really cannot stop on the emergency lane. Also take the speed with which cars are driving into account, if a car is driving too fast he will also not bother to stop even though there is enough place for him to do so. **Pedestrian lanes, Bus stops, bicycle lanes and some roundabouts** are useful spots where most cars are capable to pick you up. Standing at a traffic light has the advantage that you can talk to the drivers who are standing still, but the disadvantage is that people can't let you in when the lights have turned green. These aren't the only spots of course, you simply have to use your common sense and improvise where needed.

Make (eye) contact.

This is always important, also when you are at a petrol station. When you make eye contact with people in their cars, they feel more connected to you and you seem more trustworthy. Don't forget that cars are not abstract entities, but that there are real people inside of them that can feel empathy with you. Making eye contact helps with this and it allows for some (though basic) communication. You can also make contact by waving at people and just jump around happily. When you have contact with a person and the car happens to be standing still (at a traffic lights for example) you can try to talk to the person and ask if he/she is going into the direction you need to go to. No need for tactful question usage, ask to the point if they are going to the highway in the direction of a certain city and will pass a petrol station.

Stay enthusiastic at all times.

This is very important, both to get a ride and to keep your spirit up. When you clearly are having fun, people are more likely to take you with them. Always keep smiling, singing, waving and jumping around. It also makes standing next to the road a lot more pleasant.

Take advice into account

When you are standing next to the road with a sign and you notice that people are making strange gestures like pointing backwards or severely shake their heads, it might be that you are hitchhiking at a wrong spot where cars aren't going into the direction you think they are going to. When this is the case, you should thoughtfully check your position and when you come to the conclusion you really are at the wrong place, move to a better one (see 'Set a realistic deadline').

Be patient.

When standing next to the road you never know how long you will be standing there. It could be 2 minutes, it could be 2 hours. It is important that you keep patient and trust that somebody will pass by who will take you to your next destination. My longest stay at one location was 4 hours before a successful ride stopped for us. But when things truly don't work out, proceed to the next step.

Set a realistic deadline.

Any time you are standing next to the road you should think of at what time you need to get a ride to be able to reach your destination. If you want to cross a vast distance that day you should reconsider your plans when you don't get on the highway before a certain time. When your set deadline has passed and you still don't have a ride (into the right direction) than decisions you could make are:

- a. Search for and stand at another spot which might be better
- b. Take public transport towards a possible better hitchhike spot or even your destination
- c. Give up and try it the following day.

Usually it is the wrong spot that is the problem, so try to do proper planning before starting your trip!

Sign Usage

Using a sign not only makes you feel like an authentic hitchhiker, it is also almost the only tool you have when it is dark outside. There are some do's and don'ts when it comes to using a hitchhike sign.

Do's:

- First write on your sign "Direction" (or the translation of this word in the language of the country you are traveling through) after which you should write the city name. This makes clear that you are going into a general direction and don't have to be dropped off at that certain location. If you don't write this down, drivers might think to themselves that they don't need to go to that certain place that is written on your sign and therefore not have to take you, although they might cross a petrol station which is on that route.
- Always write down the name of the place where you need to go in the language of the locals. You can also write down the English name, for example: Firenze/Florence, Köln/Cologne, Genève/Geneva etc. When you are traveling in bilingual countries like Belgium, write down both accepted names of the place: Antwerpen/Anvers, Luik/Liège, Rijsel/Lille, Leuven/Louvain etc.
- As alternative to writing down city names you could draw a petrol station sign or just an arrow to indicate where you want to go to.
- When you have to travel for a really short distance (off-highway), you can opt for not using your sign, since you can be sure that everyone is going into the right direction anyway. This takes away the trouble of writing a sign and the chance of people don't want to take you with them because they are going to another place.
- Only writing down the city name(s) might be very efficient, but to get the maximum out of your sign you should decorate it with drawings of smileys, flowers and sunshine. This helps with getting a positive image across and will evoke random smiles from drivers passing by.

Don'ts:

- Don't write down highway numbers or names. People simply don't know them 99% of the time.
- Don't use your sign when you are at a petrol station, you should ask around where people are going to and not hope for the best that people will come to you and offer you a ride. Contrary to this statement however was how a friend of mine travelled through France. At every petrol station he arrived he started with calmly getting a cup of coffee. He then started looking at his map at the coffee corner and slowly starts to write down the city name on his sign for everyone to see. He told me that sometimes he got a ride even before he finished writing down the city name.
- Don't write down the name of a city which is very far away or very close by. People tend to think that they either don't go that far or don't want to pull over so early.

Hitchhiking at a petrol station

When you are at a petrol station **you should approach EVERYONE and ask for a ride**. You will be surprised by the variation of people who are prepared to give you a ride. My general rule always states that **you should be polite and friendly at all times**. Even if you get negative reactions from some people, you should never let this be a reason to let your mood go down. Never forget that there are more people on the petrol station that will see you approach others, and if they see you do this in a polite matter they will be more likely to take you with them. I've experienced quite numerous times that people came to me and said that they saw me ask around and wanted to help me.

You should always keep your goal in mind: get to the next petrol station which is closer to your destination. Even if this means that you sometimes only get rides of a few kilometres (which is especially true in the Netherlands), this is the best way to go. Keep in mind that the closer you get to your destination, the more likely people are actually going there. So there is no reason to be picky on the rides you accept, unless you are in Luxembourg, but more on that in the chapter 'Experience by country'.

Sometimes you get into the dilemma that you are offered a ride into the right direction, but not as far to a petrol station. Even though the driver offers to drop you close to the on-ramp into the right direction, I would recommend staying at the petrol station where you are at that moment. Unless the petrol station truly is abandoned or simply the wrong one. When you are at a petrol station from which cars are driving into the right direction it is always better to wait for a car that goes until the next petrol station because this gives you certainty that also from here cars will go into the right direction, whereas you have no idea if the on-ramp the driver is talking about is feasible for hitchhiking.

When you are at a petrol station and don't want to carry around your luggage all the time, you should put it at a spot where you can see it at all times from all directions. Usually the corner of the gas station makes your luggage visible from both the parking lot and the actually gas pumps. This reduces the risk of your luggage being stolen without you noticing it.

Map usage

As stated for about a million times already, your map is your best friend! It can not only show you where you need to be and how to get there, but also your (potential) drivers. I recommend to always show people where you need to go to, regardless of them being interested in taking you with them. Sometimes people don't realise that it is very easy to take hitchhikers for a short trip to the next petrol station until they see the actual distance.

Using the map is especially useful when you don't speak the language of the people. You can simply show them where you want to go to by pointing at it. Don't be too aggressive with your map usage though, it is also very important that you keep making eye contact and show your enthusiasm.

Language usage

Europe has a very high language diversity. Everybody speaks a different language or accent almost every 400 to 700 kilometres. Having knowledge on several languages can be of great help when hitchhiking, but sometimes it can also backfire on you. I experienced this when you are not very proficient with a certain language and start a conversation with somebody. They might think that you are a bit weird. Think of it this way, if a complete stranger comes up to you and asks: "Direction you going to, yes maybe?" you would also have a second thought on what this person's intentions could be. What I always do is start a conversation in a language that I am comfortable with (English) and when I notice that they don't understand it or have trouble replying, I propose to them to ask the question again in their (probable) mother tongue (French or German in my case). Usually people become very relieved that they can speak in their own language and don't mind it that much anymore if you make mistakes. If communication really is an issue, you can always rely on your best friend: your map!

Step by step how to approach people

I will first start with some general steps on how to optimally approach people. This doesn't mean you have to follow these steps to the letter, it is just a method that I figured to come across as friendly and naturally as possible and not scare the sh*t out of possible drivers. If these steps aren't natural too you than you should do it your own way and simply be yourself.

1. When you see a car pull over at the gas station, don't look at this car constantly by keeping your eyes on it all the time until somebody gets out. This will make the people in the car feel uncomfortable and they might already start to find you suspicious.
2. When you walk to the person who you want to talk to, than do this casually. Don't 'move in for the kill', just walk steady and don't run or anything. Also don't look at the person in the eyes, up until you are within speaking range. This makes the situation less awkward and you don't want to start your conversation shouting because the person is too far away.
3. When you are close enough to start a conversation, try to start with a polite question. What I learned from my job as a street salesmen is that it really helps if you start with a question on which people can only answer 'Yes' too, because this will get them into a 'positive mood' in which they are more likely to answer yes on further questions. The best question you therefore can start off with is: **"Excuse me sir/madam, can I ask you something?"**
4. The follow-up question should be **"In what direction are you going?"** This will avoid the 'No' answer when you ask people if they are going into your direction. I also discussed this approach with other hitchhikers and some think this is actually a very bad question to ask, because you want to know something which is quite private. This might scare of the driver and put him/her in a defensive mode (which I sometimes indeed have experienced). Therefore you should check how they answer and from their answer onwards have to decide what the best thing is to ask next. They might go into your direction and then you have to convince them to take you with them.

5. When people are going into your direction, try to show your enthusiasm. When they call a city name which is into the right direction I usually start off with a semi-excited sentence **“Really? Oh that is great! I am trying to hitchhike to ...”** At this stage I grab my map and show them what I am talking about.
 - a. When they say a city name you never heard of you can continue by asking if this city is in the direction where you need to go to, also grab the map so that the driver can point out where he/she is going to.
6. When showing the map I usually start off with showing where we are and then show the driver where I want to go to. This gives the driver the idea for what part of his/her route I will be in his/her car. I try to always emphasize on how helpful it will be if the driver could bring me to that specific petrol station or location. If the driver confirms that he/she want to take you proceed to the chapter “Entering the car” ([page 18](#))

It is very important that the first impression people get off you is positive. Therefore you should try to remain eye contact throughout the conversation because this causes you to come across as trustworthy (at least in most western cultures). Being polite and friendly as stated before also really helps in getting that awesome ride you need to get further.

Even if the person doesn't want/cannot take you, stay polite and wish him/her a nice day. You are not interacting with products who can get you to your next destination but with life human beings. So treat them nicely and with respect!

Persuade techniques

On petrol stations there are a lot of different people driving in and out all the time and every person requires a different approach to maximize your chances. I hereby present some strategies I use to counter certain excuses and to get into certain rides quickly. When performing these techniques you should try to come across as confident as possible, because their success relies strongly on that of convincing social interaction:

People that are in a hurry: Quite a lot of times people tell you they can't take you with them because they are in a hurry. **My advice is to play along: also be in a hurry!** When they truly are in a hurry they make decision fast, quickly tell them that you also are in a hurry as well and that you only need to be taken to a certain petrol station and that you will be out of their car within no time. This strategy has somehow worked surprisingly well for me.

Company car: On the road you will come across a lot of business man with fancy cars. But more often than not you will hear that it is the car of their company and that they are in trouble with the insurance when they take you with them and are involved in an accident. One easy way to undermine their argument is by asking them how many times they ever had accidents in their lifetime. Most realise that they almost had none and with this insight they usually change their minds. Remember that most business men were students themselves and it isn't unlikely they have hitchhiked themselves when they were younger.

Strong doubters: Once in a while you come across people who are going into the right direction, have enough space in their car and don't have any excuse to not take you, but still they doubt if they want to take you with them. It is necessary, but hard, to NOT start to push them with questions like "Why not? I don't understand it!" Or "Why wouldn't you? You have enough space!" Instead you should try to stay kind and friendly and try to understand their doubts. Don't forget that you are actually asking them to share their private space for quite some time with a complete stranger and this is a thought that needs some getting used to. **Your smile is stronger than you might think**, if you are sincere about your intentions and how helpful it is that you can get a ride from this person they usually give in eventually. Usually these people are very relieved when they find out along the ride that you actually are a really nice person to talk to and are usually very interested in why you decided to go hitchhiking.

Truck drivers: Although for ages there has been a special bond between hitchhikers and truck drivers, it has been broken thanks to insurance policies. Truck drivers are not allowed to take hitchhikers with them anymore because this will cause their truck and payload to not be insured anymore. Truck drivers also aren't allowed to have more passenger than one on board because there are usually not enough seatbelts. There are still some liberal truck drivers out there, but I personally rarely come across one. I therefore don't have any good techniques to talk myself into a truck. But always try to approach them anyway, they might offer you a ride for hundreds of kilometres.

"Full" car: Another common excuse you will hear often is that the car is "full". One of my mottos is that there is ALWAYS room for a hitchhiker (or two). **The keyword here is "trying"**. Ask the driver if you can try to fit into the car. If you fit into the car, you are already in it and it is hard for the driver to refuse to take you after that. Most drivers are quite hesitant to even let you try to fit into the car, but it is quite easy to convince them by saying that it can't harm anyone, or any excuse of that nature.

Set a realistic deadline

Just like hitchhiking next to the road, you should be realistically on your chances of getting away from a certain place. If it is already dark and you still have to travel hundreds of kilometres (and you are not in Luxembourg or Germany) it is a clever move to reconsider your odds of reaching your final destination.

1. As long as there are people on the petrol station you could opt for to just take the first possible ride towards a town up ahead. Only do this when you are certain that this town gives the possibility to get on the highway again the next day, so don't accept a ride which goes into the middle of nowhere. To arrange a last minute place to stay is described at "Places to stay" ([page 20](#)).
2. If you are really out of luck you should try to arrange a place to stay on the petrol station. This might be scary the first time, but usually the employees understand that you really have nowhere to go and let you sleep somewhere in a corner on a bench inside. If the petrol station closes at a certain time it is possible that you have to set up a tent outside. This could cause some trouble because the ground is property of the oil company and is therefore illegal to sleep upon. But when you lie somewhere out of sight it should be ok. You could also ask the personnel to take you somewhere after they have closed down the gas station.

Off highway hitchhiking

Quite frankly I don't have too much experience with hitchhiking off the highway and into rural areas. From what I experienced you mostly stand next to a small road and have way less traffic. The techniques described in the chapter "Hitchhiking next to the road" ([Page 10](#)) largely still apply to this situation. But you usually get rides way faster than in a city because cars are driving slower and have more space to stop. Also local traffic seems to be less in a hurry compared to those who go to the highway. This usually leads to more friendly people picking you up and some nice conversations about local activities. Sometimes you even get a place to sleep offered, which is of course a nice addition.

As always try to stay positive, but being extremely enthusiastic might be overdoing it. The pace in rural areas is a bit slower than in urban regions and a simple smile and a calm wave usually does the trick to get a ride.

Village hopping

This practice is usual done in Asia, but should be working everywhere. The idea is that you hitchhike from village to village, maybe do some small tasks and get food and shelter in return. I have to refer to a friend of mine called Eric who did this all across Cambodia up until India. I recommend reading his blogs because he also gives a lot of tips and tricks on how to travel with as less money as possible and his stories are generally very inspiring. You can find his blog on his website:

http://www.yourworldyourhome.com/how-to-travel-across-the-world-on-less-than-2000/?fb_source=pubv1

Entering the car

When a driver agrees upon you entering his/her car there are a few steps that you should follow. Start by introducing yourself, this comes across as very polite and it also helps if you to get to know whose car you are entering.

Boarding

The succession of things that get into the car should be:

First: Guy

Second: Luggage

Last: Girl

And when getting out follow the same succession but then backwards. This reduced the risk of the car driving away with something or someone still inside it. I usually don't exit the car before the driver exits the car to open the trunk. These steps of precaution don't have to be taking when you highly trust your driver, but it helps to reduce the risks of hitchhiking.

Also: **never separate from your luggage or your hitchhike partner!** The situation could arise whereby you can get a ride with a group of cars. Even though it is logistically more feasible to put your luggage in one car and sit in the other, you should always insist that you want both your luggage and yourself in the same car. Even if there are no bad intentions involved on the driver's side, a simple miscommunication on which petrol station both cars have to stop could lead to the disappearance of your goods, or at least severely delay your trip.

Verifying

Before the driver has the chance to drive away **make very clear agreements on where the driver should bring you.** When it is certain that the driver will go onto the highway for a long distance into the right direction you don't have to agree in detail yet where he has to drop you off, but ALWAYS verify if this person is really going into this direction. Use your map again to be absolutely certain. This step can prevent a lot of headaches when there was some miscommunication on the place where you wanted to be put.

Precaution

Hitchhiking does come with some risks, but there are many ways to reduce them when you use your common sense and pay attention. Here are a few rules which should help you to stay safe during your trip.

1. Let yourself be guided by your guts, **when you really do not trust somebody, than don't get into the car** even though the person seems to be nice and refusing leads to awkward moments. Just keep in mind that you probably won't see this person anymore the rest of your life.
2. **When there is alcohol or drugs in play, than don't accept the ride.** The last thing you want to do is being in a car with a drunk person, especially if this person is behind the wheel. Also if the driver isn't under influence, it still makes the other persons in the car unpredictable. You can also get into a lot of trouble when authorities discover drugs in the car.

Congratulations! You're in a car! And now?

You did it! You got into a car which goes into the right direction with some friendly people. But what do you do now? I will first go into important details you should pay attention to during your stay in a stranger's car and then give some tips to make the ride both for you and for your drivers a little bit more enjoyable.

Pay attention to the route you are following!

Keep an eye out where you are going at all times. The last thing you want to happen is missing the petrol station you were supposed to be dropped off at. People these days follow their navigation system blindly, which sometimes cause for changes in the route which could be detrimental for where you want to go to. When you hitchhike with two or more people you should make clear agreements on who pays attention to the route.

Trust your map, not the driver!

This might sound strange at first, but let me explain. Even though your driver wants to help you with his or her best intentions, but when they talk about a "much better petrol station further up ahead" which isn't on your map, than kindly refuse to be dropped off there. Refusing such a kind offer can sometimes cause for a painful situation, but it really is the best course of action to not take their advice into account. For way too many times it happened to me that I was dropped at an abandoned petrol station for trucks or at a petrol station which only leads into a random city. **You should always and only trust your map** (on the condition that the map is up to date of course).

Talk and share

There isn't anything more fun than meeting new people in my opinion. Everyone has his or her own story to tell and unique lessons to teach. Although hitchhiking is known for being a method of getting somewhere cheap, for me talking to the people I meet is my main motivation to keep on doing it. I've gotten rides with entrepreneurs, shamans, psychotherapists, families and local farmers and I enjoyed each and every one of them.

People who take you with them are also very much interested in you and your motives to hitchhike. This mutual interest leads to interesting conversations and I can notice the joy you also bring to them. **Topics of discussion can range from small talk about the weather to literally the meaning of life.** It is important that you talk to your driver because it is the only thing you can give, but as I said it is a beautiful gift.

Sleeping

When you are on the road for quite a long time you could become drowsy and tend to fall asleep. This isn't a problem if you are with two or more, one can sleep while the other entertains the driver and keeps an eye out on the route. When you are on your own then you are in bad luck, because you really should stay awake at all times. Only if you fully trust the driver you could opt to sleep for a while, but only if the driver knows exactly where he needs to drop you off.

Places to stay

This section isn't really part of hitchhiking, but I would like to give some hints on how to arrange places to stay for free beforehand or when you have run ashore in a random city.

Couchsurfing

Being a member of the couchsurf community makes it very easy to get a place to stay in almost every city in the world. Arranging a couch is quite easy and the people who host you are almost always very friendly and interesting. I see hitchhiking as a journey on which you can learn a lot about life, and I too feel the same about couchsurfing. The list of unforgettable experience I had with people I met through couchsurfing is already numerous. Dumpster diving in Hamburg, preparing a vegan Christmas dinner in Zürich and enjoying the local cuisines in Lyon are only a few examples of things I was able to experience thanks to couchsurfing. Website: <https://www.couchsurfing.org/>

Most large cities have a "last minute couch request"-page on which you could (in theory) arrange a couch the day before you leave towards a certain city. Keep in mind that this is quite inconvenient for most people who offer a couch, so always try to arrange one as early as possible.

Also in times of distress couchsurfing can give the answer. In every big city there is usually a couchsurf community present which organizes regular activities like meetings, parties and a lot more. When you arrive in a city you should try to find out if such an activity is going on at that very moment. Having a tablet computer with you can be your saviour in such an occasion. When a friend and I got stuck in Milan we were lucky that we could find a free Wi-Fi spot and were able to figure out how to get to a couchsurf meeting that was happening that very moment.

Ring random doorbells

Although this requires some courage, it is in essence not too different from asking rides while hitchhiking. Ringing a random doorbell and ask kindly for a couch or a floor to sleep on is usually seen as an act of desperation for which people feel pity for you and might take you in. If you explain the situation well and (as always) stay polite it shouldn't be a problem to get a place for the night.

Tent

When you were bright enough to bring a tent with you on your trip, then you could sleep almost anywhere. Parks, countryside, somebodies backyard, be creative! It is not legal to put up your tent at all places. Parks especially are being checked by police.

Youth Hostel

Your last resort, usually youth hostels are very cheap (less than 15 euros for a night) and have quite decent facilities such as showers and internet connection. Don't feel bad when you have to decide for spending the night at a hostel. You can still meet a lot of kind people there, I once met two Scottish bloakes with whom I had a great evening while drinking beer and listen to their adventures as soldiers in Afghanistan.

Countries by experience

I have travelled through quite some European countries, some more than others, and I hope that I can give an insight in how it is like to travel there from my experience as a young adult male.

Netherlands.

Even as a native Dutchman, I sometimes have trouble with getting rides in the Netherlands. I think it has something to do with the general mentality of keeping everything as simple and humble as possible (Dutch saying: "Doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg"). Dutch people are really anxious when it comes to picking up hitchhikers, but because hitchhiking was a very common practice in the 70s and 80s people from these generations are likely to take you with them. It does help that almost all Dutchmen are very proficient in using the English language and this really helps with explaining to people what you are doing and thus getting a ride. One credit I do have to give to the Netherlands is that there are quite a number of designated hitchhike spots throughout the country, making hitchhiking here a lot more comfortable.

Belgium

I consider Belgium as a much easier country to hitchhike through than the Netherlands thanks to the kind nature of the people. They also possess a much wider range of language skills thanks to the bilingual origin of the country. The roads of Belgium are also extensively used by Dutch and German tourists to reach France, making it easy to get a ride throughout Belgium.

Germany

I cannot state it more often: Germany is a hitchhiker's paradise. The people are very open to hitchhikers and the road network is top notch. I have been able to reach every corner of Germany by hitchhiking without a hitch. Most people can speak English quite decently or at least understand it. Thanks to the German "Autobahn" you will be able to get high speed rides you can't get anywhere else in Europe. Before you know it you are rushing from Frankfurt to München with 250 km/h in a comfortable leather seat while listening to some techno beats.

Luxembourg

I can only elaborate on the three main petrol stations which are located around the capital Luxembourg. These petrol stations are perfect gateways to the rest of Europe, because of their popularity thanks to the low prices for petrol.

West: This petrol station is medium sized and perfect to get rides towards all possible cities in Belgium and the Netherlands. Just watch the licence plates and pick your country.

South: This petrol station called 'Aire de Berchem' is gigantic and officially the biggest petrol station in the world. You can get rides here that go all the way to Marseille. I therefore recommend to not take any ride which doesn't go further than Metz, because you might miss an opportunity to get way further.

East: The smallest of the three, this petrol station is located at the border with Germany. It can be used to get rides into Germany, but is less popular thanks to the good highway connections between France and Germany at Saarbrücken. Surprisingly you can even catch rides into Germany at the other side of the petrol station with locals who drive all the way to get some cheap gasoline.

France

Although most people have quite a negative prejudice on the French attitude towards tourists and foreigners; I personally rarely have had trouble with getting rides from French people. Yes, it does help if you are capable of speaking some basic words in French, but a lot of people are capable of talking in English and even if they don't, they still are friendly enough to offer you a ride anyway. Even if you don't like travelling with French people you are still in luck, because the French roads are crowded with tourists. Most of my long distance rides in France were with people that were on a holiday. The road network is quite ok, although some drivers are hesitant to drop you off the highway because they might have to pay for the tollbooth.

Switzerland

A very wealthy and international orientated country, I consider Switzerland being almost on par with Germany when it comes to openness towards taking hitchhikers. The road system is very good and you can cross the country within a few hours. The roads are paved with tourists going to Italy or Germany in the summer and to the mountains in the winter. With the last case you should be precautious on what rides you take, because being on a road going towards the cold mountains is the last place where you want to end up as a hitchhiker.

Just like with Luxembourg I like to elaborate on a certain important petrol station located just after Basel. This petrol station has a large shopping mall crossing the highway (believe me, you will be impressed) from which long distance rides can be fetched. Here people going towards the Ruhr gebied in Germany, Geneva on the border with France and Milan in Italy. Also this petrol station is the only place to get a proper ride towards Zürich and this petrol station should be used to travel from Zürich towards the south. I wouldn't recommend being picky on accepting rides here, but you get the picture.

Italy.

It is absolutely terrible to hitchhike through Italy. First off it is considered illegal, making people scarred to take you with them, even though the police doesn't mind you doing it. Italian people are in general not open to anything and their English is (especially in the south) very bad. Their sense of direction is inhumanely dreadful, so you need to make really really REALLY sure that your driver is going into the right direction. And even than it happens that they are driving the wrong way and are still convinced that they are on the right track. I also have to give a warning to all the ladies who want to hitchhike in Italy, because the men here are very 'intimate' to say the least. When I travelled with a female friend she was harassed at least three times in one week, and even once by one of our drivers. I would recommend to only hitchhike with foreign tourists and with Italian people who come across as intelligent and polite.

Poland

I haven't had too much experience with hitchhiking in Poland, I've only travelled from Berlin to Leba (close to Gdansk in the north) and back. But the experiences that I had were very positive. Polish people didn't hesitate for a second to offer me a ride, even though we couldn't communicate through a common language. I believe this mind set comes from the strong Catholic origin of the country which emphasizes on the collective good and helping each other out. Also outside of Poland I had amazing rides from Polish people who really cared about my wellbeing. The road network in Poland is in dire need of improvement, but thanks to the lack of sufficient highways makes it still possible to get rides next to roads which are used to travel from city to city.

Denmark

Danish people are very open minded about hitchhikers, but there is a huge problem in Denmark: taking hitchhikers with you in your car is forbidden. This law was passed in the 80's after reports of murders on hitchhikers in Spain, and unfortunately this law still holds to this day. Like I said, Danish people are very reasonable, but they are still hesitant on taking you with them. Besides this drawback, I think it is quite a pleasant experience to hitchhike through Denmark. There are a lot of opportunities to get rides to Sweden and even Norway because of the mutual respect both nations enjoy.

Summary

A short summary of the most important points discussed in this guide.

Preparation

- Get a good roadmap ([page 4](#))
- Plasticize a yellow A3 paper ([page 4](#))
- Look for a road where cars go towards the highway and are capable of pulling over ([Page 8](#))

Hitchhiking

- When standing next to the road: try to always make eye contact and be positive ([page 10](#))
- When standing at a petrol station: ask EVERYONE for a ride ([page 13](#))
- Always stay polite and keep on smiling, even if things don't go your way ([page 13](#))
- Always stay together with both your luggage and your hitchhike partner ([page 18](#))
- When you don't trust a person, than don't enter their car ([page 18](#))
- When there is drugs or alcohol in play than DO NOT enter the car ([page 18](#))
- Make clear agreements with the driver where he/she will take you ([page 18](#))
- Talk and share experiences with the people you meet ([page 19](#))
- Enjoy!