



How to be a  
*Dirtbag*

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## Intro

### “You Only Live Once”

It's amazing how many times people say that for totally meaningless things. People are deciding what type of cake to eat and say “you only live once”. It's said so often that it becomes meaningless, but it's actually the most meaningful thing, if you take it with a deeper meaning. If you could choose to do anything with your life, what would it be? More and more people every year decide that they want to “Dirtbag it.” Give up the normal grind of making money just to live for the next day in exchange for a life of travel and living simply. What is preventing you from doing that now? The answers may be a physical one. You might not have the money, or know how to build out a van, or live without bills. Equally the answer might be a mental one. The expectations that society puts on you might keep you glued in routine and habit and you don't know how to break out from those expectations.

This is not a book about being an aimless drifter, as some people probably view Dirtbags. Rather it's a book about how to get more out of your life through an abandonment of materialism in favor of real accomplishments that matter to you. It explains not just what a Dirtbag is, but how you can become one and just as importantly why you should become one.

**Special Note:** While much of this book is centered around rock climbing, it is not a climbing guidebook nor does it contain any instruction on how to rock climb or has anything to do with the technical aspect of climbing. In fact you could remove all references to rock climbing and still use this book. It is a guide book on how to have the most free time and work the least. In essence it's how to extend your road trip or turn your life into a permanent road trip. This is regardless of if that time is spent rock climbing or doing any other activity that you love. You'll find two types of chapters in this book. Instruction as to how and why to be a Dirtbag and

“Tales From the Road”, examples from my own life of Dirtbagging as to how that applies to real life on the road. This is the guide to being a Dirtbag.

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## Chapter 1

### What is a Dirtbag?

*Dirtbag (noun): A person so dedicated to a given activity, that they work as little as possible in order to do their chosen activity as much as possible. They give up work, money, a normal home, and live in the dirt (or in a pimped out hippy van with solar panels and a micro-fridge.) Often times associated with rock climbing, but also surfing, skiing and other outdoor sports. Although you can Dirtbag anything, even Scrabble.*

*Example:* "Dave is such a fucking Dirtbag, he doesn't shower enough but he rock climbed 300 days last yeah."

"Yeah man, a hero."

*To Dirtbag; (verb) Doing things in order to further a jobless existence where you pursue a passion as much as possible and work only for things you actually need. Normally not paying money for things you don't actually need. Any trick to save money and extend a road trip.*

*Example:* "What is your plan for camping in Yosemite this year?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about it, I'll just Dirtbag it."

Before you decide whether or not you want to be a Dirtbag, it would be good to know what one actually is. If you do any sort of outdoor sport, you have probably encountered someone "Dirtbagging it." What is a Dirtbag though? What separates them from a normal person just doing a sport? Well there are a few things that characterize a Dirtbag from just a normal person on a long camping trip.

One: A Dirtbag does not pay rent. From an outside view, people may view a Dirtbag as homeless or destitute. That is not that case at all. Being homeless for a Dirtbag isn't a matter of dire economic circumstances, but rather a choice that they have made. It's more than just the best way to participate in a sport or lifestyle, it is a lifestyle. Dirtbagging is a different way of living, a more simple way. Through a pure pursuit of rock climbing or any other given activity you give up a "normal" life of paying rent and working a job, replacing it with a radically different type of lifestyle.

Two: A Dirtbag Travels. A central characteristic of almost all Dirtbags is that they are nomadic. One of the reasons that they are living out of vehicles and backpacks and off of bicycles is that Dirtbags are always chasing the good weather, or going to explore somewhere new.

Three: A Dirtbag has their life focused around a specific activity. For most people this is some kind of outdoor sport. Rock Climbing, surfing, mountain biking, or old fashion ski bums. Technically you can Dirtbag anything though. Anytime a person is not paying rent, traveling and working as little as possible in order to do their chosen activity as much as possible, they are a Dirtbag.

A Dirtbag is a person who lives in the dirt (or, in a car.)

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### How I Became a Dirtbag

Originally I went on the road with one purpose - to get good at rock climbing. I hadn't intended to travel or live out of a backpack. I was simply taking some time off work after going and working a fishing season in Alaska to focus solely on climbing for a couple of months. I had an old Ford Bronco with transmission problems that I had packed away all my possessions in and was going to live out of until I could find a job in Bend, Oregon next to the iconic climbing destination, Smith Rock. I actually thought that I was doing something original. Like I was some sort of genius for thinking of the idea of living in a car next to a climbing area, being totally ignorant of the long history of people who had done the exact same thing before. I didn't know much about the climbing community at large. All my experience was just as a college student who went climbing with his friends. I didn't even own a tent. The only climbing trip I had done, to Smith Rock, I had stayed in a motel.

It was never my intention to end up as a Dirtbag, much less end up on a never ending road trip. When I first pulled up into Smith Rock I had never even heard the word in reference to climbing or sports before.

Life throws you funny curve balls though. The first curve ball was my car breaking down, almost as soon as I got to the Smith Rock Campground (called "The Bivy") parking lot. I didn't want to drain my bank account to replace it so I just gave it to a mechanic in town. This had a side benefit of basically cutting down all my spending and letting me stay in The Bivy for free (they charged per vehicle). The second curve-ball was the economic collapse of 2009. Bend was hit particularly hard by the recession, and their unemployment rate was 25%. Jobs were scarce.

Joel, a Dirtbag who lived in Smith Rock walked me through how the US unemployment system worked and I applied. That's how I funded my first stretch of joblessness, which ended up spanning two years. I continued to live in The Bivy and look for jobs in Bend. Once November rolled around it started to get cold and a traveling Dirtbag named Taylor gave me a suggestion.

“Bail man, go to Bishop.”

I had never even heard of Bishop before, but I packed up all my possessions (into two backpacks, like a total noob) and hitchhiked down there. I knew nothing about Bishop, but there like Smith Rock I found a thriving scene of Dirtbags. There was a virtually unending party in the pit, which was the primary Dirtbag scene in Bishop.

My unemployment checks just piled up in my bank account as I slowly cut away one bill at a time. I didn't cheat unemployment either. I was open to stopping at any of these places and work for a bit, but once the 26 weeks were over I had enough money built up that I stop even looking for work and just chased good weather, until I ended up with \$200 in Mexico. It was time to go find a job. So I took that \$200 and did the last logical thing I could think of. I hitched out to New Orleans to go to Mardi Gras.

After a misadventure there that ended up with all my stuff stolen, I decided to ditch the Mardi Gras plan and hitch back to Moab and ended up just getting a job. After I had a few thousand dollars saved up I got itchy feet and eventually just stuck out my thumb and the trip continued.

## Chapter 2

### How to Get Started

Now that you know what a Dirtbag is you are probably thinking, “Homelessness, where do I sign up?”

Giving up the material things in your life sounds like a big sacrifice, until you realize the massive benefits of exchanging those things for free time. One of the most important things is that it doesn't cost nearly as much to be on the road as it does to live “a normal life.” The idea of not having income for stretches of time is the first obstacle to get over in order to take your life back and realize the true Dirtbag within. This freaks people out because most people in our world are living paycheck to paycheck and without the next one they literally would not be able to buy groceries.

That is one of the very reasons to go on the road. When you are “barely scraping by” even being able to go on a week or two of vacation is expensive and difficult. That's because you have to pay all your bills back at home while out enjoying yourself. Even doing that is often times out of reach, much less the idea of going months or even years without working and just traveling. You don't have to win the lottery to do it - you just have to get rid of the thing that's been holding you back the most: Bills.

Getting rid of all your bills is step one of becoming a Dirtbag. There is one bill that is the ultimate enemy. When it falls, so fall all the rest: that is rent. The idea of getting rid of your rent is almost unfathomable to most people, but when you are living a life on the road staying in campground and living out of a van, rent becomes totally unnecessary anyway.

Rent is also a medieval concept, deriving from the concept of having a lord as being a serf. We even use the term landlord. Are you a free person or are you some sort of serf who has to be told how they are allowed to live inside of their own space? Renting makes you

subject to the whim of someone else's rules and you even sign a creepy ass contract that binds you to space you rent for six months or a year (called, I understand it, a lease.) Even a so called "good landlord" has too much power over you, as they can make you homeless at a moment's notice (or 3 days or 28 days depending on the state.) If your life is subject to a landlord, are you really a free person?

The first thing you will need to do is have a little supply of cash in order to get started. Now it probably won't have to be nearly as much as you'd imagine. That's because Dirtbagging is cheap. It's so cheap, probably much more than you would imagine. Once you kick the habit of rent and bills, your spending goes down to a crawl. There have been Dirtbags who have gone on massive road trips with only a few hundred dollars. Those are hardened crusty individuals, experienced at living on the cheap and living out of tents. To start with your expenses are probably going to be a little higher until your figure everything out. Okay you ask, don't be bullshitting me just tell me how much money to save up. \$3000 is a reasonable start and will last you way longer than you expect out on the road, although you can definitely start with less than that as well but with that much or more you are golden. Once you've gotten the hang of living on the cheap while traveling.

If you are one of those people living paycheck to paycheck, you maybe have lost your ability to quit your job because you have no savings. There are a few things that you can do in order to get the initial funding to start a long term road trip. There is one surefire way that has been used over and over again in order to fund the first road trip that ends up being the kick in the pants needed to start Dirtbagging. Living paycheck to paycheck you probably don't have that much savings. Most Americans don't and if you are one of those who find it impossible there is one surefire way to raise a bunch of quick money and that is: selling everything you own.

A purge of possessions serves a double purpose. The first obvious one is that it gives you a supply of cash to use to start traveling. Two, it gets rid of all the stuff you don't need. For some people it is a very difficult thing to get rid of their treasured possessions. After all, they have lived their entire lives as consumers, buying things that wear out, throwing them away and then buying more things. The decision becomes a lot easier when you take a larger view about what you want out of life. Picture your entire life, rather than just the moment you are in. What do you want out of life, a life that is full of "things" and possessions, or a life that is full of experiences?

A good thing to do if you just can't part with that old lamp or velvet couch is to talk to someone who has sold all their possessions and gone on the road. Although they are as diverse of a bunch of people as you could imagine, coming from every job background and every country, people who have done this have one thing in common - not a single one of them has ever regretted it. So are you ready to purge all your stuff? Good. Sell it all.

Many people, especially young people may take stock of their possessions and find that they own shockingly little. The thing about participating in consumerism is that you never really own anything that retains its value for long. The most expensive thing that most people normally own is their car, which loses value at an astonishing rate. Most expensive things that your average person owns, from electronics to furniture is the same way. That's why "consumerism" is an appropriate name, because you are in a cycle of consuming things and not really owning anything.

So if you are in a situation where even selling all your stuff (or mentally you are just not ready to let go of that oversize giraffe statue and set of crystal wear that you made four easy installments for) there is another solution and the real key for all Dirtbag's existence.

That is seasonal work. There are jobs all over the country that are temporary, provide some kind of housing and most importantly of all, end. Some Dirtbags fight forest fires in the

summer, or work on a trail crew or fishing boats in Alaska or the inevitable hordes that travel to northern California to work on the marijuana harvest. By leaving your apartment and full time job to go to an intense seasonal one that provides housing, you can quit your job and rent and still be taken care of for a little bit, and guarantee that you will be leaving that work with the chunk of cash that'll get you started on your first extended "not sure when it's going to end" road trip.

A secret to seasonal work is that it is actually easier to find than a normal job. Most people in the world are not nomadic. They are anchored in one place and therefore are looking for a year round job where they live for a sense of security and uniformity. Most people don't want a seasonal job, that's why there is actually a surplus of seasonal jobs, enough to keep you on a climbing trip as long as you want to.

Doing an intense seasonal job is hardly the only option. There are also plenty of less intense seasonal jobs in lots of climbing areas. Yosemite, for example, hires hordes of people to assist with the endless stream of slack-jawed tourists that flood the valley every year. Out in Moab, living out of a vehicle is hardly an impediment to getting a job to deal with their own tourist deluge. Any climbing (or other outdoor recreation) area that is also popular with tourists will have the same need. Many in small towns even have a labor shortage. The Internet makes it easier than even to secure one of these seasonal jobs before you quit your current one.

Another great thing about seasonal work that will help you extend your climbing trip is unemployment. America has a well-developed unemployment system, and if you work a seasonal job you may qualify to get checks well afterwards. The way that unemployment works is that if you are laid off of your job, you can collect money, normally 2/3rds of your previous income up to \$450 a week until you find another job or for 26 weeks. Everybody who works pays into this system, and are entitled to collect from it.

Now the exact requirements vary by state, but the fact that a job has an intentional end does not disqualify someone from collecting unemployment. The normal requirement involves either making a certain amount of money at your job (normally a few thousand dollars), or working for a certain length of time, normally two quarters or four months. That the job ends at a certain amount of time has no relevancy, nor is there any sort of requirement that you can't live in a van and go on a rock climbing trip afterwards.

You have to actively look for work, normally by applying for two or three jobs a week. What those jobs are is not specified, so it is an awesome time to apply for your dream jobs. There are amazing dream jobs all over the Internet which you have a low chance of getting. If you don't end up as the CEO of REI or an adventure guide in the Himalaya Mountains, you can just continue your climbing trip as long as you collecting checks and even save up money.

Many people will talk about how the struggles of living off of unemployment. The struggle is real if you are living in the city, paying rent and have all the expenses that go with it. If you are living in a van and have cut out all your bills, it's a small fortune. Which is how years of climbing trips have been funded by funemployment.

Some people will have moral reservations about signing up for unemployment after a seasonal job in order to go on a climbing trip, even if they meet all the qualifications and put in job applications. They feel like going on unemployment is mooching or somehow taking money from poor people who really need it. Neither statement is true.

Anybody who works pays into unemployment through their employer. Some will say it's the employers that pay, but that it's money that would go to wealthy business owners is even a better argument for you to take it. However it's money that would be paid to you if it weren't put in the unemployment pool. It's your money! You can't mooch off of your own money.

This time off between jobs is crucial for society in general, so that you are not just forced into a job that you don't want, and can find one that fits you. So you can fulfill that requirement, finding your next awesome seasonal job and take time to improve yourself as a human being by doing your real passion.

So either by selling all your possessions or by attaining a seasonal job, you've saved yourself up a little money. Again, it doesn't have to be all that much. You can start the next step ... moving into your car.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Living off \$3000 a Year

When my unemployment money ran out after two years, I did not want to give up the new lifestyle that I discovered. So I started getting random jobs around climbing areas and more importantly: living off of very small amounts of money.

For a four year length of time I would live off of around \$3000 a year. I lived a life with no car, no phone and no bank account. Part of what helped me live off of peanuts was just living out of a backpack. The backpack is a magic thing. Every possession that you accumulate, you have to carry around with you. You literally feel the weight of any consumer decision that you make. I never had food stamps and didn't receive any financial assistance. I was never hungry. In fact for a bit of time in Mexico I actually got kind of fat. My expenses were food, beer and climbing chalk.

Living off of \$3000 a year is actually not that difficult. It breaks down to \$280 a month, or around \$9 a day. People probably envision living off of cups of rice or some such nonsense. \$9 a day of rice is 20 kilos of rice. Can you eat 20 kilos of rice a day? You can actually eat really well off of \$9 a day. Let's break down some expenses.

A carton of eggs is \$2, so if you eat four eggs in the morning that's \$0.75. A bag of potatoes is \$3 or so for 5 lbs. Half a pound of potatoes is \$0.75. Add some spinach at \$2 a pound. So a third of a bag. So that's a full hearty four egg breakfast omelet for \$2.50 with potatoes. Make a couple of PB&J sandwiches for lunch. 10<sup>th</sup> of a jar of peanut butter (\$0.25), jelly (\$0.50) and four slices of bread (\$0.25). For dinner, a quarter container of spaghetti (\$0.25 cents), the rest of the spinach (\$1.25) and a quarter pound of cheese (\$1) and you'll have leftovers and be \$2.75 under your daily budget.

That's before all the numerous ways there are to hustle free food (see dumpster diving chapter). What about some of the other basic necessities? Say, clothing yourself. That's where the USA's amazing thrift market comes in. People in our consumerist culture throw away a ridiculous amount of clothing. Most of them are perfectly fine and is in fact, more than most thrift stores can even handle. The absolute best is to find when a bag sale is, that is when you can fill up a bag and get a whole wardrobe for \$5.

Another basic human need is shelter. When you are on an extended climbing trip like I was, you are going to be camping by default. I was camping and so were all my friends and pretty much everyone I met. You aren't in a city, of course, but rather out in the beautiful wilderness or national parks. When you are climbing you are generally totally removed from any sort of urban setting. I wasn't the dirtiest of Dirtbags that I met in that length of time either, nor was I the one living off the least money.

One young kid I met had no tent and was just finding the best cave to live in everywhere he went. Eventually he ended up with a bivy sack and tarp. I remember him setting it up in Indian Creek as a snowstorm rolled in with heavy wind. He claimed to have been warm that night. He told me that he would wait until he was down to his last \$35 and then hitchhike back to Maine and work in the summer. That was his third year on the road. I met a Canadian who was maxing out his six month Visa on \$800 and didn't seem to have any sort of struggle with it at all. My friend Michelle, who we called "The Dirt Barbie" for her blond hair, went up to Squamish with \$65 for the whole summer and made it last. No matter how much money you have, you will make that amount work for you.

I never got that broke while traveling. The time coming back from Mexico was the least, but normally I'd just start looking for a job when I was down to a certain amount of money. It never was that difficult. When I was on a strict budget and wanted to buy something (say climbing gear) I'd do it by finding a way to hustle free food. Every dollar under the \$9 budget

could be put aside towards something else. Sometimes I could go a week without spending money at all. These habits also made it so much easier to save money during the times I was working.

Living off of \$3000 a year sounds crazy to most Americans. That's only because they are used to a certain reality and can't envision any other way. However the average per capita income for the world is \$2920. That means that your average person in the world is living off \$3000 a year. If your average world citizen can do it, certain you can and I did for a long stretch as a Dirtbag. Those were perhaps the most fun years I ever had.

## Chapter 3

### Moving Into Your Car

To most people, moving into your car sounds like an act of desperation. In reality it can be an act of liberation. The main impediment to moving into your car is not a physical one, but rather psychological and social. This chapter will help you overcome the mental challenge to moving into a car, plus give you some nifty design ideas once you've decided that it's a good idea to take up the vanlife (which it is!)

Physically moving into your car isn't that difficult. The main challenge is paring your possessions down to little enough to fit into a vehicle. The amount that you have to get rid of depends on the type of vehicle that you are moving into. A truism in life is that whatever space you have, you end up filling that space up with stuff. If you live in a mansion, you'll end up with a mansion full of stuff. If you live in a studio apartment, you end up with a studio apartment full of stuff. If you live in a Honda Civic, you have a Honda Civic full of stuff.

Moving into your car can take a little bit of logistics, depending on whether or not you are moving into aforementioned Civic or a 22 foot long solar powered Sprinter van (the mobile mansion of the Dirtbag world.) Regardless you will have to decide whether and then how you want to "build out" your car, truck or van.

"Building out" a vehicle is the process of turning said vehicle into a living space. This normally involves tearing out the back seats of a car and turning it into a bed. For some this seems like an extreme modification. However the longer that you stay on the road, the more sense it makes. You'll probably find yourself doing one little thing at a time. Every day you are not sleeping in the backseat of your car, is probably a day that you have to spend in your tent. Your effort to maintain an air of respectability in keeping your backseats has left you living in a tent. That might be fine, but the first thunder or wind storm will have you ripping out those

back seats in no time. You'll probably find that the more you live in a vehicle, the more effort you end up spending building it into a tiny little home.

Now it's time to explore different build out set ups. The first and most basic, which can be used whether or not you have a car, truck or van is the same: a sleeping mat over a bunch of old climbing ropes.



This is the vehicle equivalent of a mattress on the floor of a studio apartment, a system familiar to many college aged males. It's easy, and it's lazy but you probably would be a little embarrassed to take a date back there. Even the crustiest of hippy girls may balk at your laziness.

That's where the building of "building out" comes in. You can start with the most basic of structures, good for car, van, truck or minivan comes into play.

**The platform:**



A platform is easy to build. It's just plywood on four legs, like the most basic of tables. If you are making a large platform consider adding two extra legs in the middle for support. Whatever bedding you want goes on top, and bam! You are sleeping on a bed once again. Platforms double as both bed and storage, as the platform creates a perfect space underneath, to store stuff. You can even get creative and make an adjustable platform.



You can use the lower space to put in whatever you want, mostly for storage, things like clothes or carabiners. So now you have a bedroom and a closet on wheels, so it's time to add the next space, the kitchen. A kitchen is key part of the eventual setup of having a whole micro living space.



A great way to have an instant kitchen is to buy a large propane tank and a standard two burner stove. You just need to dedicate a bit of space under your platform for the tank, and make a fold out shelf for the stove.

So now that you have bedroom, closet and kitchen started, you are really only limited by your imagination. Add a spice rack, or solar panels to have electricity anytime. If you are living in a van, or have taken on the project of building out a school bus, you can add a wood burning stove even. Get a Dutch oven for all your baking needs. You can personalize the van life for yourself fully. Talk to the plethora of people you'll meet in their vans and get ideas from them.

Far more difficult than building out a vehicle and turning it into a tiny house is explaining to the people in your life that you've decided to live in your car. Now this difficulty can vary greatly, if you were raised by hippies or surf bums then they might be fully understanding of you moving into a car. If you were raised by suburban yuppies, it might be a great deal more difficult to explain.

Society puts an inordinate amount of pressure on everyone to pay rent. For some reason, even though almost everybody has a perfectly good living space called a vehicle, somebody along the line decided that it's so important for you to give a sizable amount of your income to someone called a "landlord" that if you don't you'll face some sort of social ostracism and be treated like a bum. This fear is probably the number one thing that keeps people from moving into their cars and traveling, but you can conquer it with a little bit of understanding.

The best thing to do explaining this to your parents or other people in your life is to start slow. There is no need to get into all the gory details of living on the road. There is no need to say "Mother, society has been lying to me, my liberal arts degree turns out to be useless, and everything I've been told about how to be happy is a lie, so I'm going to live in the back of my truck and just rock climb."

A more tactful approach is to just tell them you are going on an extended trip to see part of the country for a while. Also can say that you are taking some time off of work to figure out your life, point out that you have savings for the trip. This approach is also the truth, phrasing it as just a long road trip is exactly what it may end up being. You might not like it, after all and end up back in the city.

If the more likely scenario happens and you end up on extending your road trip, that you had already explained to them that you are touring the country or on a national parks trip gives them a few months to get used to the idea of you traveling. Especially if you are updating them via social media and keeping in touch about the different things you are doing.

So if you decide to extend your trip, you just tell them that without giving specifics as to when (or if) your trip will actually end.

Once you have actually gone out on the road in your car, you will undoubtedly run into scores of #vanlife people out there. This will always be your best resource, both for ideas about the build out of your van and about how to best adjust socially to living in your vehicle, but it all becomes so much easier when you are actually doing it.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Hippy Bus Matt

I've seen every conceivable set up that people have built their cars into. I knew a 6'4" engineer who built out a minivan with a set up that allowed him to take a full out bath inside of it. I knew a hippy French Canadian who lived in a mini-school bus with his sister and girlfriend. There were bunk beds and other than that just a giant pile of stuff.

The best set up I've ever seen was a full size school bus. I was camping at Indian Creek by myself with no vehicle. I woke up one morning to find the spot for a car to be occupied by a full sized, painted school bus with four cats crawling around it.

"Ack! Hippies!" I thought to myself, thinking of a good excuse to drive them from my camp.

I envisioned annoying drum circles at night keeping me awake. Actually it ended up being just a single older climbing guide named Matt. We nicknamed him "Hippy Bus Matt."

At one point I ended up babysitting his bus and the four cats that lived with him. The bus had everything that you could possibly need. Multiple solar panels on top gave a constant strong power supply. There was running water through a water pump. A full sink, shower, beds, gear storage, wood stove and a ladder set up as a way for the cats to exit and enter on their own.

The space was used so well that it felt like you were in a luxury two bedroom apartment, rather a vehicle that could up and drive away at any time. Living in that bus for two weeks really proved to me that vehicle life does not have to be cramped and dull, but can be however your imagination wants it to be.





## Chapter 4

### Moving into your Backpack.

One real truism about traveling is completely counter-intuitive to everything that we have been told in our lives about traveling. What's true is: the less money you spend, the more fun you have. Perhaps the idea of moving into a vehicle isn't appealing for an entirely different reason than it is to the general population. Maybe you crave a real adventure, in the style of Jack Kerouac or the countless climbing legends of old who packed everything they own into a backpack, rope slung on top and just lived that way. There are thousands of people who have gone out and had care-free, worry-free, car-free adventures. Doing such only adds to the adventure. So if you are seeking excitement over comfort, consider doing at least one trip out of a backpack.

Don't get me wrong, a vehicle is definitely a convenient and nice thing to have. The idea of not having one is so foreign to Americans that to go without seems limiting or even impossible. On the contrary though, traveling without a car opens you up to meeting many people and ideas. The idea that you would go on an adventure without a car seems odd today, but only a short time ago in the US, during the 1970s and before it was common place.

If you extrapolate back further in time human being didn't start living in settled societies until 8000 years ago. Before that nobody accumulated any sort of wealth. Even then only a tiny amount of people lived in cities and even a tiny percentage of them accumulated any sort of wealth. It wasn't until a scant few hundred years ago that settled people passed up the population of tribal peoples. The majority of people live in the third world and have little in accumulated wealth. Probably not much more than would fit in a backpack.

So while being on the road in the US without a car may make you an oddity in the US in today's time, it connects you to the larger part of humanity and the way that human beings

have lived and continue to live in the much of the world. If all of those people can do it, you certainly can. It's only our society here and today that tells you it's unusual.

It also connects you to the history of Dirtbagging. John Muir, the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalist who was instrumental in founding the national parks system, would often head into the mountains with little more than a ruck sack and army blanket in order to explore and climb mountains in the Sierra Nevada of California.

“Back in the 70s, if you were a rock climber, you were a Dirtbag.” Said climbing legend Alan North. The same thing that was true about John Muir in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was true about most of the rock climbers in the 60s and 70s. They all lived out of backpacks or half broken down cars. John Bachar was the best American rock climber at one point in time and yet still traveled four dudes in a car, and had to bum around from time to time.

So while traveling without a vehicle may seem like an oddity for present day America, when you are moving into a backpack you are actually doing something quite normal for the vast majority of human history. You are also connecting to a large part of the history of climbing and other outdoor sports. The tradition of the “old school Dirtbag” who isn't living out of a Sprinter van continues on to this day.

The climbing world also makes it extremely easy to travel without a car. Compared to some sort of aimless wandering hippy, a climbing bum has clear destinations. Also there are a plethora of van dwellers hanging out in virtually every major climbing area. Conveniently the places that they are headed are other climbing areas so it makes it very easy to split gas and go where they are going.

The car-less lifestyle melds so well with the climbing lifestyle that often times you can even pick the place that you want to go next. Simply hang out in the area of your choice and if you are headed to another major climbing area then almost certainly someone else is headed that way. Going carless requires a certain type of open mindset when it comes to destinations

but if you keep an open mind you can end up some amazing places that you would not have even thought of on your own.

In this day and age of smart phones and constant connection to social media we are actually suffering from a loneliness epidemic. We are more connected to distant friends than we are to the people living around us. Living out of a tent in a campground forces you to be social. Very little in life is more boring than hanging out by yourself in a tent. For one thing it's probably cold out at night and you didn't backpack in loads of firewood. Campfires have been a beacon for friendly socialization for eons.

Going back to the time when humans first harnessed fire, we have met around campfires. The warmth of a fire almost compels friendship deep in our psyche, hearkening back to when to leave a campfire meant facing a cold and dangerous night. There is a natural bonding that takes place around one. A part of our brains that hearkens back to the time of our ancestors when being around a fire at night was a means of not just warmth, but entertainment, storytelling, and a place to form bonds. It is only within the last 100 years, with the rise of electricity that we broke that connection. Being without a vehicle means that you will spend many nights around campfires. It forces you to be social in many ways, with no van to anti-socially retreat to at the end of the day.

The climbing world makes living out of a vehicle easy in another way. In a city you would be viewed with some sort of social stigma for living out of your car. In the climbing world, Dirtbags are just another person on a trip. Many people will tell you that it's awesome that you are on the road living so minimally. It's romanticized in many ways.

In addition to the social benefits and general sense of adventure that comes with backpacking around, there is another huge plus to this type of old school Dirtbagging. In fact the very reason that climbers lived in tents for so long and surf bums just slept on the beach.

It's cheap. There is no other way to get such maximum value out of a trip as doing it via backpack. Your expenses are cut down to the bare minimum.

Another compelling reason to go on this kind of trip, at least once, is for a pure love of the outdoors. Being outdoors is one of the number one contributing factors towards good mental health. It's no surprise then, especially when combined with doing a sport full time, that the people you meet on long term road trips are some of the most healthy and sometimes (shockingly) well-adjusted people that you will meet.

A pure love of the outdoors is a compelling reason to spend as much time as possible outside. It's probably the number one reason that people will give if you ask them why they are Dirtbags. Backpacking ensures that you will spend most of your time outdoors. If you really love the outdoors, it really doesn't make any sense to work five days just to spend only your weekends outdoors. Whereas if you just move outdoors, it comes with a built in thrift to it that will let you spend most of your time enjoying nature.

While the climbing world makes it easy to catch rides from place to place and join in adventures or enlist people for your adventures, it is possible to set out on your own, even when living out of a backpack. That is by using a long neglected American tradition: hitchhiking.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Hitchhiking to Patagonia: The Start.

I had been living out of a backpack for a couple of years at this point. I had traveled to all the major climbing areas on the west coast, car-less and as a free person. Sometimes I got rides from other climbers, sometimes I hitchhiked. It all depended. Most recently I had been traveling with a friend, Dan who I had met in Mexico. We meshed well as climbing partners and traveling companions. In the summer of 2011 we were up in Canada, in the Dirtbag mecca of Squamish. We were living in the woods for the summer in an unofficial campground that was commonly referred to as “hippy” camp. We told stories and smoked pot at night. During the day we climbed the 1500 foot tall granite monolith called “the Chief.” I was the king of hippy camp, the king of the Dirtbags.

At night around the campfire I would entertain people with stories of true Dirtbagery: how I hitchhiked to Mexico and Mardi Gras. How I lived in an abandoned supermarket in Grand Junction, Colorado while I saved up a little money working a bullshit job, enough to get me through his summer at least. I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do when my funds ran out, which was going to happen soon.

It was one of those nights, all the other hippies had gone to bed and it was just Dan and I around the campfire passing a bowl of weed back and forth between us. During a lull in the conversation he asked me a question. The way he asked was almost too casual for the gravity of what the situation would turn into.

“Do you think it would be possible to hitchhike to South America?” He asked.

“Sure.” I said, without really putting any thought into it. “I bet it would be easy.”

“Easy.” I said. Those words actually came out of my mouth. “Easy.” I was basing that on my limited experience of hitchhiking in Mexico, which had been easy. In reality I had no

experience with South America. Dan had actually grown up in Venezuela, but had left when he was 18 and joined in the US army. He had never left Venezuela when he had lived in South America and had limited experience with the other countries there.

“Well.” Dan Paused. “Would you want to do it?”

It was like a shock of cold water that sobered me up almost instantly. My senses tingled at the idea. Did I want to hitchhike all the way to where the road ends? See how far south went. Was it possible?

“Yeah. I want to do it.” I paused myself. “But I’m broke as shit. I need to make some money this fall.”

The “yeah” was all that Dan needed. It was on. We were going. I started putting out feelers for work, got a hold of a friend in Humboldt County, where the weed comes from, and got my first job on a pot farm. In future years I would make my full living this way, but this year I worked just a few weeks, we had a deadline to be down in South America after all. We had to hit climbing season. So when I had saved up \$2000 I figured that was good enough and I hitched out of there to meet Dan in Las Vegas.

In Vegas I told him I was ready to go. Would \$2000 be enough to see me all the way to Patagonia and back? I wasn’t sure. I just figured I’d go down, and leave when I was down to \$500 and that would see me back safely. I had no idea if that were even true, but it was the plan I was going with.

Back in those days weed farms paid you in cash and I didn’t have a bank account. I was a true Dirtbag. No phone, no car, no bank account. I had no time to even open one up, so I did what was really my only option. I hid the money in my shoe. So I would travel all the way to South America with my money, all the money I had in the world, hidden in my shoe.

Hitching to Vegas was no problem. I hoped that that was a foretelling of what was to come. I met up with Dan, climbed a few days in red rocks. We started out with amazing luck

actually. Some friends of Dan were traveling down to Mexico to go on a sailing trip and they were going to give us a free ride down there. We hopped in their minivan, huge backpacks full of climbing gear and everything we would need to live for the next six months and away we went. It was just the start of an epic trip and what was going to follow would not, in any way, be described as “easy.”

## Chapter 5

### A Hitchhikers Guide to Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is a long American tradition that started perhaps as soon as the automobile did. In the 1930s and 1940s it was considered a normal thing to do, even for children. Hitchhiking peaked in popularity in the 1960s with the hippie movement, and has seen a decline since then especially falling off in the 1980s. Most people, when asked why they would never hitchhike or even pick up a hitchhiker normally cite safety.

This is despite the fact that the last decade was the safest in the history of the United States. So even though we've seen a decline in hitchhiking in reality it is almost certainly the safest time to hitchhike in the US.

Hitchhiking is an amazing way to get around. It's getting a free ride but more importantly it's getting a free window into someone else's life for a few minutes or hours or sometimes even days. It could even be possible that the divisions that we are seeing in American culture are made worse by the lack of hitchhiking. In the past when it was common to catch rides, you had to spend time in a car with someone who may have totally different points of views to you, and it really humanizes people from all perspectives.

For you will be picked up by people with every religious and political view imaginable. Republicans and Democrats, Christians, Atheists, Satanists who are afraid of the dark, a bus full of anarchists, A pimp from Louisiana, A WWII vet who hitched the same route in 1946, two Oregon hillbillies who lived in a van full of rifles.\* The thing that you'll learn is that all of these people are basically good friendly people who just want to live their lives. (Uh, except for maybe the pimp, that's not a very moral job. Please don't be a pimp.)

It's healthy to have exposure to people of different beliefs who are helping you out and who you are forced to have a friendly conversation with. This is something that was lost from young people when they stopped regularly hitching to get around.

Hitching is great for international travel for the same reason. Hitching through an area means that you really get to know a local culture. In addition to this you end up in places that you would never normally end up. You also talk to people that you never would have an in depth conversation by going with a conventional mode of transport. Hitchhiking just naturally lends itself to adventure in a way that little else does.

To contribute to the success of your adventure, there are a few basic pieces of information that will help. One of the most important things to know is that it's easier, almost always, to hitchhike on small highways as opposed to the big mega-interstates. This is a counter-intuitive piece of information that is crucial for hitching. There are several reasons that the small highways are better. Yes, the mega highways have more traffic, but it is illegal to hitch on the highway itself. So you are regulated to on ramps, so you end up being exposed to less people altogether. Even if you decide to hitch them, the traffic is too fast on the interstate itself anyway. Finally they drop you off in cities rather than smaller towns and cities are the bane of hitchhiking.

Slow traffic is one of two things that make an ideal hitchhiking spot. The other and most important of all is that there is a good place for the person to pull over. Without that, there is literally no way for the person to stop to pick you up. So a good pull over spot is above everything. Slow traffic is better because it gives people time, more time to think that you don't look like a dangerous hobo. Small highways are full of large turn outs and slow traffic.

Once you've found the best spot it's time to know the basic hitchhiker's pose. It's amazing how many people will try to hitchhike walking, facing away from traffic, thumb barely out and then are surprised they don't get picked up. Wait at your spot, don't walk. If you have a good

spot walking just brings you to a bad spot. Turn and face the oncoming traffic, smile a non-serial killery smile and hold your thumb out far to ensure they know what you are doing without a doubt. Try to look like you are a happy hippy out for an adventure and the least like a scary clown hobo as possible.

Also with traffic, less is often more. Less traffic means the drivers are more bored. It means that they have more time to pay attention to you and that without the other cars it is easier and safer for them to pull over for you.

Cities are hell. Chances are you will be dropped off in one at some point and it will not be a good place to hitch out of. Most traffic in a city is just going somewhere else in the city. Luckily cities normally have large affordable city bus lines. You can often time for a couple of dollars take these a surprising length out to the country. Go to a bus station and to a central bus terminal or ask a bus driver (or use your smartphone) to find out how far you can get on the city buses and restart your journey on a small highway.

The other thing about the small highways is that they go everywhere that interstates do. The US has an amazingly well developed road system and you can get everywhere on them. However, some of them do sometimes get truly remote and it's always good to get some sense of them from the locals or your last ride. That being said you can successfully hitchhike anywhere with enough patience, whether it's a city or a desolate mountain road.

Remember, your job while hitching is in the space of time that someone is looking at you, convince them without being able to talk to them, into giving you a ride. Bearing that in mind, make eye contact. So you've got a good spot and are looking like someone who a person would want in their car. You probably want to know how long exactly you'll have to wait for a ride. That's an impossible question to answer precisely. Some places are just easier than others. In Navajo country, it would be unusual to wait more than ten minutes. Other places, say those filled with old white people, the wait could be a lot longer. If you follow these

guidelines though, it would be very unusual to wait more than an hour just about anywhere. The stories of people who are stuck for days hitching, they are screwing up in one way or another.

Smaller highways are also legal to walk on, and if somewhere is legal to walk then it's legal to hitchhike there. It's an unfortunate misconception that hitchhiking is illegal. Hitching is legal anywhere that walking is legal. The only laws that apply involve blocking the roadway in order to solicit a ride, but being on the shoulder is perfectly legal.

Whereas people are confused about the legality of hitchhiking, by far the bigger confusion is over the perceived danger of it. This is largely a myth. By far the biggest danger to a hitchhiker is the same as to everyone else on the road, the risk of an auto accident. Why did people in the 1960s, a far more dangerous and violent time than today, (2017 had the lowest murder rate on record) feel that it was a perfectly fine way to get around? Well they were right. It hasn't gotten more dangerous, we have just become more paranoid. (Horror movies centered around a hitchhiker haven't helped, but those are fiction.)

Altogether American highways are one of the least likely places for a person to have crime committed upon them. If all the people driving on the American highway system were counted as a city, it would have by far the lowest murder rate in the US. Think about the logistics of attacking someone while being in a moving vehicle. It just doesn't make sense because either person can cause a crash at any time. You are in one of the least vulnerable positions. Consider also that taxi cabs, ride shares, public transport are all things that people do without a second thought and they put you in the same position of contact with a random stranger that hitching does, but they are just deemed socially acceptable for some reason.

"But anything can happen!" Some people will tell you. What are the chances that a murderer, in the mood to murder and with the capability of doing so is going to drive right by you while you are hitching? No better than one driving right by you when you are just walking

normally through your own neighborhood and kidnapping you right there. Being paranoid about hitchhiking is being paranoid about everything, when you extend the logic behind it.

That being said there are a few reasonable common sense precautions you can take to reduce your risk even more. Remember, just because someone stopped for you doesn't mean you have to get in the car with them. There have been women who have hitched across the country who just took rides from other women. You can turn down a ride whenever you feel like it.

Another good precaution is to be talking to give someone a text or call when someone picks you up. Do it loud so that your driver can hear and tell them that you do it to let people know where you are and who you are with. That lets the person know that they can't get away with anything to start with. It's also a good idea to have a little conversation with a person before leaping into their car. Start out just by asking where they are going (don't tell them where you are going right away) and if you get a weird feeling just tell them that you want a longer ride or are going in a different direction.

It'll also give you some time to make sure that the driver is sober, which can be one of the scariest things that can happen. Your chances of getting picked up by someone who is drunk or otherwise impaired is thousands of times greater than getting picked up by a serial killer. If it makes you feel safer, you can always carry pepper spray or something similar with you.

Hitchhiking is also the ultimate Zen activity. You have no control over when you get picked, you just have to clear your mind, stick out your thumb and embrace the wait. Waiting and keeping a clear mind is a great benefit to you. You really have no idea when, or by whom you'll get picked up by. Rather than taking active action, as is often human nature, you are waiting for something to happen, every ride filled with potential.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Epic of Cathy and Sterling (Part 1)

It was our first full day in Mexico. Our goal was audacious to say the least. We planned on hitchhiking all the way to Patagonia, the southern region of Argentina. To make the trip even crazier, we had to get there by climbing season. We wanted to be there by the first week of January and it was already November 11. That gave us six weeks to hitchhike the whole 10,000 mile trip. We weren't sure whether or not this was even possible. We weren't sure of much and we definitely had no idea about what was going to happen next.

We had been dropped off the night before by our American friends who were going just a hundred miles into Mexico to go on a sailing trip and our first night of the trip was one of the most uncomfortable of the whole trip. It had rained hard in northwest Mexico, an area that normally never gets rain. After spending some time in a bar for ex-pats (Americans and Canadians living in Mexico) we sheltered in the loft of an abandoned restaurant for the night. It had huge porch umbrellas we were hoping would keep us dry. They did not.

Nevertheless, by the morning we were in good spirits and started our journey with high hopes. Once we were started, all my anxiety about the trip that had built up over the last month faded away. We were now doing it. That's what happens with any major project that you start, any sort of traveling. Starting is always the hardest part - once you have started you are *in* the journey. No longer is it an existential threat to you. Instead you are living it. Anything you might have feared before has now just become part of your life.

Our first ride was an American, who was stoked (like almost everyone) about our trip. He even gave us \$20 to wish us well and remarked that it had been years since he had seen "Anglos" hitchhiking in Mexico.

We got a series of rides from locals. Everything was going smoothly and the rides were coming quick. Everyone was friendly and interested in us. We found ourselves in a small hamlet, one of the many in Mexico that spring up on their own to accommodate travelers on the Mexican highway system, which is divided into pay roads, which are as nice or nicer than the American highways and the Carreterra Libre, the free roads, which are of varying quality. Sometimes they are just as nice as the pay roads and other times they are an unwieldy mess of pot holes, speed bumps and chaos.

Dan and I were hitching the pay roads. The idea was that it would just be faster and probably a safer way to hitch. That's when we saw the ride that defined the first part of our whole trip. It was a 1979 ramshackle Toyota RV, the kind that has a small truck for the front. On the back of it was painted "ZigZag Express" and a New Hampshire license plate that read "peace."

"Look." I said to Dan, "New Hampshire."

Almost on cue the ZigZag Express pulled over and stopped for us. Dan and I ran towards the RV and the door opened.

A friendly looking older blond woman greeted me. She was a little overweight with crystal clear blue eyes that always seemed a little distracted.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

Her northeast accent was immediately obvious, "We are going all the way. We're going to Panama!"

We looked at each other in disbelief.

"We are going to Argentina!" Dan told her, as we boarded the ZigZag Express.

We then met the other passenger of the small RV. Along with Cathy was her adult son, Sterling. He was thin and had thick rimmed square glasses and had a thousand yard stare, as

though at some point he had seen something horrible in his life. He spoke in a strange monotone voice that was a little off-putting.

The RV started up and Cathy asked us, “Are you really going to Argentina?”

“That’s the plan.”

Now one would think that getting picked up on the first day by people going almost half the distance would be amazing luck, in many ways it was. Cathy and Sterling were wonderful, kind people who drove us thousands of miles for free.

However we quickly discovered that despite their audacious plan to drive from New Hampshire to where the road ends, they were not experienced travelers by any stretch of the imagination. Their combined travel experience was this: Cathy had left the country once, having spent a week in an American style resort in English speaking Belize. Sterling had spent a couple of weeks in Spain, backpacking around before quickly being overwhelmed by the experience and getting flown home by his mother. Their total Spanish vocabulary was two words – “hola” and “gracias” - both of which were only known by Sterling.

By comparison, my travel companion for the trip was Dan. He was an American who had grown up in Caracas, Venezuela when it was the murder capital of the world. His parents were American missionaries who taught English and he was fluent in English and Spanish equally. At 18 he had joined the US army and done two tours in Afghanistan as support for Special Forces, where he had come under fire and been under threat of IEDs. He was broad and muscular with a long beard and eyes so blue that they stood out even in the whitest parts of America, much less the Latin American countries we were going through.

Then there was me. I was already a seasoned traveler. I had spent the last three years on the road with no car as a hardened climbing bum. People had taken to calling me “King of the Dirtbags” based on my uncanny ability to live on small amounts of money for long stretches of time. I had logged thousands of hitchhiking miles, from Alaska to Mexico. Although compared

to Dan my Spanish was shit, I had studied it in high school and had managed to hitch around Mexico the previous year by myself. That was where I had met Dan, in Potrero Chico.

It was very quick that this gap in travel experience started to show. On the first day we could not have been happier, despite the fact that Cathy and Sterling said they wanted to be in Panama by Christmas (much slower than we planned on traveling) they flew down the Mexican pay roads at top speed that a 1979 Toyota Dolphin will go. We were making excellent time and we thought that maybe they had just overestimated how long the trip would take them. The Mexican pay roads, like American highways, bypass towns and cities and give a straight shot to where you are going.

The second day was our first hint of trouble, when Sterling who was driving at the time decided to try out the “Carretera Libre.” The free roads of Mexico, even for those Americans used to driving in foreign countries can be a major problem. Their maintenance is spotty at best, they head straight into the maze of Mexican towns and cities where the signs directing your back to them are poor if they exist at all (not that Cathy and Sterling could read them anyway.) They are also covered in “topes” the Mexican speed bumps which are inexplicably abundant on the Carretera. For a reason that we couldn’t figure out, perhaps because they we just used to driving in America, Cathy and Sterling seemed to never see the topes.

WHAM! Hitting a vicious tope at 45 miles an hour in a 35 year old RV is an experience I could do without. WHAM! Every tope would send stuff (or us!) flying around the tiny RV. WHAM! Repeatedly smashing into topes didn’t seem to make them easier for Cathy or Sterling to spot them. WHAM!

Mexican roads are not made for RV travel to put it mildly. Cathy and Sterling were also not ready for the Mexican roads. The first city that we hit took us hours to get out of. Eventually either Dan or I positioned ourselves near the front seat so we could be a constant

guide, warning them about topes and reading the road signs for them. It became quickly exhausting. Would it be a faux pas to just ask them if we could drive?

There were other problems that started to emerge as we entered day two with Cathy and Sterling. They seemed constantly confused by exchanging currency and I don't think they ever got a hang of it. Dan always had to accompany Cathy into banks to help out. It was that second day that Cathy breached a pressing subject with her.

"I need to get some pot!" she declared. "I'm not used to going this long without it."

She had left her weed at the border 48 hours ago and was fiending for it already. At our first major stop at the famous beach of Playa Encantado, Cathy started asked random Mexicans in English where to find some weed. One sketchy looking fellow said to follow him and she was about to when Dan and I stopped and told him to just bring it here if he had some. We never saw him again. We assured her that we would find some for her.

Not far away was the beach town of Sayulita, a surf town that Dan had previously lived in for a month the winter before. It was filled with ex-pat Americans and is extraordinarily safe. People leave their cars running with their keys in it with no fear of theft in Sayulita. It was a logical place for us to find weed and within thirty minutes of arriving, we bought a huge bag for her for \$20 that would last all four of us (Cathy generously shared her weed with us) for the rest of Mexico.

We spent three days in Sayulita, surfing and hanging out on the beach. Sayulita is a town that exists because of the surfing. Almost half the population are foreigners, mostly from the US and Canada. The other half are people who work for those foreigners or in the tourism industry. From surf instructors, high end artists, to people who wander the beach selling candy or food to people lounging in the perfect sand. This was a Mexican experience that Cathy and Sterling were a good fit for. One where they could speak a lot of English and have constant access to American style amenities and restaurants. At this point, despite the

occasional hiccups of getting lost and Cathy trying and failing to use her MasterCard in rural Mexico (“I thought they take MasterCard everywhere!” She remarked), we were still happy to be with them. That’s because the true craziness hadn’t even started.

## Chapter 6

### Where to be a Dirtbag

This is one of the chapters that will be rock climbing focused, because of the experience of the author. All the other sports and activities that you can do have their own “circuit” of popular areas. However nothing in this guidebook remarks on the quality of the actual climbing in the areas. That will be left to climbing book authors and people to argue about on Facebook. Instead this is about the friendliest, easiest, most fun or just the places with the most Dirtbags in them. This list of places is subjective and incomplete. However it is an attempt to put together places where you can go with or without a partner, which are the most fun to hang out in outside of climbing, and are a good starting point towards going to other locations.

The ultimate answer to where you can Dirtbag is anywhere. There are thousands of places you can enjoy outdoor activities. Anywhere you want to go is a potential place to Dirtbag. Often you’ll find yourself in many unexpected places. Many career Dirtbags find themselves having visited over a hundred different areas. However to simply say “anywhere” is a cop out answer. If you knew all the best places to Dirtbag already, you wouldn’t have bought this guide. No list of places could possibly be complete but these places are simply a good start spot, all places that you can go on your own and popular places often serve as a launch point to adventures to more remote and obscure locations.

#### **Yosemite Valley, California**

Yosemite is in the home and heartland of North American Dirtbagging. It’s where it all started. From the moment that John Muir laid his eyes upon it and declared “The mountains are calling and I must go.” That same feeling echoes today as countless dirt-poor rock

climbers and mountaineers have flood into Yosemite every year. There is something about Yosemite that has a mystical, almost magnetic quality to it. That's why some people dub it "The Center of the Universe."

The center of that center is Camp 4. Countless Dirtbags have crossed through those hollowed grounds, but as during peak climbing season Camp 4 tends to fill up by six in the morning, an equal number find themselves in "Camp 4 ½" the nickname given to the endless caves, flat spaces and boulders close to Camp 4 where people who couldn't make it in (or want to stay longer than the ridiculous seven day limit on camping) end up crashing.

The same magnetic drawing power that brings in climbers, base jumpers, high-liners and other adventures draws in another sort of person - tourists. An estimated four million annual visitors come to the park every year, which means the climbers get dwarfed by the fat people in bad khaki shorts and endless Japanese tour buses who travel around in packs following a leader holding a flag.

This mass of people creates unique opportunities and unique challenges to the Dirtbag who is there to live on the cheap. Some will hate the stress, but as one young Dirtbag can be quoted "If I can get to Yosemite, I know everything will be okay because I can live for free here indefinitely." So if you are up to the challenge Yosemite can be one of the most rewarding places to Dirtbag.

The first challenge to overcome is the aforementioned strict seven day limit (from May 1-September 1) on camping. Keep in mind this is not one of those deals where you can do seven days, leave the park for a day and then get a new seven days. This is seven days in the entirety of the spring and summer season. The rationale given by the authorities is that everyone should get a chance to enjoy Yosemite so they need to rotate people in and out of Camp 4. The problem with that rationale is that the people don't leave after seven days - they just hide in one way or another, which is what you'll have to do.

The first trick to being able to stay in Yosemite long term and avoid hassles is one of the best if you have a national parks pass and a vehicle you can sleep in, which is just to make the short drive to El Portal every night and pull over in one of the many parking lots sleep, and then reenter the valley. The cost in gas is actually less than the cost of staying in Camp 4 for a day and it's legal and hassle free. A major downside is that you are not going to be able to drink in Yosemite, where beer is always cold and available in a store and there is a heavy social environment. If all those factors fit you, then this is a great option.

Sharing a tent and registering it to one person is another common way to get around the system. You might be able to talk a friend who isn't staying in Camp 4 into waiting in line for you to give you their days. Bribe them with a climbing trip or cold King Cobra, the official malt liquor of Yosemite.

Camp 4 ½ is your final option, it's especially good if you are there without a car. There are a million bandit camping spots, find one that is absolutely hidden from any searching rangers and hunker down there. Just be careful not to be caught as it's a whopping \$175 fine for out of bounds camping. However the boulder fields in Yosemite are an infinite maze and nobody is really looking for you. There are different caves that people lived in for years. It's up to you to find your own.

How did the young climber who declared that he could live in Yosemite for \$0 do it? Well Yosemite is not just rocks and rivers unfortunately. Yosemite Village is a small city set up for the convenience of the tourists. They have desecrated the Valley with restaurants and shops to buy tee shirts and bullshit in. It's possible to "skim off the fat of the land." Food, shelter and water are your basic needs in life, you have your cave for shelter, and there is water fountains everywhere and also fern springs, a natural spring with the best tasting water on earth. So now your goal is to get free food.

So the long valley tradition is to swoop plates in the lodge café, where tourists often don't finish their food and lazy underpaid bussers are disinterested in clearing the plates all that fast. That is really only a well-known example of how to get free food in Yosemite. There are so many little tricks and games that you can play in the valley to get free stuff, coffee, sodas, even clothes and food that a whole book could be dedicated to it. This is just a starting point - the best advice is to just go. Once there all will slowly become clear.

### **Joshua Tree, California**

Winter is a rough time in the United States for the Dirtbag. If you are a ski bum, winter is the high point of your season, but for a climbing bum it's necessary to migrate south. One of the best places where you will find tons of traveling climbers, adventurers and just plain hippies is the desert wonderland of Joshua Tree.

Joshua Tree is winter Dirtbag paradise. It is no coincidence that Dr. Seuss lived a mere two hours away, as he is the apparent architect of the place. It's a truly psychedelic landscape. Although a national park like Yosemite, it is devoid of hotels, restaurants or even running water (bring in what you need) The only real challenge you will have is finding a spot in one of the four campgrounds in the park, but there are always other options as well. To put it mildly, it is a more relaxed place than the Valley. Perhaps some of the hippy vibe of the local community, made up of many artists leaked into the climbing community. If the equivalent of the famous JT space station (you'll know it when you get there) existed in Yosemite, rangers would be all over it in an instant.

It only takes a moment of staying there to discover that Joshua Tree is all about the community there not just about getting high in the desert. There are some traditions in Joshua Tree (along with an awesome New Year's party) that go back decades. Missions like "The

Chasm of Doom” or the “Stonemasters Descent” have little to do with rock climbing, but make up amazing party adventures for the long winter nights.

It is also a good launch point to explore other areas in the southwest. You can find partners for trips out to nearby Arizona, also warm in the winter or the mythical big wall Trono Blanco down in Baja California is only five hours away. Every year it’s an amazing trip waiting to happen.

No matter where you go in the US in the winter, it’s going to have some cold days and freezing nights, that’s why there is always an option to go further south...

### **Potrero Chico, Nueva Leon, Mexico**

Potrero Chico is a Mexican Dirtbagging haven. Where the living is cheap and there is no struggle, no hassles, and the awesome total freedom of Mexico. People call America the land of the free, but consider what would happen if you lit a fire on your own porch in many places in America. You’d have your own neighbors calling the cops on you in most places. In Mexico your neighbors would show up to drink and party.

Even if you go down to Mexico on a strict budget you can live exceedingly well. Although you can go camp in the canyon for free, most people end up staying in one of the privately owned campgrounds right outside of the Canyon for \$5 a day.

But wait, what about the rule to not pay for camping? Well that really depends on what you are getting for the money. When you compare what you get for that \$5 to what you get in the US, there is no comparison.

For \$5 you get a campground with a full kitchen, oven, pool, gym, electricity, Wi-Fi. It’s a glam camping experience. It may not sound like a very Dirtbag thing to promote, but you can live it up on Potrero Chico complete with eating a Mexican hamburger the size of your head for the same cost daily of being homeless in the United States.

You can stay wherever you want though. In Mexico nobody is going to tell you that you can't camp somewhere. Public land in Mexico is still exactly that, meant for public use. In the United States too often we charge fees to stay on the land that we own.

The great winter weather is also a major perk of being down there. It's genuinely warm most days. However never make the mistake of going down with only shorts, because it can get cold in Mexico! There is always one man with no pants who goes to Mexico. Don't be the man with no pants!

One thing about Potrero Chico is that it is a huge party scene, beer is cheap and plentiful. If you return five empty bottles of beer, you get one back. Mexico over all is an awesome country with tons of other places to go. Potrero Chico is an easy starting point to go by yourself and meet someone to travel with you to one of the lesser known areas or make a trip out to the coast for a quick surfing trip. All of it in the amazing warm weather of the Mexican winter. In Potrero Chico it is also fully possible to get by only on English, but traveling outside this gringo paradise is necessary if you want to really experience the wonderful language, culture and have a more genuine experience which is highly recommended.

### **Moab, Utah**

Enough cannot be said about the climbing around Moab. However the Dirtbag scene is even better. There are a slew of ways to live for real cheap out in the desert. Out beyond the range of cell phones, is a series of campgrounds near Indian Creek. This is the main hangout of Dirtbags around Moab, scruffy desert monkeys living out of vehicles and tents.

Moab is about way more than just rock climbing. Mountain bikers flock there from everywhere, Canyon lands is the capital of canyoneering, it has the largest base jumping community and highline community in the US. This is all in a town of 3000 people. This outdoor tourism also makes it easy to find a part time job, where they definitely won't mind if

you are living out of your car or a tent. It's sandwiched between two national parks. The town itself is pretty cool, as evidenced by the fact you can't go into a grocery store without people shopping with huge backpacks on and nobody bats an eye.

Far out into the desert is where all the real desert monkeys live, having huge parties and almost unrestricted freedom. In addition to all the world class climbing, the fact that you camp beyond cellphone service ends up as a big plus to bonding people together. The only real major downside to Moab is that beer you buy in a supermarket is 3.2% and because you are in Utah, marijuana is highly illegal.

### **Squamish, British Colombia**

Summer is a magical time for traveling, because there are so many areas that you can go to in the summer time that are just not possible to enjoy any other time, either due to intense cold or in the case of Squamish, constant rain. The summers become magical and likewise untold numbers of outdoor athletes make the pilgrimage north. No place does the drama of the mountains, ocean and forest all collide in one place. Also no other place has the sheer numbers of van dwellers come together in a single place. It becomes a small city of Dirtbags.

If you spend even a single day bored in Squamish it is your fault. Even hanging out by the picnic tables in the Chief campground (one of many, many climber hangs) guarantees that something interesting will happen there. Every year there is a rumor that there is going to be a Yosemite style crackdown on the intense numbers of people camping for free. However unless you have the massive numbers of law enforcement officers that Yosemite has, chasing 1000 van dwellers from place to place just isn't realistic. So instead Squamish goes with an acceptance model of dealing with their Dirtbags.

This goes all the way back to the first ascent of the grand wall going up the Chief. The two young men who were doing it were just living in their tents at the base of the wall, and it was

the town that rallied behind them in the 1960s. Squamish's blacksmith even made them custom pitons and people brought them food and supplies to get them to the top. That tradition of cooperation continues.

The great thing about the climbing community is that if you are warm and welcoming to traveling climbers in your home town, when you go on your own trip you can expect the same thing.

### **Lander, Wyoming**

Speaking of being friendly to Dirtbags and summer, welcome to cowboy country in Lander, Wyoming. In Lander they will literally let you camp in the city park for free. Not as some unofficial policy of tolerance, but they actually have a sign that says "camp in the city park for free." You can either car camp, or just set up a tent on the grass. You have to move your tent every three days to not kill the grass, but there is apparently no limit on staying in a vehicle.

In Lander there is never a sense that you don't belong. It is also host to the International Climber's Festival in the summer, a mountain bike festival, and a number of other events. During the climber's festival the bank gave away free beer that you could drink inside of it. That's some Wyoming shit right there.

The continental divide, the mother of all North American treks, crosses close to Lander, bringing in hungry eyed wild looking backpackers. Yellowstone national park and the Grand Tetons are both close. NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership Society owns three gigantic buildings in town, although most of their students end up camping at city park for some reason. In town there are bars, restaurants, a gym and a bakery that are all owned by former Dirtbags that settled down in Lander.

Outside of town there are hundreds of miles of untouched, unpopulated wilderness complete with the occasional Grizzly bear named Waffles. So be bear aware, but the chance to be in real wilderness makes Lander a must do summer location.

### **Smith Rock**

“We had to build this campground.” A Smith Rock Ranger explained, “The climbers were just not leaving.”

So they built the parking lot Dirtbags a campground and that’s how The Bivy was born. Smith Rock is the example that all state and national parks should follow. Camping at The Bivy is 5\$ a car, it has heated bathrooms and showers, electricity and there was even a short time where there was Wi-Fi in The Bivy. All of that and Smith Rock turns a profit enough that it supports other state parks all over Oregon.

It has 600,000 visitors a years all managed by a staff of two full time and one seasonal ranger plus volunteers. Everything runs smoothly and a survey of Smith Rock users 99% of people would recommend it to a friend and 98% enjoyed the park. This is all in a place with the best climber-ranger relations in the US. The Rangers will pick you up hitchhiking and it’s not surprising that climbers will volunteer to change the self-composting toilets. So the next time that someone tries to justify \$15 a night for minimum facilities, send them up to The Bivy and show them how it’s done.

The other fun thing about The Bivy is the people who come through. They make it so easy to live at Smith that some people just don’t leave. Enter legendary Dirtbag Joel Sprenger who lived at the Smith Rock Bivy for five years. He would sleep in the heated shower rooms in the frigid cold months of the winter. His first year there he explained this all to a community college class that he was taking in Bend to a rather non-comprehending group of fellow students, who’s lives just followed the routine of normal society.

Technically Smith has a 14 day camping limit, although it is not enforced. During those first years the rangers would try to kick Joel out of the park, but like the early climbers in the parking lot that inspired the building of The Bivy, Joel just didn't leave. He'd be gone for a day or two then just be right back in The Bivy. Like with everything else, Smith Rock used a cooperative method to deal with Joel. They made him an official volunteer and used him to keep track of what's going on in The Bivy. It saved a hassle for everyone and everybody stayed on good terms. Joel even made it into the introduction they gave to new rangers. It basically went "Listen, there is this guy who likes to live here, it's easier for us if we just let him stay."

That's a lesson that all law enforcement could learn. If someone is not causing any major problems, it's just easier and makes common sense to let them stay.

### **Red River Gorge, Slade, Kentucky**

Miguel Ventura may be the only person in the U.S. who found a way to become rich off of Dirtbags. He runs the famous Miguel's Pizza where he charges people 2\$ a night to camp in the sprawling yard of his pizza place. There is Wi-Fi and a hangout spot. Although he himself is not a climber or former Dirtbag, he started out selling a little climbing gear out of his ice cream shop at the time and things just snowballed from there until Miguel's became the best Dirtbag hang out east of the Mississippi.

Keeping prices low and giving just the services that young climbers on extended trips want (a place for a tent and Wi-Fi) it makes it easy to stay at Miguel's for a long stretch of time. It also has to be the only pizza place in all of Kentucky where most of the clients have six pack abs. The people there are so ridiculously fit that locals passing through would look and wonder "what is in that pizza?"

While you can Dirtbag anywhere (people live in the parking lots of climbing gyms) these places all have a few things in common. You can confidently go by yourself, as they have tremendous access to other nearby places, and are fun and interesting places to spend rest days. However it merely scratches the surface of the potential and is only meant to be a starting place on your journey.

### **Mt. Arapiles, Australia**

While the rest of the places listed here are in North America, a special note has to be made for Mount Arapiles, a couple hours west of Horsham. Mt Arapiles is the dirtiest of the Dirtbag places. It is so easy to stay in Mount Arapiles for giant lengths of time with no money, which many people just do.

Australia doesn't have trash compactors because they don't have bears. Kangaroos have not been able to figure out how to break into dumpsters, so in Mount Arapiles a few dumpsters in a nearby town feed dozens of Dirtbags there. If you are under 30 get yourself a work holiday visa, which lasts a year, otherwise a standard tourist visa is 90 days. Once in Arapiles, it's hard to even spend money. You don't even have to leave the campground except to buy luxury items. Remember to supplement your diet with a vegetable from time to time, otherwise you may end up with scurvy, as befell at least one of the hardcore Dirtbags living indefinitely out of there in the 1970s.

Just beware the goon!

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Epic of Cathy and Sterling (Part 2)

Chain smoking weed with her son, believe it or not, did not improve Cathy's driving or Sterling's ability to get lost. Following our visit to Sayulita Sterling started to bizarrely turn off the main road, convinced that some random dirt road would lead to the next hidden Sayulita. Mostly they would quickly become too choppy for the RV to travel on. Once it ended in a fence with about thirty "no trespassing" signs on it.

"We need to get the fuck out of here now." we told them.

More than a week into traveling with them, lost in a Mexican city and going around in circles, Sterling remarked "I don't mind getting lost," - WHAM as we hit a tope. It was after that comment that Dan and I started discussing leaving Cathy and Sterling.

We were traveling slower than we wanted to now, and their lack of travel experience and instincts were wearing on us. They would frequently leave the ZigZag Express unlocked when they shopped (All our stuff was in it too!) and we were worried about what would happen if the 40 year old RV broke down in the middle of Mexico. We would almost certainly have to help them find a mechanic, if there was even one who knew how to work on it.

The stress of dealing with them caused me to drink even more than usual. As we pulled into a town for the night, Dan and I would go out and find a bar and drink with locals. They were universally enthusiastic about our trip and laughed at our misadventures with Cathy and Sterling.

One of these times we stopped in a small rural Mexican fishing village. Cathy said she was going to make pasta dinner for everyone and Dan and I went out drinking. After an hour we returned to the where we left the RV, only to find the ZigZag Express, with all our stuff inside of it, missing.

Momentary panic set in. At this point into traveling with Cathy and Sterling, we knew that anything could have happened. We had seen them leave their RV unlocked and wander off, be gullible and often confused by Mexico. We immediately did the only thing we were capable of doing, which is search through the town. We ran up and down the streets, still buzzed from drinking in a slightly frantic search. Luckily, they had just driven to the other side of town.

We asked about their change of location, "Uh, is everything okay?"

"Uhhhhh, um, not really." Cathy replied, "I was cooking pasta and suddenly the water caught on fire! Sterling was coming around the corner with the fire extinguisher and I threw the burning pasta out the door and hit him! He caught on fire, then this guy came out and beat on the flames and that's why we moved over here. That's his house, he's helping Sterling."

Dan and I stared at Cathy for a moment and then at each other. I knew he was thinking the same thing as me. How the fuck does water light on fire? My immediate thought was that it had something to do with the propane in the RV - this thing was more than 40 years old. We were too drunk and too tired to do a proper investigation at the moment. So we just looked at each other and then went to find a place to sleep. As we often did, we just climbed on top of an unoccupied building. Climbing is the instinct of rock climbers, and also nobody is going to find and bother you on top of a building. Indeed we were never bothered on our whole trip south.

We were amused to find in the morning that the building we had slept on was the town jail. Once again Dan and I discussed potentially leaving Cathy and Sterling. We did not come to Mexico to be put in danger by a 60 year old antiques dealer from New Hampshire.

Despite our growing concerns, two days later we were still with Cathy and Sterling. The occasional craziness (while driving we hit trees with the sides and top of the RV, hit a dog, were rear ended, Cathy bribed the police, Sterling drove without a driver's license) it was easy to stay with them. For one thing, they didn't want us to leave. Perhaps the creeping realization

that they were in over their heads was starting to dawn on them. So Cathy had taken to feeding us and we were also smoking out of her weed supply.

We pulled into a gas station, and the two gas station attendants were cute young girls so Dan and I decided to go over and say hi. While we were talking to them, I perchance glanced behind me, only to have my eyes widened as I saw flames shooting out of the window of the RV.

“Holy shit!”

We ran back towards it, just in time we stopped right before the door, avoiding Sterling’s fate as on cue Cathy tossed flaming liquid out of the door. We stomped it out on the burning grass.

Cathy bemoaned, “There must be something wrong with the water in Mexico.”

Now it’s true that you can’t drink most of the water in Mexico, but we knew it was not flammable. Sober and in the light of day we decided to get to the bottom of this, before we all went up in flames.

“Oh well” Cathy declared, “I’ll just start over.”

She grabbed a bottle.

“Wait” Dan said, “That’s not water, that’s our white gas.”

We stored our white gas for a WhisperLite stove in a clear plastic container. It was however, marked with a large X and said “fuel” on it. How Cathy could have started cooking with white gas, and not immediately smelled it is a mystery to me. Another thought immediately dawned on me - she hit her son with flaming white gas.

**To be Continued ...**

## Chapter 7

### International Dirtbagging.

Eventually wanderlust may force a person out of North America. Many people cite costs as a reason for not traveling. However when you Dirtbag a trip overseas just camping and outdoor adventuring, traveling is often cheaper than just staying at home. By international standards, the United States is an expensive country. So if you plan on going south of the border, all your basic necessities instantly become cheaper. To Dirtbag overseas normally means to spend a whole season there, as long as the weather is good or until your visa runs out. Whole other hemispheres mean that you can have the pick of your seasons, depending on what you want to do.

But wait!? Isn't international travel too expensive to do on a Dirtbag budget? Fear not, you can travel the world for months at a time and spend no more money than you do in the US if you know a few things about international travel.

There are people who go to Mexico, stay in an American-style all inclusive resort. Even though this is in a different country, I would barely count it as traveling. The experiences that you have in something like this is barely different than what you could have in the US. So what was the point of even going overseas? For the cost of one of these vacations, you can spend months overseas.

In South America, Asia, India there is no reason to stay in any sort of resort ever. You are not having a cultural experience, you are not saving money. If your goal is just to party and waste money, not interact with locals at all, not see anything beyond a preplanned tour in English, what is even the point? You can do all of that at home. So wheel of fortune can keep their \$7000, five day vacation. Take that money and rather than be somewhere for a week, go and *live* somewhere for months.

The first expense that you are going to run into in international travel is the expense of a ticket. It is dramatic how much you can bring that ticket price down if you have a flexible schedule. There are many sites that let you search for tickets via the cheapest month to leave and then you can find the absolutely cheapest day. You can only take proper advantage of this as a Dirtbag, where your free time is your resource. You can use that to find really unbelievable deals. If you saved up enough money for a cut-throat priced ticket you can go to one of these places for long enough that the low cost of living will off-set those expenses. Extended stay in the third world is both easy and cheap and most importantly of all, super fun.

Even traveling in the first world internationally can be a lot cheaper than you would imagine. For one thing other first world countries don't have the same idea of camping fees that the US does. In Australia for example, there are free backpacker campgrounds anywhere there are backpackers, with toilets and garbage removal. In Europe, where there isn't the culture of silly lawsuits that we have in the US, landowners are infinitely more likely to let people camp on unused land than in the states. In the Scandinavian countries (excluding Denmark), you are allowed to camp on any private property as long as you are at least 100 meters from the person's actual residence. It's only in the US that there is this idea that money has to be exchanged for everything, even living in the dirt in a tent. For all the talk in the US of being the land of low taxes, there seems to be a constant tax on even living. In other countries there is not nearly the stigma of living without paying rent.

Also many countries do not have the practice of using a trash compactor, and like the US all the first world wastes tremendous amounts of food, making the dumpster diving opportunities plentiful. However most of the world is in the third world, which means that most of the great Dirtbagging opportunities are also there.

If your goal for traveling overseas is cultural immersion, Dirtbagging is also the way to go. The less money you spend, the more you have to live like a local. If you go overseas as a

tourist with money, the locals often just view you as resource. You end up dealing with constant people trying to scam you or sell you junk. However as a foreigner who is hitchhiking or using chicken buses to get around, you interact with just the normal people in the country rather than those who make a living off the tourism industry. Poor people are friendlier than rich people, almost across the board.

Another advantage about Dirtbagging through a country, rather than going on a standard vacation or just being an aimless backpacker are the destinations that it takes you. The places where rock climbing, or surfing or other outdoor activities take place are not necessarily tourist destinations. A lot of people talk about wanting to get off the “gringo trail,” which is exactly what it sounds like, all the places that foreigners like to go to. Foreigners, mouths agape and Lonely Planet books in hand all end up going to the same hostels as one another and on the same eco-tours. People who want to have an adventure of their own are desperate to get off the gringo trail.

By focusing your traveling around climbing (or any other adventure sport) you are automatically taken off the gringo trail. If you bike tour across a country, you don't just end up at A and B, but all the small normal and sometimes fascinating little places that just regular people like to live. When you don't get treated like a resource, it's amazing the friendliness and generosity of people in the country.

While some climbing areas, say the beaches of Tonsai in Thailand have had a tourist industry spring up around it, rocks and mountains are randomly distributed. Most of them are in the middle of nowhere, perhaps a town or city nearby as a resupply point. When you are traveling as a Dirtbag, going to local markets, budgeting and trying to find the best deals, it humanizes you. Also when you are just at some random climber area, likely no tourist market has sprung up unless there is something else popular around. Also when traveling as a Dirtbag overseas, you just end up looking poor as hell, which unlike in the United States,

overseas will make people nicer to you. It provides a nice contrast to all the Gringos who flash their money around.

Dirtbagging makes your traveling goal orientated, rather than the aimless backpackers that are common in the third world. If you are going to Argentina with the goal of climbing a specific mountain, or even just going to a specific climbing destination, your trip suddenly adopts a purpose. You also always have something to do.

So your cultural immersion is way more fun as a Dirtbag. Another huge advantage of traveling as a Dirtbag are the places that you go. Outdoor sports naturally happen in beautiful places. Whether you end up rafting down a remote river at a Grand National Park, or skiing down a volcano in the middle of nowhere, these activities end up happening in beautiful places almost by default.

Not only are you in an amazing environment, but by participating in sports you interact with that environment. Most people at their best traveling only get to go and see something beautiful. While there is nothing wrong with that, there is a special joy that comes from actually touching the mountain, being in the weather, experiencing what different parts of the world are like in a primal sense.

It's true that if you go on a shorter trip overseas, you can get some of these experiences. However a short trip often barely scratches the surface and will leave you feeling unsatisfied. Many people go on them because they say they can only afford a short trip. However what that really means is that they are still paying rent and bills on top of everything back at home. As a Dirtbag, you don't have those expenses, so your only costs become the ones that you need to pay in country. If that country is cheaper than the US then it actually makes more sense to stay there for longer, to offset the costs of the plane ticket.

Not only do you get great interaction with the locals by Dirtbagging overseas, but the other foreign travelers that you will meet are sure to be some of the more interesting and

enlightening people that you'll meet. They often make excellent adventure partners. They have already taken up the chance on foreign travel and are often looking for the next bigger and better journey. They often make a good resource for ideas about where they have been and where to go next.

Different countries don't just import their Dirtbags from America or privileged first world nations, but there is not a country where some form of Dirtbagging hasn't sprung up on its own. People everywhere have come to the same conclusions as those in the West - that it is better to spend your time enjoying your own activities that you love outdoors than it is to work all the time and that it's the best lifestyle and just the easiest way to climb full time.

### **Hitchhiking Internationally**

Hitchhiking is an awesome way to experience a foreign culture. You get to practice your language skills, learn about the average person's life in that area of a country. Locals who pick you up can be an invaluable source of information. It helps you find out what they like to do, and where they hang out for fun.

Different countries have different hitchhiking traditions. Before you embark on the ultimate form of Dirtbag travel, it's a good idea to get a little information. The best information comes from someone who has actually done it substantially in an area. The worst information is from someone who heard about something that might have happened once to a friend of a friend, but have never hitched themselves. Don't bother listening to those people. Would you learn guitar from someone who had never played it? Then don't worry about travel advice from someone who hasn't done it themselves. This includes people who pick you up, who'll often tell you that hitchhiking is harder than it actually is in a region. If they haven't done it themselves, just politely agree and continue your trip.

If you don't have a source of firsthand information available, Hitchwiki is an online hitchhiking guide that covers every country on earth, with first hand stories. It's generally accurate and a decent guide for the local customs.

In some third world countries, people will expect money for a ride. This is an uncommon practice, but it's important to know beforehand if this is the case to avoid any awkwardness. The good news is that in any country this is the case, the bus system tends to be cheap and extremely good.

So many people go on vacation to simply take a few moments away from their regular life and gaze upon something different or beautiful. Dirtbagging overseas by comparison is a way to live your regular life and connect with the environment, something you are forced to experience in a way that is raw, primitive and powerful. It's a great way to extend the length and overall enjoyment of an international trip.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Epic of Cathy and Sterling (Part 3)

“Este, esta el dia ultimo.” Dan said to me in Spanish.

In fact, it was not our last day with them. We stayed with them to the Guatemala border where it turned out that they had no proper paperwork for the RV. Suddenly we thought it was our chance to perhaps leave them, as we went through the line on foot with ease. However a quick bribe from Cathy saw her to the front of the line, and a quick trip into town to a lawyer, 30 years old and dressed in Hawaiian shorts, who wrote up some paperwork to get them across the border.

It was clear that Cathy had anxiety about us leaving them, worried about managing changing currency and dealing with the language. However it was that trip that they started on and we were increasingly ready to set out on our own. Our first stop in Guatemala was at a fair sized city. While Cathy and Sterling cooked, we went out to explore a local market.

It was similar to the markets in Mexico, perhaps a few more drunk people and a lot more guns. Unlike Mexico guns are legal in Guatemala and there are a shocking number of armed security guards. Even the McDonald's parking lot had serious looking man pacing with a shotgun in it. The second thing that Dan and I noticed was that as soon as the sun went down, all of the people cleared off the streets and the only cars driving around were pimped out low-riders.

We knew immediately that if the regular citizens don't walk the streets at night, we shouldn't either. So we hurried back to the RV only to find Cathy and Sterling cooking in a conspicuously open square, with door unlocked and open. We told them it was better to park somewhere discreet, tucked ourselves away and spent a rare night where Dan and I slept in there as well.

We crossed another border the next day and it was in El Salvador that we finally left Cathy and Sterling. We decided to stop in El Tunco, which was a town famous for its surfing and tourism. Pulling into El Tunco, Sterling came within inches of pulling right in front of a speeding semi-truck. I almost had a heart attack. We found a guy who rented a room to us in the town for \$5. It had two beds and a shower and was simply an extra room in a family home. We were preparing to go rent surf boards when Cathy came running up to us.

“This guy said Sterling hit him with the RV.”

It had finally happened I thought, after all the crazy driving they had hit a person.

Luckily they had not hit a person, but instead a car. Through bad luck they had managed to hit the newest (and most brightly colored) car in all El Salvador. A brand new bright cherry red, Japanese import economy car, less than a month old. Arriving on the scene we found Sterling being yelled at by a young El Salvadorian in Spanish. Another man, his friend or cousin was standing behind him arms crossed. They looked like fairly respectable people but they were pissed.

Sterling was yelling back repeatedly in English. “I don’t understand you!”

We ran up and Dan started to speak to them in Spanish. It was amazing how fast the man almost snapped out of his fury, looking at the blond haired, blue eyed Dan speaking in perfect native Spanish. Even though his car had just been hit he became fairly friendly to us and asked where Dan learned Spanish.

“I grew up in Venezuela, my parents are Americans.” It was his standard answer.

Then the man gave a long winded explanation to Dan in Spanish, rattling off the whole story of hearing the crash, seeing the RV drive away, etc. Dan turned to Cathy and Sterling.

“He says Sterling hit his car.”

“I didn’t hit it.” Sterling protested

We left for a moment to investigate. The ZigZag Express had bright red paint residue on its bumper, right at the same level as the dent in the car. We returned to report our findings.

“We think Sterling hit the car.” Dan told Cathy.

Of course I knew that he had the moment the accusation was even thrown out that it was true, with all of the erratic driving I had witnessed.

“Well what should I do?” Asked Cathy.

We were reluctant to even offer advice. After all she was on a trip to Panama that she decided to go on, a 60 year old woman who ran a successful business. We were about to leave them and they had to start making decisions on their own if they were to finish their own adventure. Nevertheless Dan offered up what seemed to be the only two choices.

“Well, you can either maybe offer this guy some money, or take your chances with the El Salvadorian police.”

There was a good chance that the El Salvadorian police wouldn't do jack shit to a white tourist in a tourist town like El Tunco. There was also a good chance that no matter how normal and respectable these guys appeared, that they had another 20 cousins in town who would fuck up Cathy and Sterling if things weren't made right. It was our first time in El Salvador as well and we didn't really know exactly what the police or local customs were like.

The one thing that Cathy was adapted well for Latin America (being an antiques dealer) was the haggling. Luckily for Cathy and Sterling the guy was willing to take \$200, many times less than it would cost to fix in America.

With tempers down and everyone satisfied, we took this opportunity to take our stuff out of the RV, and move it into the room we were renting. We finally left Cathy and Sterling, telling them that we wished them well and that we were sure they'd make it to Panama. (I was not sure at all.)

That same day we met an old surf instructor by the name of Sebastian, an Argentinian who claimed to have been to every state in America but North Dakota, and every country in the Americas. We told him about our journey with Cathy and Sterling.

“These people will die without you.” He declared.

I’m happy to report they did not die. We followed their blog and while they did talk about eight hour waits to get through borders and different adventures and misadventures, they made it to Panama and all the way back up the other coast of Mexico and home to New England, a true testimony to their growth as travelers. (It was also a testimony to Toyota engineering, as the old RV had nary a problem on the whole trip.)

As for Dan and I, we hitched on, leaving behind our two week long ride and continuing on to hitch into El Salvador, one of the most dangerous countries in the Americas.

**To be Continued ...**

## Chapter 8

### Dealing with borders

If you want to travel internationally you have to deal with borders. Now there is no particular legal reason to keep Dirtbags out of a country, but some people find themselves with difficulty crossing borders, or explaining to border guards (the most serious human beings on the planet) that you live in a van or out of a backpack. That could produce a long series of uncomfortable questions and even a quick trip back to your own country.

Here are a few tips for seamlessly crossing a border legally and with no hassles. What border guards are normally concerned about are a couple of things, that you are not intending to work illegally in the country and that you are not intending to stay in the country as an illegal immigrant. Simply explaining to them that you don't even like to work in your own country may not be good enough. That's why it's a good idea to come with proof that you can support yourself for the duration of your trip.

Now obviously you can, else wise you wouldn't even be going there to start with. Bringing a bank statement or even better a recent employment stub from your latest work will go a long way (assuming that it wasn't that long ago) in addition an agenda where you are staying helps. You will need that if they decide to question you, which they hopefully won't because ...

You should appear to be as normal of a person as possible. If you can leave the impression that you are just a normal tourist, there to spend money, you will normally be waved through and not even have to explain yourself much. So shower, shave and put on your nicest clothes. Don't tell any real lies. There is no reason to lie at the border as long as you are not planning on working, they are normally happy. To that effect just answer border questions with as quick and short of answers as possible. Always give definitive answers.

Don't say that you are going for "a week or two." Say "one week" or "two weeks." Remember that most people live their lives according to schedules, so they think that you must too. Be specific if they ask.

If you want a freewheeling open ended trip and you flew to your location, they may want you to have a return ticket. There is 24 hour flight insurance that lets you get a full refund. You can simply buy a return ticket right before the flight, and once you've landed cash in your insurance on your return ticket. This is doubly good because it can make it seem like you are on a short trip, when you are really maxing out your stay and being flexible with a long trip.

Tips for getting into the third world: Ha! Don't be silly. They just let you on in.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Richest Man in El Salvador

We left Cathy and Sterling, wished them well and set out in El Salvador on our own. El Salvador is one of the countries with the highest murder rate in the world. Going with just that information you would probably think that we would take another quick Bus Ride through the country. However while we were in El Tunco we asked how it would be to hitch through El Salvador. Word of mouth was always the best source of info and everyone said the same thing. Go for it.

“What do you think the chances are that we beat Cathy and Sterling to Panama?” Dan asked me.

A small truck pulled over for us almost as soon as the question was asked.

“Looking pretty good.” I replied.

We jumped in the back, were driven to the next town dropped off with a smile and wave and almost immediately were picked up again in another little truck. El Salvador was ridiculously easy to hitch in. Almost every little pickup truck stopped for us and we just jumped in the back and jumped out with the cars barely slowing down. We flew through the country and by midday we were at the Honduras border. A quick \$5 bus ride took us through the small part of Honduras on the west coast and by afternoon we were entering our third country of the day. It's safe to say El Salvador was the easiest country to hitchhike in that I'd ever been in.

In fact it was an El Salvadorian who gave us our first ride in Nicaragua too. We nicknamed him “The Richest man in El Salvador.” What he was doing in Nicaragua was simply “business” and he said he was an import/exporter. We didn't know exactly what that meant and didn't ask any further questions. The Richest Man in El Salvador traveled in style,

in a brand new giant American pickup complete with a driver, a bodyguard and in the back of the truck mysteriously there was an elliptical machine. He spoke a little bit of English, but most of the conversation carried on in Spanish. I could only understand a little and Dan would translate on occasion.

He explained the elliptical machine, "I like to work out at hotels."

The Richest Man in El Salvador did not look much like he worked out at all. He was portly and middle aged. He was tall, huge for an El Salvadorian, with a looping double chin and an expensive suit. He looked like he should be smoking a cigar at all times.

He explained the bodyguard, "You can never be too careful in El Salvador. I was kidnapped once for six months, my wife was kidnapped too. That was a different time."

We inquired if Nicaragua was a dangerous country.

"There is no crime in Nicaragua!" He declared and perhaps compared to El Salvador that was true.

Pretty soon on our trip we were stopping for lunch, and the Richest Man in El Salvador was buying all our food and a round of drinks for everyone, including his bodyguard and driver. We were on the road again and in the next town, we stopped for drinks again.

"In El Salvador, we drink until we fall down!" He declared to us, pointing in the air.

Indeed that might have been the case, but Dan and I just drank until we were mildly buzzed. We drove to the Nicaraguan Capital with them that way, bar to bar. The Richest man in El Salvador shared that his wife was dying of cancer and at the same time heavily flirted with every young female that we met on our bar hopping. He told us that he thought that cancer wasn't natural, but caused by the US government and somehow related to shellfish. Suddenly Dan asked them to stop, they stopped and we got out.

I asked Dan about the sudden stop.

“Ah man, they were just starting to say some weird shit, about having me sign some papers or something like that.” He explained to me.

It was not the last time I was happy to have Dan with me on the trip. It was always our policy to be suspicious, and the driver had perhaps had a drink too many. We were in the largest vehicle I saw in Nicaragua except for the semi-trucks, so any crash would probably have been worse for the other party. We jumped on a 30 cent bus to a smaller city, near the edge of the Capital City. It was getting dark and we decided to look for a place to bivvy. Bivying on the edge of a large city was not ideal. We stopped in a small square. There was an old grizzled looking man sitting by the still fountain. Children were running unsupervised through the streets and most peoples doors were unlocked or just left open. Our previous rides words echoed in my head. There is no crime in Nicaragua.

Just then, the old man by the fountain took an empty water bottle in his hand, filled it up in the still garbage filled water in the town fountain and took a drink. Dan had seen also. Holy shit, that is some third world shit right there.

We walked a little further and sudden there was a small field with some trees and hedges. It was secluded and we were confident no one would bother us there if they'd even see us. We curled under a hedge and went to sleep. We were flying through Central America at top speed. We might as well have been driving ourselves. Costa Rica and Panama awaited and after that was perhaps the crux of our trip, the Darién Gap. The Pan-American Highway travels all the way to the southern tip of Chile, from Alaska (It is a combination I-19, I-10 and I-5 in the US) except for one 200 mile section in Panama called the Darién Gap. It's the densest jungle in the world, full of Jaguars, poisonous snakes and the most dangerous of all animals: men. We had to find a way around the Darién to continue our journey.

**To be Continued ...**

## Chapter 9

### The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving

A remark once heard in Moab, Utah: “I never started eating so well until I was eating out of a dumpster.”

Some people undoubtedly find the idea of eating out of a dumpster to be disgusting. However what is really disgusting is how much perfectly good food gets thrown away every year. A dumpster is just a container. It’s a container that we put stuff in that we deem to be garbage, but for some reason also contains thousands of tons of totally edible food.

An expiration date is really just a number that some person printed on a piece of paper. It really doesn’t tell you whether or not that food in the container is good or not, it just tells you that some company office somewhere decided to print a number on a piece of paper.

Are you too stupid to tell whether or not food is spoiled? If the answer is “no”, then you can open up an expired can and give it the old smell or taste test and decide for yourself whether or not you are willing to eat a piece of food. An expiration date shouldn’t override your common sense.

Anyone who spends a little time on the road and eventually runs into some dirty hardcore Dirtbags, will probably knowingly or unknowing end up eating food that spent a little time in a metal container that we call a dumpster. After your first time tasting delicious aftermarket delicacies and finding out that it’s fine (or even good!) you may become brave enough to try it out for yourself. Here are some helpful hints for those getting started in dumpster diving.

#### **A. Vegetables**

Vegetables in the dumpster are often fine. Supermarkets are obsessed with a perfect appearance of everything. In American supermarkets everything has to look perfect. If there is a bunch of twenty carrots and a single carrot is rotten then it is unsellable in the grocery store

and goes in the garbage even though it has 19 good carrots on it. This makes no sense. With a little cutting and a good thorough washing and you'll find yourself eating all kinds of delicious vegetables. Do you have enough trust in your own judgment to not put a rotten vegetable in your mouth? Then you probably have the common sense to sort out which vegetables are good.

### **B. Meat**

Bin meat might be a little trickier to judge than vegetables. However there is one test that we have all done with food left a little long in our home fridge, the smell test. Sometimes perfectly good meat is thrown out because there is minor damaging to the packaging. Sometimes meat gets thrown out because it smells of death. A good sniff will let you know the difference.

### **C. Fruit**

Dumpster fruit is a tricky process. Overripe fruit is pretty gross when eaten on its own, but it can often be salvaged and turned into all kinds of delicious things. In fact the best banana bread in the world is made from dumpster bananas. A little cutting and you can make pancakes, cobblers, pies and all kinds of stove top bake goods with dumpster fruit.

### **D. Pizza.**

Always check every pizza box! Every time you see one anywhere. Pizza places are some of the best places to dumpster dive. Their dumpsters are often clean because it's mostly flour and the boxes keep the pizza separate from everything. Also for some unknown reason pizza places throw out tons of pizzas. Mistakes, mis-orders, and leftover buffet. It all goes in the dumpster, sometimes still warm. If there is a pizza place in town then that is the first place to check.

Being a dumpster diver is like being a hunter/gatherer, sometimes you come back empty handed and sometimes you come back with food for you and all your friends. You are helping eliminate waste and who knows what you might find in the dumpster.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Crossing the Darién Gap (Part 1)

The Crux in rock climbing is the hardest single move on a route. The crux of our journey was the Darién Gap, the densest jungle in the world. Hiking through the Darién Gap is possible. Post journey I've met two people who have hiked through and heard about a girl who did it by herself with just a pop-up tent. However none of those people had 30lbs of climbing gear with them and a time limit.

One of the reasons that no road has been built there yet is that relationship between Panama and Colombia is a historically poor one. Colombia used to own Panama, until the US funded an independence movement there so we could build the Panama Canal. There is no official ferry between the two countries. If you want to cross the Darién Gap by sea, your only option is to just find someone with a boat willing to take you.

It is also a dangerous journey by land, full of predators and poisonous animals and horrendous bugs. We heard a story of a man who left his boots out at night in the Darién and woke up with them literally filled to the brim with bugs. Our plan involved going to a Port City called Colón in Panama and finding a Cargo ship that was willing to take us. Dan had read a trip report online about people who had done the same thing and it seemed to be the cheapest way across on short notice.

As we got closer to Panama, people started warning us about the city that we were going to look for the Cargo ship in, Colón. They told multiple stories about how it is a dangerous place. One guy had been robbed by two men with machetes in broad daylight right outside his motel room there. Another, a massive muscled American with tattoos had been drinking there, when they guy who he had been drinking with suddenly pulled a knife on him. He had come out of the encounter fine. The other man with the knife? Not so much. We had been

through many large cities in Central America by this time and though there was clear danger in some, it was nothing that you couldn't avoid with a little wariness and common sense. So though we were always alert, we weren't too worried about Colón.

It was just a couple of days from leaving the Richest Man in El Salvador and we were in Panama. We got a single ride (from another El Salvadorian) all the way through Costa Rica, not even stopping except for lunch in the tourist haven country. Our hopes for potentially meeting surfer European babes in the Tourist hot-spot dashed. We beat Cathy and Sterling to Panama by weeks. It was late when we arrived in Panama, and it was raining. They have a saying in Panama: In the dry season it rains every day, and in the rainy season it rains all day.

Dan asked me how I felt about taking a bus overnight to Colón. We could sleep on it and arrive by morning, giving us all day to try to find a boat to take us. I agreed to the plan and we hailed down a bus going to Panama City. There Dan slept in the bus station and I stayed awake waiting for the bus. A flamboyantly gay Panamanian came up and started flirting with me in Spanish.

I told him I didn't speak Spanish and ignored him for a minute until he started acting weird or high or something. After telling him to get lost loudly a bus security guard came and shooed him away. Eventually the bus to Colón came. Every bus in Panama is the same, used American school buses that are radically spray painted. A cross between street graffiti and something you'd find at Burning Man. Every single one seemed to have at least one image of Jesus and a marijuana leaf. Ours arrived, blaring reggae just like the rest of them. Despite that I got on and immediately fell asleep on it. I awoke with the sun coming up and us arriving at our destination, Colón.

As we shook the sleep out of our eyes and got off of the bus, we immediately realized that we may have made a mistake in coming here. We had gone through dozens of large Mexican

cities and all those ones in Central America. Many of them I would describe as dangerous shitholes, but in none of them did we ever feel such an immediate sense of danger. Nothing we had seen previously was quite like Colón. It looked like a cross between Mad Max, A pirate city and the worst slum you could imagine. Dan had done two tours in Afghanistan and grew up in Caracas Venezuela. He turned to me.

“This looks sketchy.”

It looked like the city had been bombed and people were just living in the hollowed out remains of a city. 90% of the city were squatting in abandoned industrial buildings, with no electricity or running water.

One of the first things we saw was a small child steal food from a bus stop food store. The owner, a Chinese-Panamanian, a descendant of those who built the Canal (which ran through Colón,) immediately started yelling at the child, then left his store to chase him a bit with a knife cursing at him in Spanish and Chinese and grabbing his crotch occasionally to accent his curses. The people at the bus stop seemed amused.

We had other things to worry about. Everybody immediately started staring at us. We were possibly the only two white people in the city and with our giant backpacks stood out like a sore thumb. We had heard about another port city close by called Coco Solo, after one look at Colón we decided maybe that would be a better option. We asked a bus driver where the bus to there was. He told us that they don't run that bus anymore, because too many people were being robbed on it. Fuck.

“Shit, we are here, lets at least go down to the docks at check it out.”

We asked the bus driver where the docks were. He looked at us with a little bit of surprise and concern.

“You boys should probably take a taxi.” he advised.

“How far away is it?”

“Six blocks.”

“We don’t want to take a taxi for six blocks”

“Okay” he said “Here is what you do, walk down the main street, don’t talk to anybody, don’t trust anybody.”

We took his advice. The main street had few stores but you could not actually go into any of them. All of them had bars on the doors and windows, even when they were open. If you wanted something it was an exchange like a drug deal, you had me the money and I’ll hand you the tee shirt. There was one bank in town, which consisted of only a single ATM, with two guards in full body armor with machine guns. Everybody, who was mostly tall muscular black men, half of whom had a machete openly dangling from their waist, turned to stare at us. Some concerned, and some sizing us up. There was something of a police presence, but we were not sure that was even a good thing. We had a good security measure - we looked like we didn’t have anything worth stealing. During our whole strip so far we had not shaved. Our gear had tape on it, we were dirty. I had pots and pans hanging off the outside of my pack, hobo style. All of this was intentional. We actually had hundreds of dollars in climbing gear, Dan had an iPhone and I had more than \$1500 hidden in my shoe.

We got to the docks. It was a long six blocks to walk. Outside of the docks a group of men were drinking at an open air bar. It was 8 AM. They saluted us with beers in the air. Crazy white people in Colón. Across the street was a tavern with a sign that had a naked white woman painted on it. I got a feeling deep down that people had died in that bar. This was the closest thing that you could get to a pirate town in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We went to the docks, again there were armed guards with machine guns there.

We explained what we were doing there and they let us through, pointing out where a captain was that might take us. We approached the man, a tall thin black man and Dan told

him that we were looking for a ride to Columbia. He told us he could take us for \$60 apiece, but that he wasn't leaving until Sunday. It was Wednesday.

"Also I can't take you from here." He explained to Dan in Spanish. "There are rules about passengers and the Canal. I can pick you up from a city La Cieba. I'll pick you up there on Sunday."

The idea of staying in Colón until Sunday was not an appealing one either, so whatever was in La Cieba, it had to be better than this. La Cieba did not show up on Google Maps for Panama. We walked the long walk back to the bus stop. There was a large man with dreadlocks standing waiting for a bus. He looked friendly compared to many there. We approached him and asked if he knew anything about La Cieba.

"You boys speak English?" He asked in a Jamaican accent. "I think you got to go back to Panama City and hire a four wheel drive to take you out there."

I was dismayed.

"Or ..." He continued thinking. "You might be able to get on this bus here, it goes to the last town on the road. Maybe someone there can take you on a boat."

He didn't need to say anything else. We hopped on the bus and got the fuck out of Colón.

**To be Continued...**

## Chapter 10

### Making a Living

The most frequent question that any Dirtbag gets asked is how they support themselves financially while on the road. Unless you have reached Dirtbag Nirvana,<sup>1</sup> then you have *some* need for money. You might need it to put gasoline in your house, and keep the wheels moving. You may need to buy a five tub jug of peanut butter or perhaps a new Camelot. Whatever the reason, eventually it'll be nice to have at least a little money.

The majority of people in the world live a paycheck to paycheck existence. It is extremely hard for them to imagine how to miss even a single paycheck, much less going months at a time without working. However once you have reduced your needs as a consumer down the bare minimum, a single paycheck can cover weeks or even months of travel.

That is where the real secret of Dirtbagging comes in: seasonal work. There are seasonal work opportunities all over the country and indeed in other countries. Seasonal work allows you to work hard for part of the year, and road trip for the rest. Conveniently there are many popular outdoor recreation areas that have seasonal work in the time that you want to be there.

Even if your seasonal job pays less than the job you work in a city, your savings is immensely more when you are living like a Dirtbag. Getting those savings to pile up is the main goal of any “work season” for a Dirtbag. Remember that before you do any of this, you need to have dropped out of consumer culture, stopped buying things, reduced your needs and stopped paying rent. Once you have that part of Dirtbagging under control, there are a couple of good options for saving money.

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1 The ability to live without money.

The first option is to find an intense seasonal job. These are jobs that take up a huge amount of time when you are doing them, but only last for a short amount of time and leave the rest of the year free. Examples are working in a fishing boat in Alaska. Every summer tons of people go up and work in fishing boats, you live on the boat and as long as you are not paying rent and a bunch of bullshit bills back at home, you literally cannot spend money while on the boat and just leave with a big fat check at the end, possibly set for your whole year.

Another example of this type of work is fighting wildfires. There is always a demand for forest firefighters and each year in California that demand grows. Doing this job you collect insane amounts of overtime and in addition to that you can get in good shape while doing it too. Like with fishing, there is no way to even spend your money while you are on the job, which means that it piles up and you can go on unemployment afterwards.

A Dirtbag staple for decades has been to participate in the marijuana harvest. Like fishing, it lasts only a short season in the fall and can fill your pockets for the rest of the year, although it's not a very physical job so the tradeoff is that your body does not maintain very well while you are sitting in a chair for weeks on end.

The other option as opposed to an intense seasonal job is to occasionally get a job in the area that you want to recreate in. Although you don't get the instant influx of money that you get out of the intense seasonal jobs, you get to rock climb while you are working. If you can live like a Dirtbag and work at the same time, the money piles up faster than you would believe. While you are living in a van you really have nothing to spend your money on, thus keeping your expenses low. There is even a professional baseball player, Daniel Norris, who makes a million a year and lives in a Volkswagen in the Wal-Mart parking lot next to the stadium. That's because Dirtbagging is a satisfying lifestyle and a better way to live, regardless of how much money you make. Even better, it doesn't cost very much so you can manage on much less work than if you were paying rent.

Climbing season is the same season as tourist season in many places. In other words, when you want to be in a great outdoor location, other people also want to be there also. Places like Yosemite, Moab, The Red River Gorge and many others need seasonal labor to fill the tourist need. Other rock climbers are an excellent resource to find work. It's not a taboo question to ask someone what they do for a living and get some details and maybe even a reference. Every Dirtbag has some way of getting it done and nobody ever starves to death in a lonely pit, so you won't be the first.

When you first go on the road, the idea of running out of money might give you tremendous anxiety, but you'll find that being mobile actually gives you more work options than you would have had before. Also once you do a job once, as long as you weren't too much of a fuck up, you can go back to it again and again. Also the seasonal nature of these jobs means you'll be able to go on funemployment afterwards.

The third, and maybe the best option, is to work remotely out of your van. There is a whole new generation of tech workers doing contract work remotely. As our work becomes more and more mobile and remote and our 4G connections become more and more widespread, you really end up being able to do it from anywhere. That means you can maintain working from your favorite places that you want to be. Just be careful not to be stuck in a trap where you still have to work all the time having one of these remote jobs. It's easy for tech job van lifers to end up being sucked into doing work more than enjoying themselves.

There are also many opportunities to work overseas. If you are under 30, a particularly good one is to go and be a backpack laborer in Australia. Most of these jobs are farm help in Australia and make heaps of money thanks to their strong economy and high wages. Or if you are lucky enough to speak English as a first language, you almost always have the option of teaching English simply by having an American accent. To teach English overseas you don't have to speak the native language there. There are different programs that are pre-set so that

you basically are just reading a script in English. They set a course, and Dirtbags who want to continuously travel overseas teach English from South America to China.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Crossing the Darién Gap (Part 2)

We were on the bus, listening to the reggaeton that played on all Panamanian buses and relieved to be out of Colon. The road was a dirt one and a little muddy in spots, but the peaceful countryside was a relief to see and we got our first view of the Caribbean Sea, clear and beautiful. About two hours into our bus ride we got a surprise when two other white backpackers got on the bus, a guy and a girl. The guy was short and bald with muscular arms, a bit of a belly and a nose that looked like it had been broken multiple times. The thin girl had blue eyes and sandy blond hair. Somehow I instinctively knew they were European. They saw us and immediately went to the back of the bus where we were sitting.

“Hey, where are you going?” The guy asked. His thick accent was obviously eastern European.

They were from the Czech Republic and also were also looking for a way around the Darién Gap. They were nervous because they had just met a Frenchman who had tried to find a way and failed. They also did not speak any Spanish so were relying on English, which did not take you very far in Panama. I didn't think the chances of finding someone who spoke Czech were very high. We told them about the Cargo ship we had already arranged and how we needed to get to the mystery town of La Cieba. We told them about Colon.

Pavlic, for that was the name of the Czech man, smirked. “I would not worry about this place. For I have with me mace and asp.”

He pulled out a can of mace and an asp. An asp is a metal rod that extended with a lead ball on the end of it. He took it out of his pocket and with a flick of his wrist casually brought the weapon to its full length right on the bus.

“I can hit a man in the thigh and he passes out with pain.” He boasted, “I hit him in the head and he dies. It could be one man or ten men. I spray them with mace, then I hit them with asp.”

They told us they were going to Bolivia because that is where the best cocaine is.

“Not like the shit we have in Europe.” Pavlic said.

Just like that, we were traveling with these people. You truly never know who you are going to end up traveling with on a journey like this. His girlfriend, Elia, was quiet by comparison. She was part girlfriend and also part chaperon. As they hadn't got to where the cocaine was yet, Pavlic had started drinking rum. We told them about our ambitions during the Bus ride. We were much more confident than they about finding a way around the Darién Gap. We hadn't hitchhiked all this way just to be stopped now.

“The Frenchman was probably just rude to people.” I quipped at him. “We'll find a way.”

The bus came to a stop and we all got out. The small town that we were in was paradise compared to Colon. Small children ran unattended. The Caribbean was magical. Almost immediately a thin, tan skinned man with high cheek bones came running up to the four of us. Dan started speaking to him in Spanish. I understood what he was asking though.

“You guys are looking for a way around the Darién Gap? You are going to Columbia?”

The man asked Dan.

The man owned a launcha, basically a very large speed boat and was taking three Spaniards into Colombia tomorrow morning. He wanted 150\$ but was leaving tomorrow morning rather than four days from now. We told him that we already had a deal for 60\$.

“Cargo ships, bah, they'll take five days, I can get you there in one! 100\$ but just for you two, everyone else is paying 150\$ don't tell them you go for cheaper!”

The Czechs, who were not on a Dirtbag budget (and were nervous about making the trip at all), jumped on the deal and it was done. We saved time, a hassle and were not having to

deal with the sketchy crew of the cargo ship and climbing season was coming up, so the sooner we were there, the better.

For the Captain, who was from Columbia, it was an extra \$500 for the same trip he was doing anyway. He and his son, who looked like a carbon copy of him 20 years younger went and introduced us to the other passengers. The Spaniards actually didn't all know each other before hand. Two of them were a couple, young hippies who were traveling through South America and selling jewelry on the street and juggling as a way to get by as they traveled. The third was a sail boat captain who lived in Colombia and gave sailboat tours through the San Blas Islands, the Island chain that we were going through. He was taking this trip simply to see new routes and possible trips through the Islands. He was tall and dark skinned, with bushy eyebrows that were so expressive they were almost cartoonish.

We were told by the Captain that we were leaving at 6 AM and that the journey would take but a single day. We learned something about the way Colombians tell time, as we left at 11 am for the first day of a three day journey. We all loaded up on the boat, which just barely fit the nine of us. Dan and I looked up and the five Europeans had all lit up cigarettes, even though there were multiple canisters of gasoline under the seat they all were sitting on.

Away we went. The waves smashed violently against the boat for a while and I wondered if it would be this choppy the whole time. We got soaked with the salty water. After ten minutes of intense waves, like magic everything cleared and the Caribbean was as calm as glass and so clear that you could see straight to the bottom of the ocean.

The San Blas Islands were unreal. Some of them were literally like Islands in a cartoon where a single coconut tree rising out of them. The largest island had a town of only a few hundred people. Actually it was two islands connected by a bamboo bridge that looked like it was straight out of Indiana Jones. The San Blas are populated by a tribal people called the Kuna. They believe they were god's chosen people and that other people are unclean. As a

result some of the Kuna are terrible Xenophobes, and foreigners are not even allowed on many of their Islands.

Pepe, the middle aged Spaniard sailboat captain who was on the launcha with us told us that they live by two methods: fishing and salvaging cocaine. Drug smugglers who were get chased by the Panamanian police dump their cocaine the Caribbean hoping to come back for it. Sometimes the Kuna would get to it first and then smuggle it onto the black market. They also had all kinds of laws for foreigners that mostly involved fines. The largest fine that you could get would be to sleep with a Kuna woman, which is a \$60,000 fine.

I chuckled a little thinking about how many Americans glorify tribal cultures, but the Kuna were basically drug dealers and bigots. Despite that, most of the Kuna that we interacted with personally were friendly, including old women in tribal clothes who didn't speak Spanish but rather just their native language. They would come up and ramble to us in their tongue like we understood, but the tone sounded friendly.

We traveled between Islands. Our captain had a side business delivering chicken to some of these Islands and also even ice cream to a close friend of his, which was a rare treat in tropical Panama, as none of the Kuna villages had any electricity. During the whole trip we could see the Darién Gap jungle, thick and looking impenetrable. The occasional village was on the coast and instead of the speed boats that most Kuna had, these villages largely had dugout canoes and lived similarly to the way people lived there 1000 years before.

After three days we arrived in Columbia. We were dirty and disheveled and all seven of us paid our captain and found a hostel to stay at. It was the next afternoon that Pavlic, our Czech friend approached me.

"Kevin." he declared, having been drinking since morning. "Today, me and you, we find cocaine."

I was skeptical, Dan and I smoked weed but didn't do any drugs. "I don't know if that's what I want to do."

"It's not problem." he said, "I know what to do, we go find the dirtiest man in this city, and he knows where cocaine is."

I was not thrilled to be part of this plan, to go find the dirtiest man in a Colombian port city and try to get drugs out of him. Pavlic did not share my concerns.

"It's not a problem." One of his favorite phrases was "If he gives up problem, I spray him with mace and hit him with asp."

I declined the offer and instead we started drinking cheap Caribbean rum and went and found the others. The conversation flowed between English and Spanish. The drunker Pavlic got, the worse his English got. Occasionally when the conversation had been going on in Spanish for a long time he would loudly interject in Czech. Eventually he banged on the table.

"I am a pirate. I am a hippy, I am lost in the Caribbean." He banged on the table drunkenly again. "Respect me!"

His girlfriend dragged him, stumbling heavily, back to their hotel room and that was the last I saw or heard of the pair. I imagine that they made it to Bolivia and eventually found the cocaine they were looking for. The rest of their trip after that? I can only imagine.

As for Dan and I, we pushed on into Colombia. We took a quick Ferry ride to Turbo, another city we were warned was dangerous, and we started our hitchhiking trip again.

## Chapter 11

### But Where Do You Poop? (And Other Stupid Questions)

It's funny the problems that people think Dirtbags must have. After "how do you make a living?" people seem baffled by how Dirtbags do even the most simple of things. Perhaps the confusion is because they think if they lost their jobs, they'd be eating out of dumpsters (not that there is anything wrong with that) and sitting in piles of their own feces. Probably not though, because as human beings, we can figure shit out, literally.

This chapter will cover all the questions that Dirtbags get most frequently, starting with "where do you poop?"

The answer? Toilets. Most of the time of a Dirtbags life is just spent in a climbing campground and believe it or not, they have toilets. That is where one poops, and it's not an issue or a struggle or a difficulty in one's life at all. Your options in life are not rent an expensive apartment or live in the middle of nowhere or on the streets. There is a vast amount of options in between and they all have toilets. Now you know. You too can poop in a toilet. On the off chance you are backpacking somewhere deep in the wilderness, proper leave no trace etiquette is to dig a hole six inches deep and at least 100 feet away from streams and trails, but most of the time it just goes into a toilet. It's really not an issue at all

#### **"What do you eat?"**

This is an amusing and somewhat baffling question that gets asked all the time. The answer: food. Keeping food isn't a problem, nor is cooking. They invented in 1913 a camp stove that is not very different from a home propane stove. Yet despite it being around for more than a hundred years, people apparently haven't heard about it. A campfire is also an excellent way to cook, combining heating and cooking into one source. It was invented in 600,000 B.C.

To keep your food fresh there is this new and trendy thing called ice. Although the high class Dirtbags may go for the option of a solar powered fridge, which really is not all that difficult to install. For the more rustic lot, the theory is to eat it before it goes bad.

The picture that the outside world has is so totally inaccurate that it's comical. It's of starving hippies barely sustaining themselves. The reality is people eating well and largely communally. Enjoying shared meals with combined ingredients is not uncommon at all, where everyone pitches in a thing or two and out comes a culinary masterpiece. There are many people who never started eating so well until they became Dirtbags.

**“Don't you get lonely?”**

America has a loneliness epidemic. Our smartphones have connected us to every person in the world but at the same time left us lonely and isolated. People think that this problem is somehow amplified with Dirtbags who has given up on working full time. It's a mystery how people view the life of a Dirtbag, sad and hungry with no place to poo. Is there a poster in high school that tells you to never quit your job, that if you break out of being a cog in the machine that you will be sad and alone?

Nothing could be further from the truth. Becoming a full time Dirtbag is not just joining a sport, it is joining a tribe. First off, there are tons of people who are also on the road. The other Dirtbags feel an instant bond between them because of a shared experience. Then on top of that there are the people on short trips, and the weekenders. A lack of company (particularly in the areas mentioned in chapter 5) is never a problem.

Unlike city living, you are unlikely to find a bunch of mindless phone zombies engaged in “social” media but actually isolated and alone. To the contrary because they are living purpose driven lives and because some areas are out of cell phone reception, people once again talk to each other, cook dinner together, and it is one of the last bastions of real socialization.

Additional barriers against loneliness are the constant parties that go on in climbing areas (double for surfing.) If you want to find a party, there will be one. If you want to be alone in the desert, that option is there too. Some people turn the Dirtbag life into a constant party, like an ongoing mini burning man. However you choose to craft your experience on the road, loneliness will not be part of it.

**“Aren’t you afraid of Coyotes?”**

Nope, nor mountain lions, or bears. Animals are afraid of people. Your chances of being eaten alive by coyotes (or bears for that matter) are the same in the wilderness as in an office: Low. Any anxiety you have about camping will go away with the same speed poop goes through a goose. Coyotes are a particularly cowardly animal. They make a lot of noise but want nothing to do with human beings. Black bears are almost as cowardly as coyotes, despite their large size. There are only two times they are actually dangerous, one is when you fuck with the cubs. So don’t fuck with the cubs. The other is if you run. Never run from a wild animal under any circumstance! This makes them think you are prey and give chase. Other than that all these animals are extremely afraid of humans. People are five times as likely to be killed by dogs as by bears and mountain lions put together. Nobody thinks that being afraid of dogs is a rational fear. The only reason people are afraid of the animals in nature is that they are not used to them. Once you get even a tiny bit of experience under your belt, you discover that there is nothing to fear from wild animals. Not that you need to throw all caution to the wind and try to ride the Bison in Yellowstone. Give animals their space and they will give you yours.

This is another good reason to give a few trial runs to the outdoor life. Keep in mind that most human beings who ever existed lived most of their lives outdoors without fear and they had to deal with much gnarlier animals than we have now. Your DNA is 99.9% similar to them, it’s just what you’ve been told is the “normal” way to live that is different. It’s amazing

that at the same time we have wiped countless species from the face of the planet, at an alarming rate, it is also the same time that we are most afraid of animals in the wild on an individual level. Seriously though, coyotes are chicken shit and you are a human being. It's fine. Unless you are camping in polar bear country, animals want no piece of you.

### **“How do you shower?”**

Some people really put the dirt into Dirtbag. The reality is that when you are around dirty people, you almost magically stop caring about being dirty. However if it's something that you just cannot get over then there are normally lots of ways to shower while on the road and stay clean as you want to be.

Baby wipes! Baby wipes can be your best friend if you want a quick way to get clean. If they don't quite do it for you, they invented a solar shower, a black bag of water that is heated by the sun that gives a full long heated shower. An inventive Dirtbag can build a shower space on the side of his or her van.

Another option is to just poke holes in a plastic bottle and heat the water up via stove top. Voila - instant one-person shower. A final option if you absolutely must is to pay for a shower. Almost everywhere has somewhere that you can buy a shower from. Public pools are often a cheap option, sometimes they come with a soak in a hot tub as well. In Squamish, \$2 Canadian will get you full access to shower, pool and hot tub between the hours of 11:45 and 12:15. Dirtbag pool time. Just be aware you might be sharing the hot tub with dread-locked French Canadians, the dirtiest of all Dirtbags.

### **“How could I ever live without...?”**

Unless it's food, water or fresh climbing shoe rubber, you'll manage.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Always another Mudslide

“Did you ever think that you’d be happy to be locked in the back of a moving truck in Columbia?” Dan asked me.

“No, I can safely say no.”

We were happy. We had been stuck in the Colombian rain on our way to Medellín. Some random passer-byers had told us that people might not be driving the road that we were trying to hitch because of the rain. Even though it was supposed to be the start of the dry season, it had been raining hard for the two days that we had been in Columbia. We had also been told there was a detour that people were taking, a long way around that avoids the mountains. However, Google Maps for South America in 2012 gave us no indication of what that detour might be. We stood there in the rain. Cars occasionally passed us. The road that we were traveling on was no longer the Pan-America. Instead we had cut inland in order to check out a small climbing area in the middle of the country. The Pan America is generally well kept and in good shape. Every other road in South America can be considered questionable and the prospect of heading off into no man’s land during the rain storm was not an appealing option. Another car passed us by.

“They must be going somewhere.” I said to Dan.

It was a meaningless statement. It was getting late and our morale was low. We were facing the prospect of finding shelter or setting up our tents in the rain. That’s when the moving truck stopped. It was a father and his two young sons, who were literally just people moving houses to Medellín, store owners and part of Columbia’s middle class. They stopped and bought us dinner, piranha, which was good but bony as shit. Everywhere we had hitched we had only been met with kindness and love and these guys were some of the best.

Colombians are often like that, kind, generous, curious and beautiful. Colombia is a paradise, a beautiful place filled with beautiful people.

The rain blasted through the night. The road that we were traveling on had once been paved. Now it was in a half paved, half potholed state of decay. It made for an extremely rocky ride. Dan slept not at all, but instead stayed up answering questions that the children in the back had for us. I was told all were amazed at my ability to fall asleep, as the truck violently rocked and thunder boomed throughout the night. I awoke to the truck coming to a stop. It was just barely getting light.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I came to.

“I don’t know.” Dan answered.

The back latch opened and we got out. The driver started explaining something to Dan in Spanish.

“Yeah, he said there is a mudslide blocking the road. They are going to turn around and take the detour. But he said there is a town just a few kilometers ahead, and we can just walk around the mudslide.”

As the morning got lighter, the rain was also lightening up. There were a small flow of people walking from that town to the bundle of cars and trucks trapped with us behind the mudslide. They were there to make sure everyone was okay, and to help with any rescue efforts. Some were digging at the mudslide to try to clear the road. There was no official road crew at all, just literally the people from town shoveling away at a massive, massive mudslide. People also were taking the opportunity to see that food and other necessities were brought to the people trapped in the mudslide.

We discussed our options with our ride. They were going to turn around and take the detour. However we were told that there was a small town just ahead of us, just behind the mudslide. With being on foot we had the option of just walking around the mudslide and

restarting our journey from there. We said goodbye to our ride and thanked them. We would learn later that there were mudslides behind us as well, that we had been sandwiched between them, so they undoubtedly spent quite a bit of time stuck between mudslides.

Fuck it, we decided to walk it. The mudslide was huge, stretching at least a quarter mile and like nothing I had ever seen before. There were boulders in it the size of small houses, and many the size of cars. It was also a moving, flowing, almost living thing. It creaked and groaned and breathed. The occasional crashing noise or noise of snapping tree branches did not help make it a comfortable walk.

There was nowhere to go that we could truly escape the mud. Instead we walked to the edge, where other people were already traveling across and picked the path with the least mud river flowing through. Thick deep mud is one of the slowest things you can walk through. At some points we were up to our knee caps. I even had a brief moment of sinking like quicksand into the mud, with Dan holding out a stick to me. The worst bushwhacking I have done in my life was nothing compared to traversing that mudslide.

By the time we had emerged on the other side, the sun had even started to come out. We were drenched in mud. Nothing had escaped being covered in mud. As we started the long walk towards town, a man in a motorcycle rickshaw came up dropping off an old woman at the base of the mudslide.

He saw us and immediately saw an opportunity.

“Ten dollars to town. No, eight dollars?” He made the haggling easy “Six dollars! Four dollars! Two dollars!”

It was worth \$2 to not walk through any more mud. We jumped in. The ride was stomach turning. We stopped and crammed in a third person. Now we were four people being driven by a 150cc engine through a road that had almost gotten taken out by a mudslide. We rocked

back and forth and crashed through huge water-filled ruts in the road, but eventually we made it to the edge of an idyllic little Colombian jungle town.

Small waterfalls came down with crystal clear water from the side of a cliff wall. We used them to wash as much of the mud off as we could. We entered the town and it gave us our first taste of rural Colombian life. First thing is that everybody seemed to get around on a small motorcycle, the same as the kind that dragged us on a rickshaw into town. You would see set ups of whole families, a father and mother with two kids in between and one strapped to a back. Every third motorcycle had a super-hot chick on it. Women in general in Colombia were mega-gorgeous.

We became an instant spectacle. Two white guys with huge backpacks emerging out of the mudslide, in a town so far off the main path that it literally wasn't on our map. Colombians are extremely friendly people, who are quick to initiate a conversation with you. People would stop in the middle of their day or even their job to come and talk to us and ask us what we were doing.

"We are hitchhiking to Argentina." We told one girl, young and beautiful, who had stopped to talk.

"Is that possible?"

"Well we are here, right?"

"Yeah, but what are you going to do about the mudslides?"

We thought that we were through the mudslide. As it turns out there were 20 something mudslides altogether, the next one only five miles up the road. We were not sure what exactly we were going to do, but the girl on the motorbike offered at least a temporary solution.

"You guys smoke weed?"

She sped off and returned a few minutes later with a small cousin and a small bag of joints, which they gifted to us. We also learned the Colombian method of smoking a joint.

Rather than puff puff pass, in Colombia everyone just lights up their own joint. So we did, it was hard to imagine that earlier in the day we had been knee deep in mud so thick it was sucking our shoes off our feet. We smoked with these strangers and talked about life, life in the US and in their village.

“Well if you can’t get out of the village, come find us,” Said the weed fairy and her cousin as they sped off.

Faced with the next mudslide, I wanted to hunker down in the village for a little bit. Based on what we knew it was full of beautiful women who randomly give you weed. Dan however pointed out that if we are going to stop somewhere, it might as well be a rock climbing area and there was one just a hundred miles away.

100 miles and 15 mudslides away. It also could start raining at any time, and we had no idea when the mudslides might be cleared. So we put together a plan. We heard that there was another village past the next mudslide and we reasoned that the same way people were bringing supplies in and out of this village past the mudslide that they must be doing it to the next one.

So we started hitching, mudslide to mudslide. Walking past them and continuing on. At one point we got on a cheap bus, but ended up on it for 24 hours, stopped by more mudslides and this time not by a quaint little village, but in the middle of nowhere. Then, on our third day of mudslide travel, a Colombian General from the military decided he was going to drive that route to Medellin and like magic all of the mudslides got cleared in a day.

We got to our climbing destination in central Colombia and ended up spending Christmas with two other rock climbers, a local Colombian who had developed most of the routes out there and a Chilean Dirtbag, living off of rice and coffee and staying with the Colombian. We spent a week there, and in my life from that moment to now, I’ve never seen another mudslide.



## Chapter 12

### Dirtbag Sex (For Men)

A 2017 survey of women found rock climbing to be the sexiest sport that a man could do, (golf was the least sexy.) Despite that, you never hear golfers express concern that if they get too into their sport, they will never get laid again. Despite that it is a real concern of the, at least according to women's magazine, are the sexiest athletes on the planet.

There is something about being on the road that many men don't realize who are living in apartments. There are women on the road too! Gone are the days where there was a massive male/female imbalance at every climbing crag. In city gyms, the ratio is even and this has translated to people living in their cars and vans as well.

Another good thing about living a sport orientated life, all the women are hot. If you take the ratio of super-hot, cool climbing girls to men, there are far more of those living in a climbing area than anywhere else. Also all the other women on the planet, remember them? They didn't just disappear. So the idea that you are going to be some sort of hermit, wanking alone in a cabin in the woods

Will you be able to actually meet one of them though, living in a car or a tent? The answer, of course, is yes.

One of the biggest lies told to men, is that buying a bunch of useless stuff, you can get women. Consumerism is sold to people in a lot of different ways with a lot of different lies. Nobody left to their own devices would trade away most of their lives working just to buy 500\$ jeans. Media and television are all vehicles to sell advertising and therefore get you to buy stuff. So it's no surprise that a generation of men have grown up with the extremely sexist lie that what women want is to have a guy with money and a nice car.

When you actually ask women as pollsters have done, the most frequent things they are looking for are words like “passion,” “excitement,” and “adventurous” far outrank “money” as being attractive to women.

Ambition is also one of the number one attractive things to women. By the standards of normal society, which pushes the idea of making money as the only means of being a “successful person.” Dirtbags may look like a bunch of hippies not doing much with their life.

However they are in fact normally very ambitious people. Having dangerous or hard climbing goals or travel goals is nothing other than ambitious. What is a plan to hitchhike to the Cirque of Towers and climb in Northern Canada if not ambitious? Most adventurers have to be ambitious people just to go on the road to start with. They normally do so because they have certain goals.

There has also always been a certain appeal to roughish characters. Maid Marion abandons her life in a castle in order to live a life in the woods with Robin Hood. There is something undoubtedly romantic about these characters and it extends to today’s modern rock climbers. The movie “Valley Uprising” about Yosemite Valley even claim that part of the reason that law enforcement gave the Dirtbags there such a hard time was they were getting all the girls as opposed to the Rangers.

Whether or not that is true, rest assured that becoming a Dirtbag does not mean a life of celibacy. It also simplifies the dating process. Awkwardly trying to find some mutual interest on a first date is no longer an issue. You already have the perfect activity to do, rock climbing.

It is perfect, an intimate two person activity where you spend most of the time together. It’s also a good thing to know you have in common, an easy icebreaker to find more mutual interests and discover whether or not you like a person and you can already have a second climbing date set up.

Taking a non-climbing girl rock climbing works even better because on top of all the other things mentioned, it's exciting and unique. Just make sure that you have a sufficiently easy route picked out, preferably one with an awesome summit.

The idea that being a Dirtbag will mean no women in your life is really just one that extends from our consumerist society, and not a measure of reality.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Stuck in the Desert

We were almost there, in Chile just a few hundred miles from our destination of Patagonia. It was amazing how smoothly things had gone overall. Yes, we had to walk around some mudslides here and there and took a crazy ride on an open air cart down a death road. However the hitchhiking portion of our trip had gone super well. We had basically not had a long wait for rides on the whole 10,000 mile trip up to this point.

We had spent a week climbing in Peru and almost the same climbing in Columbia. We had stopped to surf in Mexico and El Salvador. Yet it had only taken us seven weeks to cross two continents north to south and there we were, maybe only a day or two from our goal of Bariloche, Argentina.

And we were stuck.

Cars whizzed by, there was not even a bus to catch in sight. Dan checked his iPhone. We had been at the same spot for three hours. It was the longest that we had waited so far on the whole trip.

“Well” Dan suggested, “We can keep trying this, or there is that road over there that leads into Argentina now and we can link up with the road to Bariloche.”

I looked at the road that led towards the Andes Mountains, large and foreboding.

“Fuck it.” I said, “Let’s try that.”

We walked over to the intersection with the road leading to Argentina and stuck out our thumbs. Almost immediately we got a ride, from a pickup truck with about ten mattresses in the back that we piled on top of and hung on for dear life. South Americans will pick you up in vehicles where Americans would think that you simply don’t have room. A series of other rides took us to a construction site at the pass of the road.

Dan went over and talked to some of the construction workers and then reported back to me.

“Yeah man, they are still building this road. They say people are driving through from time to time, but the Argentinians are lazy and not finishing their side.”

We didn't know exactly what to make of the situation, but if people were driving through than one of those people would pick us up. There is a strange inverse law when it comes to hitchhiking, sometimes less is more. I wasn't worried about the scant traffic. I knew that the pure unusualness of the two of us would mean someone would stop and pick us up. So we pressed on.

What happened next was one of the craziest series of rides ever. Rather than get picked up by a single driver going through, we started to be picked up with the construction workers while they were on the job just going to different parts of the road under construction. A mile, half a mile. We road latched on to a bulldozer, piled with our massive backpacks in the cabs of cranes, of trucks, of any vehicle used to make a road. We jumped from like this till we were met with Argentina.

Only to find a totally deserted dirt road. Just as the Chileans had told us, their side had nothing. We had made it to Argentina all the way from Las Vegas only to find a whole lot of nothing. We waited for ten minutes. Not a car. Would we really have to reverse course? Hitch all the way back to the Chilean city that we had been stuck in to start with? As we were contemplating that possibility, a small two door economy car rolled up to us from the Argentinian side. It almost seemed as though they had been sent to pick us up.

“What are you guys doing here?” A man stuck his head out the window to ask.

We must have been quite a sight. Two foreigners hitching on a completely deserted road. Our saviors had simply come up this way to fish in the clear, unpolluted mountain streams. They invited us along to go fishing. During that hour of fishing, 0 cars drove by us. Apparently

this pass was not normally even open to traffic and was only opening up because there was a special festival happening that week. We crammed into that tiny car and drove into Argentina.

## Chapter 13

### Never Pay Rent

Consider for a moment what is rent? Everything else in the world that you pay money for you end up with something afterwards. Rent is different than all of that, you pay the money to a landlord and afterwards have nothing except for some limited rights to stay on their property. Consider for a moment the very base of the word “landlord.” Isn’t it strange that after we have abolished feudalism that there is still such a thing as a landlord? Nothing will suck away your funds faster than rent. Many people spend half of their money on rent every month. That means half of the hours that you work simply evaporate in order for you to be part of mainstream society.

Even though there is the practicality of not paying rent in terms of traveling and being on the road, there are also good philosophical reasons to never pay rent. Consider for a moment the term landlord. Weren’t we supposed to have abolished lords and lordships with the American Revolution? The very idea of rent is a left over concept from the medieval days of serfs and peasants. It’s one of the last vestiges that ties us to a more primitive time.

The idea that it would be impossible to live without paying rent is based on an idea that we need to pay money just to exist. But what productivity do we get out of rent? Nothing is produced - it simply exchanges money from one class of people to another. Yet those who avoid rent are somehow cast in the role of being bums and layabouts for not participating in a totally non-productive part of the economy. It’s the exact opposite of what’s true.

Rent takes many forms. Consider for a moment a camping fee situation. Now in most countries in the world, you wouldn’t be expected to pay for camping. The U.S. is in an extreme minority there. Yet some people vigorously defend the camping system we set up, where a huge portion of our fees ends up not paying for services used but rather sent off to

Washington DC and supporting administration and paying the salaries of the very rangers harassing you about paying your fees. That's a racketeering scheme and it's perfectly moral to not participate in it.

Although there are many campgrounds in the US that do it right still and have a minimal of services and are free. In addition you can normally camp on BLM or forest service land for 14 days at a time, and that's a limit that's rarely enforced. Public lands belong to the public, not in the hands of a few administrators and police officers. They are there for us all to use, which means you should be allowed to stay for free, low impact and rent free.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Craziest Rides

“I’m looking for someone to go down to Red Rocks with.” Beatrice asked me.

“Well ...” I replied, “I’m going to be hitchhiking down there in a few days.”

“Hitchhiking is fine with me.” Beatrice beamed, “I’ve got to go down to a farm to work for a few days, but then we should go down together!”

I could hardly believe it. I had been crushing on Beatrice pretty much since I had met her a couple weeks earlier in the Smith Rock campground. She was one of a dozen Dirtbags who were living in The Bivy that fall and with cold weather approaching she was ready to get out of there. Beatrice was fit, Canadian, and a former competitive kick-boxer who had taken up rock climbing just in the last year. She had short hair, glasses, freckles and a winning smile, all of which I liked. She was smart, witty, and had all the self-confidence of someone who could beat you into unconsciousness if she wanted to. I was smitten and could hardly believe that she was asking me to hitch to Red Rocks, the climbing area right outside Las Vegas.

Truth be told, I had only vague plans about heading down to Red Rocks, but when she asked me if I were going those vague plans turned to 100% certainty. The idea of going on a long distance hitching trip with my crush was too much to pass up.

Beatrice was on an odd sort of Dirtbagging trip. While she was hitchhiking around America, climbing and camping, she was also enrolled in college classes finishing her degree and woofing (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, an organization that gives room and board in exchange for labor on organic farms.) She was translating that woofing into credit for college classes towards her degree. All while on the road.

Beatrice in fact left Smith before me to go down and do one of these woofing gigs. I hitched down to Southern Oregon by myself to meet her, crossing the whole state in an uneventful but lightning fast hitch of a single day. Hitchhiking is periods of boredom, followed by spikes of elation at getting picked up, conversations with strangers and occasionally....craziness. That craziness came at an astonishingly accelerated rate hitching with Beatrice.

"I've been celibate for 10 years." One of our rides declared loudly. He was an overweight man in his early seventies with large muttonchops and no teeth. "I think all the women in this town are dykes!"

"Yeah, that must be it." Beatrice agreed, slipping a wink and a knowing look towards me. We held back a laugh, just barely.

We headed towards Bishop, California as a stop on the way towards Vegas. At one point Beatrice walked off the road to pee, and I kept hitching as we waited. Sure enough she hadn't been gone more than a couple of seconds when a car pulled over for me.

"Beatrice, a ride!"

She came running out of the bushes with her backpack.

"You guys are doing this wrong." Our ride informed us, "The guy is supposed to hide and the girl hitch."

Our driver was a self-proclaimed Satanist who was afraid of the dark.

"Yeah man." He said, "I don't know what's out there, Oregon Sasquatch might get me."

"If you are a Satanist...Why do you have picture of Jesus in the front window?" Beatrice asked. She was observant like that.

"Oh that?" our Satanic friend laughed and casually tossed the picture on the floor. "That's just to be funny. "

Beatrice was a master of the hitchhiker conversation. When I took a ride, I would normally just talk about rock climbing, listen to whatever the person wanted to tell me, thank them for the ride and leave. Beatrice had a way of selling what we were doing. She would talk about the cheapness of it all, the fun and adventure. She would tell stories and engage the drivers in a meaningful way, interested in the unique way that everyone chose to live their lives. Several people dropped us off telling us that what we were doing was awesome, and that we had made them thinking about going on long road trips, or minimizing their possessions and expenses.

Joe ended up being one of Beatrice's favorite rides. After we had spent a few days climbing in Bishop, we decided that it was time to get to our final destination so we drew up a sign that said "Vegas" and started down the road. It was getting late when a ramshackle old station wagon pulled over for us. The backseat of the station wagon was filled with old donut containers and ash. Not that ash of cigarettes, but honest to goodness ash of an unknown origin almost an inch thick and coating everything in the back. The front passenger window didn't roll up, and it was cold and sometimes raining outside, causing the ride to be freezing. The heat could only go on for a few moments at a time before it caused a large knocking sound in the engine.

The man matched the car. Joe was 48 years old, but looked much older with a disheveled grey beard and long hair tied back in a ponytail. He reminded me of one of those crazy homeless people who used to be a nuclear engineer or a college professor but couldn't deal with the world anymore so went nuts. I wasn't that far off. Joe owned a small piece of land in the mountains around Bishop, where he lived with his disabled wife in a cabin with no electricity.

"The sciatic nerve in her back is all messed up!" Joe described his wife, "She looks like a turtle! Do you know what it's like to be married to someone who looks like a turtle?!"

“I do not.” I admitted.

Joe was driving down to the desert to look at a piece of land that he could purchase with a 500\$ down payment, hoping it was suitable to grow weed on.

“I can grow weed, no problem.” He proclaimed. “It’s easy - if you want a real challenge, try newts!”

Joe launched into a life story, like I suspected he was highly educated, having a master’s degree in biology. He wrote his thesis on how to breed newts, and that is exactly what he had done afterwards.

“I started breeding newts! I’m the only one who can do it, I figured out how and I started doing it. In the 1990s, every pet store had newts. They all came from me. Now none do. I tried to teach a few people how, but nobody could learn.” Joe’s voice varied in pitch and volume as he would be excited about certain topics, or angry. “The thing about breeding newts is it’s boring. It’s just looking at newt eggs, there are only so many newt eggs one can look at in a lifetime. So I took what was left of my newt money and bought a piece of land and the cabin I live in. But that was before I was 40. Up until you are 40 it is all good. 40-48, life goes to shit. My wife, she used to be so beautiful, now she looks like a turtle....”

Eventually Joe dropped us off in the middle of the desert, close to our destination of Red Rocks. We never did get an explanation for all the ash on his backseats. Where he left us was right next to a bunch of old Cargo containers that people were clearly living in. There were a mess of bible verses painted on the outside of them. Many of them referenced the apocalypse. Strange things happen in the desert.

The strangeness continued the next day. We were waiting for a ride in the morning and we watched in the not too far of distance as a dry lightning storm started to form just a few miles from here. I had seen these happen in the desert before and knew that they could bring all kinds of crazy weather with them. What this one brought was a crazy ride.

The lighting inched towards us and the dry part of it started to become hail. Fuck. Just as we were about to get hammered on, exposed in the desert an old truck with a homemade wooden back and a million Fox News bumper stickers on it pulled over. As a large piece of hail hit us I wouldn't have cared at all what this truck had on its bumper.

We jumped it. The man in the driver's seat was about what you would expect. He was a white guy in his mid-fifties, looking little more than homeless and in about the same condition as his rusty truck. His body was working but he was missing most of his teeth. His wife was a large, light skinned black woman. This was probably the strangest interracial relationship west of the Mississippi.

After a quick introduction and upon learning that Beatrice was from Canada, our driver got quickly to the topic that he really wanted to talk about. Hail hammered hard down on the truck. We had to pull over for a minute.

"Let me ask you something, what do they think about Barack Obama up in Canada?" He asked her.

"Oh no!" His wife said, sounding mostly amused, "Here he goes!"

Beatrice hedged, not wanting to offend the people who saved us from a miserable time in the hail and lightning "I don't know"

"Well let me tell you what I think!" He started.

What followed was a long stream of consciousness rant that included every conspiracy theory about Barack Obama ever thought up and then some. Every time he would hit a point, his wife would give out a loud "mmm hmmm" of agreement. Some of the highlights:

Barack Obama was prohibiting them from raising the types of chickens they wanted.

Barack Obama was buying up all the land in the Mojave Desert for some sinister purpose.

Barack Obama was born in Kenya (His wife agreed loudly, "I read it on the Internet!")

Barack Obama was a Muslim.

Barack Obama was the Antichrist.

Barack Obama was a Satanist.

Barack Obama was shutting down the San Bernardino farmers markets.

Barack Obama was stealing all the nations' money and keeping it in his "Bama Stash."

When they dropped us off, just a few miles from our destination, we got out of the car and instantly burst into laughter. Never had there been a more humorous ride - the strangest of strange rides on a strange trip.

Beatrice and I eventually went our separate ways. Occasionally we still see each other in different climbing areas and the first topic of conversation inevitably starts with "You remember the 'Bama Stash' people?"

## Chapter 14

### Wanderlust

There are people who feel the call of it, an almost uncontrollable desire to move, to travel, to be somewhere different than they are in the moment. It is that call that pushed explorers and nomads from time immemorial to spread out to every part of the globe, from the Amazon to the Arctic. In every culture, there are people who get wanderlust.

The average American moves 11.4 times in their lifetime. Your average Mongolian moves 10 times in a year. All that moving that your average American does is despite tremendous pressure from society to settle in one place. The normal story sold to you is that you need to go to college, get married, buy a house and settle down.

Despite that 12% of Americans move every year! Now maybe they are just interpreting a deep desire to be a nomad with the context of modern American society. Perhaps they are moving houses as a reaction to something deep in the human DNA that compels us, a wanderlust gene. In fact nomadic behavior is something that separates us from other species. While it's true that other animals migrate, they are not move in the same sense that a human being does, by going somewhere entirely new and living in an entirely new environment. Even our closest relative, Neanderthals, never spread out from Europe where they evolved. Human beings almost from there very first moments that we were human beings, spread out from Africa in a remarkably short length of time and from there colonized almost the entire world.

The unsettled feeling that makes people uproot and move is that same ancient desire to find new experience. So when you feel that sense of wanderlust deep down, you are feeling a connection to our ancestors and what it is like to even be a human being, despite the strange and modern world that we live in. So rather than fight those wanderlust urges for the sake of modern societal expectations or temporarily satiating it by making small moves every few years,

perhaps it is time to embrace what is in so many of our natures and become a nomad full time.

So many people are stuck in a rut. The very fact that you are alive is amazing and unlikely. Equally that you live in this time when our whole planet is more accessible than ever. It is more accessible because of the vast amount of information we have and our ease that we can travel. Don't you owe it to yourself to use the amazing fact of your own existence to go out and explore as much of the world as possible?

It is so easy to just stay in the same place all year round, work at the same job, and just play on your phone all the time. We've taken the entire struggle out of human life, even to the point that walking up stairs and opening doors are largely a thing of the past. Our phones tell us how to get places and sometimes even where to go. It's no wonder the sedentary life has sunk into a depressed mediocrity.

Aside from the ancient and philosophic reasons, there are good practical reasons to be nomadic, particularly if you are a rock climber or other outdoor sports athlete. Weather is one of particular importance. It's always sunny in California, but in the summer it is hot as balls. If you are a permanent resident of Los Angeles, you may have short access to amazing winter climbing, it may even be tolerable in the spring and fall but in summertime it simply won't happen. Live in Seattle year round? Well enjoy pulling on plastic holds in the gym while it rains for nine months a year. Most places in the US have hot summers and cold winters.

Most places. If you are a nomadic Dirtbag, you can pick the places with the best weather that you are looking for and be there in the season that you want to be there. It's probably the main reason that someone goes on the road to start with, they just want good weather.

Even if you live in one of those rare places where you can climb all four seasons (Flagstaff or Bishop), you are still limited to a small amount of climbing in summer or winter. However up north the summer isn't a limiting factor at all. In fact it expands the amount of

places that you can go. There are so many amazing places that *only* have good weather in the summer.

Other than just climbing, which hopefully is only a small part of what makes you a person, there are so many other ways in which the weather holds our life hostage. The weather makes us unable to do certain activities regardless of what we desire to do. Breaking the bonds of this ancient foe of man is essential for maximizing freedom. It is what compelled ancient nomads to move, as they followed the animals or sought pasture for their own animals.

Bad weather is a major contributing factor depression and mental problems, yet people rarely consider the idea that you can just leave when the weather is bad and not have to suffer through seasonally grim weather.

In addition there are so many places that you can only go during certain seasons. The mountains of Wyoming or the far North in Canada are places that are shut out except in the warmest months of the year. You better be there for the South American summer if you want to explore Patagonia and even then you better have long lengths of free time to wait for weather. It's hard to have that sort of time off, unless you are a Dirtbag.

The two extremes of people who are able to properly explore these places are the extremely rich, normally old from a life of work, and Dirtbags. Dirtbags have become unrestrained in their free time and able to use that time as capital by being in these remote and beautiful places for long stretches by just Dirtbagging, living out of a tent while being in unique places or just going to enjoy the best weather possible.

Being Nomadic is what makes this possible. In North America there is a natural drift south that happens every season. People who live settled lives imagine the idea of living outside to be intolerable, because they are not properly considering the nomadic element of Dirtbagging. You aren't suffering through the harsh winter that you get in a four season climate, but rather

going where the weather is the best, or if you are a ski bum or ice climber and a hearty fuck, where the weather is best for whatever you want to do.

Although it can be a well-planned out process, Dirtbagging can also just happen organically, leaving one area for another when the weather simply becomes subpar for what you want to do. That way you will gradually inch south in the winter and north in the summer, hopping a few hundred miles or changing elevation with the season.

Likewise surfers can travel down to Central America in the dry season and surf in warm water in January and save money while doing it. It is because of this concept that there is far less suffering involved than if you were to just try to stay put in one a four season environment, with hot summers, freezing winters and the worst of all, a 9 to 5 job.

## Chapter 15

### #Vanlife

“This is it - we are the last of the Dirtbags.”

That was a common thing to hear ten years ago. There were just a few of us freezing and huddled around a campfire for warmth. Today that same climbing campground is packed full of Sprinter vans with solar panels. There are more Dirtbags than ever. With the Internet and the shared ideas that come with it, more people are being exposed to the idea that you don't have to just live in an apartment or house and work a 40 hour a week job.

If you are a person who is inclined naturally towards not needing a lot of shit, or if you are a person who is inclined naturally to being broke as shit, moving into a vehicle just makes sense. The main reason that these groups of people don't move into a van is that it is just never presented to them as an option or is just seen as an act of desperation.

That was all changed with the Internet. The Internet makes it easier than ever to be exposed to the idea of Dirtbagging. People build out fancy Sprinter vans and share them on Instagram. Still these small snippets do not give a full and complete picture of how to manage all of the other things that go along with being a Dirtbag. Although like anything in life, the best way that you will learn how to do anything is by firsthand experience. That is why the most important thing of all is to just go out and try being on an extended trip for the first time, not a week but a month long trip and the best thing is if you can do this in between a time where you are paying rent, perhaps in between moving or when you are leaving college.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Volcano

It was the first time that we crossed into Argentina that we even heard about it. We told a driver that we had hitched all the way from the US and were going to Bariloche.

“Really?” He asked us, “But what about the Volcano?”

“What Volcano?”

That was the first that we had even heard about Volcan Osorno on our whole 10,000 mile Odyssey.

“Yeah, I think that most of the South is covered in Ash from this stupid Chilean Volcano.”

Like many of the people who talked to us about the Volcano in the months to come, he loved to point out that the Volcano that was dumping ash on them was not even from Argentina, but was Chilean.

“And yet we are the ones covered in ash!” bemoaned our driver.

The first ride where we actually saw the ash was later that day. An extremely elderly woman in her eighties pulled up to us, Dan started speaking to her in Spanish and she cut him off.

“Do you boys speak English?” she said, in a strange quasi-British accent.

We asked her where she was from.

“I’m from here.” She explained. “I was born in Argentina, but I’m British Argentinian.”

The elderly woman owned several vacation homes she rented out to people, but this year her business had really suffered.

“Because of this bloody volcano!” she exclaimed.

We saw for the first time the real effects of the volcano. Ash, thick and deep like snow lined the roads. We had no real way of knowing how much ash there was in Bariloche, and

we had come all this way so we did the only thing we could, we pressed on. If the climbing in Frey, our destination was out because of that bloody volcano, we'd just go further south.

As luck would have it, Bariloche was not covered, and neither way Frey. There were days where ash swirled in the air like a fine mist and on the summit of Torre Principle, the tallest peak in Frey you could see ash spewing from the Volcano like Mt. Doom from lord of the rings. While we were there, it was a constant reminder that we were in the shadow of an active volcano.

## Chapter 16

### A Successful Life?

If you stopped right now and asked yourself, “What makes a successful life?” what would your answer be? You may come up with all sorts of things, being a good moral person or having lots of friends and family who care about you. It could be living a full life of adventure and excitement. Whatever you may come up with, owning lots of crap will generally not be on that list.

Everyone wants to be happy. In various times in history people have been told that different things will make them happy. Perhaps they were told obedience to a king, or religion, certain Gods, philosophies or patriotism to your country was the key to happiness. Today people largely recognize that these people in the past were being told lies by those in authority.

Today in the West we have a similar lie that we tell people. Consider advertising for a moment. What is the message behind every advertisement? It’s that this beer or that car or this prescription medication will make you happy. When a beer advertisement is showing people having a great time with their beer, they aren’t selling you on the beer - they are selling you on happiness.

So when you are in the store or shopping online and thinking about buying something you should always consider “will this thing make me a happier person?” The truth is they are often just a stopgap for the next thing to own.

A second thing to consider when buying something is how many hours of your life went into the purchase of it. For example take a smartphone and plan. \$500 on the latest smartphone and another \$50 a month on your plan is \$1100 a year. If you make \$20 an hour, you are trading 10 days *of your life* for that phone. For the newest car, sold and advertised to

you as though God himself designed it, bought with debt (cleverly relabeled as a payment plan) you may be trading a year or more of your life for it.

Is the smooth handling and power windows with tight cornering worth a year of your life? If you could press a button that would shorten your life by 40 hours a week for a year and give you a car, would you do it? Put in those terms almost nobody would make that trade and yet that is what people end up doing time and time again.

So what will make you happy? This book can't tell you that. For many people rock climbing, living in nature and traveling is the focus that gives them purpose for life. If you are trapped in a 40 hour a week job, getting home tired all the time, you don't even have time or energy or the freedom to find your own purpose in life. Once you do find a purpose, the only thing to do is dedicate yourself to it fully which is another thing you will find hard to do while working to make someone else rich.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### We Made it!

When I first told my friends and family that I was hitchhiking from the United States to South America, in my mind I had little doubt that we would make it in the end. Sure enough, a mere seven weeks after we had started from Las Vegas our last ride, a doctor who spoke English and took us out to dinner to celebrate our victory, dropped us off in Bariloche, Argentina, the northern tip of Patagonia. The ground was covered with a thin layer of ash from the Volcano, but the mountains looked clear.

Our lips were sunburned from spending so much time in the desert, we were dirty, and we had a four hour hike ahead of us to get to Refugio Frey, our ultimate destination. We were jubilant, triumphant, it swamped our tiredness. Despite the fact that we had stopped for two weeks to climb in Colombia and Peru, despite the fact Dan got sick and we were stopped by mudslides. Despite the Volcano, despite everything we were there after only seven weeks of hitching. With good luck, I think you could make the journey in less than a month. We had hitched 10,000 miles.

After sleeping and feasting, we got on a local city bus for the final three miles of the journey. We camped at the base of the trail up to Frey and in the morning, 70lbs of gear on our back we hiked up. In South America in climbing areas there are commonly refugios. A refugio is more or less a campground except that it has a cabin you can access. Some of them, like that one at Refugio Frey are even staffed with people and supplies. At this one you could even buy wine and pizza.

At the base were people camping. It was a scene I had already seen a thousand times before - A mix of international climbers camping at the base, maybe 50 people from all over the world. We heard the burble of the English language coming from all over camp and

wouldn't you know it, within less than 30 minutes of being there I ran into Thomas, a climber I knew vaguely from Yosemite Valley back in California. We had hitchhiked all this way and here they were, one of the first people I met at my destination I knew already.

"We hitchhiked here from America!"

"You guys look like it," Remarked Thomas.

No doubt we did, dirty, bearded we unloaded our stuff. Set up a semi-permanent camp. This was where we would live for the next month. For me it was a return to my normal life. After all I had been living in a tent and rock climbing back in the United States.

Dan and I fell into a routine of rock climbing, sometimes with each other and sometimes with random people coming through Frey. We bathed in the lake. After a couple of weeks two women from Australia joined our camp and we became a group of four. During that month of living in Frey, we heard rumors of a new area just across the border back in Chile. Valle Cochamó.

"You can even see it from the top of Torre Principal." Thomas told us.

The next day we climbed up the Principal. Although not particularly challenging, it was the tallest tower to climb in Frey, sitting at the crest of the bowl of towers which made up Frey. At the top of it, I had to hold my breath. The massive Volcan Osorno dominated the view. It was awesome, like a Mount Rainier that was stuck right in your face. Past it you could see the smaller peak which was spewing ash into the air, looking like Mount Doom from Lord of the Rings. Three South American Condors, the largest flying bird in the world, swooped around us. Sometimes they would get quite close, close enough to make eye contact. Farther in the distance we could vaguely make out a bunch of vague granite domes and mountains could be made out. Valle Cochamó.

Slowly back at camp, we heard different people's plans for going to Cochamó. A month of travel had left us itchy so we decided there would be one last bit of hitching on our trip. We

packed up our stuff, left Frey behind and hiked down the trail. I didn't know it at the time, but this was the last time Dan and I would hitchhike together. Later he would get a job in Chile teaching English and stay in South America. Meanwhile I had \$500 which I kept hidden on me, this was the money earmarked to get me back home. When I was down to just that, I would return home and I would do that trip by myself ...

## Chapter 17

### Jesus, Buddha and Dirtbags

“Give all your money to the poor and follow me.” Jesus said to disciples. When Jesus instructed his followers to give up everything they owned and give it to the poor, why did he do it? 600 years earlier Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha had preached a similar message of living a simple life as opposed to a materialistic one. Despite that, most Buddhists and Christians today, faced with modern society, give in to materialism in pursuit of happiness. This is even though their wise men of the past (and countless other people) figured out that pursuit of things will never bring about happiness.

Money cannot buy happiness. It’s a mantra that’s repeated over and over again, even as everyone continues to live their lives as though it actually could. Deep down everyone knows this. Sadly many truly only come to realize this near the end of their life, when they’ve looked back on it and wished that they did something other than just work all the time.

Perhaps the truism that Buddha and Jesus were telling their followers was not just for a spiritual benefit, but also teaching them a better way to live a life, a life where they will be happier and more fulfilled. One thing that no wise man or religious leader has ever told people was that the meaning of life was to accumulate as many possessions as possible. Even though there are some people from the past who we acknowledge figured out truths about how to live, it is often times just easier for us psychologically to live like our society expects us to, even if it’s not what’s actually best for us.

In medieval times that might have meant being a farmer or a serf. A few brave souls left the land and became adventurers and seamen. It was escaped serfs who eventually set up the merchants of Venice. People who felt that they didn’t have to live the lifestyle that others thought was their pre-destiny, but could chose to be their own people.

Today people do the same thing going in a different sense. They go to high school, college, rack up student loan debt, meet a spouse, get a job that they don't really like so they can pay off that student loan debt, get an even more gigantic debt, called a mortgage, say they are going to travel when they retire, actually stay in the same place, die.

Jesus told his followers to get rid of all of their possessions because it would be a distraction from his mission (whatever people want to argue that that was.) Now you don't have to be religious or even believe in god to recognize that accumulating and owning things is a distraction to actually living your life the way you want to. It sucks away at your physical and emotional energy. Think about the emotional distress you have when you break something expensive that you own, say an expensive china plate. That's a distress over the time that you lost making money to buy that plate. You recognize that you just broke hours of your life. However if you never bought that plate to start with and contented yourself with the things that you have already, you have your hours back and never have to worry about having something break or losing something.

We also spend so much of our modern life under the delusion that having this possession or that gadget is going to make our lives easier. Think about a person who owns a minimal amount of things. They actually have an easier life because that life is a simpler one. Our needs always have remained simple over time - it's just that marketing and consumerism have continually invented new "needs" for people to have. Deep down though, people know what really will make them happy and what they really want to do with their lives. Once in a while a spiritual leader comes along just to remind people of what they already know.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The Way Back From South America

Dan decided that he wanted to stay in South America. I was fatigued of travel, after having spent six months in South and Central America. I was starting to crave hamburgers even, a real sign of American homesickness. Even more importantly I was also running out of money. Having been settled for 3 months in Chile and Argentina I was ready to hit the road again, for the way north. I was planning on flying home, but flights out of Peru were a third of the cost that they were in Chile, so what's 3000 miles more to hitch? I stuck out my thumb and headed north.

So I set off north on my own. There is a strange unspoken rule of hitchhiking: when you are at your dirtiest, that is the only time you will be picked up by attractive women. Dan and I were only picked up by female drivers once on our whole trip south. My first day hitching north on my own, I got picked up by women five times in a row.

All of them were polite enough not to mention the smell of a man who just spent a month straight in the mountains. I even got picked up by the local female news anchor of Valparaíso, all dolled up in her full anchor outfit and headed off to read the morning news to Chileans. She was also mayor of a small town outside of Valparaíso.

The main task that was ahead of me hitching north was the city of Santiago. It is a massive mega-metropolis that takes up half of central Chile. I was almost certainly going to end up inside of the city and have to navigate the bus system to find my way out north again. A lot of my luck for getting out of the city depended on my ride in. I hoped for a favorable drop off.

Now in Chile two types of people pick you up: wealthy people who own their own cars or working class people who are driving a work car or truck. The latter was my ride into

Santiago, a working class bloke driving a truck for a factory. It was only a few minutes into the ride he was asking me if I smoked weed.

Now, back in the U.S. I am a regular pot smoker, but in South America we hadn't gone out of our way to find weed and had just been smoking randomly when we came across it. South America's weed was largely brick weed: seeds, stems and bud all packed together. What it didn't have was anything close to the strength of America's weed.

What this guy pulled out of his pocket, covered in thick THC crystals was high grade North American Bud. The type of weed with a name like "train wreck" or "green crack."

"It's from Canada." The truck driver declared in Spanish, "My cousin brought 5lbs of it on an airplane. You can go to prison for five years in Chile for that."

Holy fuck, huge balls on his cousin. Holy fuck, after six months of barely smoking I was stoned as fuck. That was when he dropped me off, in the middle of industrial Santiago. There was fast moving traffic and no way for the cars to pull over. The weed had also given me a crazy case of the munchies and I destroyed all the food I was carrying with me.

The only saving grace is that there was a bus stop, named on the bus of random towns. I knew that the road was going north. So my stone brain just thought "Tilttil. That's a funny name." Lo and behold I was on the bus to Tilttil. I had no idea where that was, except that it was north and not Santiago. I rode the bus to the end of the line. Tilttil was a small, very rural town in the middle of olive and grape country.

The effects of the strong Canadian weed were still heavy in my system, causing me to have the munchies majorly. Before I went to find an Internet cafe so I could even figure out where the fuck Tilttil even was, I decided to find a "Completo", which is Chile's national dish. Normally a Completo is a hotdog smothered in Mayo and some weird sort of guacamole. Usually it had no appeal to me, but starving and stoned it sounded like the best thing ever. As I even started my search an old man ran up to me.

My safety cord with my Spanish translator Dan had now been cut and it was now up to me. I had been doing a pretty good job so far on my trip north, but being super stoned made it more difficult. I tried to explain my situation to the old man. He shook his head and practically grabbed me by the arm, telling me that he knew a lady who speaks English and has a cafe.

Sure enough he lead me to a small cafe, I got my Completo. The woman who owned the cafe's English was only so-so, but between that and my Spanish I managed to explain my situation. I was trying to get back to the Pan America highway without going back to Santiago. She let me use her laptop to look at a map.

"You know, it's getting pretty dark. Where are you going to stay tonight?"

"I have a tent." I explained.

"Well I have an extra room and my kids are learning English."

Just like that she packed me into her car and I was riding off further into rural Chile. Hispanic hospitality is a real thing that you run into throughout South America. I met her two young children. They were clearly a well off family. The patriarch of the family was a businessman who was off managing an importing business.

Having spent a month in the mountains, living off of rice and whatever showed up in the Cochamó free box, the unlimited empanadas that they had at their house was heaven. The kids practiced there English on me and asked me questions.

One question they asked me was if I was a Catholic. I told them I wasn't religious.

"Us either!" the children and mother exclaimed. "We are Atheists. Dad is a Catholic but he doesn't know anything about it.

They even offered me a job in the restaurant and teaching their kids English. However my heart was for home and I reluctantly left my would-be-family the next day to continue on to the Atacama Desert.

## Chapter 18

### Owning Less

It's strange that in a society that tells you to own more, the secret to happiness might be doing the complete opposite. There are many people who have broken away from the system and done the same thing: sold all their possessions and gone on a trip around the world or gone on the road. One thing is true about all of those people. Not a single one of them ever regretted it. The idea of abandoning normality is such a frightening one, although that fear and anxiety is not based on reality. It's simply the idea that if one does not constantly have a job, something will happen that is terrible. Often times the something that'll happen is poorly defined even.

That the Dirtbags that you meet and other free people are actually healthier and happier people than the population at large, who suffer from all sorts of stress related anxiety you be the evidence that you need that there is something right about that type of lifestyle. Perhaps the fear is that one will somehow end up homeless in the sense of the homeless in the city. However it's not a real concern someone should have. First off, if you are in a climbing campground you are not in a city. Second, the homeless overwhelmingly have drug or alcohol problems or mental illness. So if that's not you, I wouldn't worry about it.

Owning less is great. First and most important it's great for you as a person to keep your life organized and simple. It's great as it enables you to be nomadic if you can keep all your possessions down to what you can transport. It's great for the environment, as you aren't stuck in the cycle of mass consumption that takes over the world. Your average first world citizen produces 17 times the waste that someone in the third world does. By living a more simple life you greatly reduce your environmental impact. It's great for your mental health, it's a small wonder that when people meditate and relax, they like to do it in an empty room. If

you have a thing that you think you can't live without, think about all the other people who live without it.

It's amazing that despite how great owning a small amount of things is, people are still encouraged to own a tremendous amount of things. There is also the moral aspect of owning more. If you are one lonely man in a giant multi-bedroom 20 bathroom mansion, think of the massive, massive amount of waste that you are having. How such a person could walk down the street and even look at a homeless person and not feel terrible when they have 40 extra bedrooms is the sign of an immoral life.

Think of how much better the world would be if the wealthy lived simply, how much more societal good could be done with their excess money. Well does not the same thing apply to you? When put on the standards of the world, most people in the west are extremely wealthy. People don't feel that way, because they have financial struggles that are based on paying rent and the pursuit of *things*. If you can eliminate that from your life and live simply instead you'll find an almost instant boost in your health, wellbeing and free time.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Stoned Ride

Getting a ticket or fine in Yosemite Valley is commonly referred to as getting “tooled.” The tools refer to the law enforcement rangers of Yosemite. I had gotten tooled hard by the rangers and ended up with a fat \$175 out of bounds camping ticket. Nothing cuts into the Dirtbag budget like getting tooled. I know a pair of guys who were climbing El Capitan, it started to storm on them and they had to do an exhausting rappel through the night. They came down and found a dry place to uncomfortably sleep at the base of El Capitan, only to be awoken by a Ranger at the crack of dawn. Now, it’s illegal to sleep at the base of El Cap. They explained their story of having to bail because of a storm and being so exhausted and having to stay dry. The officer listened patiently, and then slapped them both with out of bounds camping fine. Tooled!

Good luck would have it that I had a climber friend in San Francisco who was remodeling his house and needed a pair of hands for a couple of days. It would be enough money to pay off my fine and keep myself rolling on the road for a little bit longer. Being a car-less Dirtbag at the time I decided to hitch out that way, until I was in range of San Francisco’s public transit.

A couple of quick rides got me outside of Yosemite Valley. Sometimes when hitchhiking you can actually hear the car that you somehow know will pick you up. Vroom, vroom, clunk, vroom, clunk, clunk.

Such was the case the next ride that pulled over for me. It was a 1982 Ford Watdafuk. To call it a beater would be a generous description. It would win a contest for the car you were most surprised could actually run. The paint was entirely gone and the frame was two colors, steel and rust.

“Where you going?” I asked.

Inside the mobile steel framed death trap was a guy straight out of Trailer Park Boys. A wannabe gangster of the first degree. He was complete with Raiders' jersey, bandana and hat combo, and massively over-sized shorts. I thought for a moment before I got in that car. However the guy was so skinny and scrawny that he didn't seem like a possible threat. I jumped on in and we squealed away.

Conversation was awkward as I strained to find common ground between us. He had not actually come from Yosemite, but was visiting his sister who lived in one of the hill towns close to the Valley and now was returning to Los Angeles, so he was only taking me 30 miles or so until our roads turned off to different places. Eventually we found one thing we had in common.

"You smoke weed?" He asked.

"Thank god," I thought.

When smoking and driving, most people opt to be as discreet as possible. Not so my driver, who without even slowing down and just driving with his knees, produced a full sized table bong like you would find in a college dorm. I took a bong rip inside the small car and passed it back to my driver, he cleared the bong. One bong rip was not enough for him apparently and he repacked it and we proceeded to take multiple rips as we sped down the road. No sooner had he reloaded the bong for the fourth time than red and blue lights started flashing.

"Oh shit!" He yelled.

His weed he put into the glove compartment and the bong he put very indiscreetly behind the driver's seat. It was not well hidden. There really wasn't a good place to hide it in the two door watdafuk, but I probably would have gone with under the seat rather than in pretty much open view behind the driver seat.

I sat there. I was as high as I had ever been in my life and in that state of mind I reviewed my options. None of the weed was mine, nor was the bong, nor was I driving. Really there was nothing illegal to pin on me at all. I tried to brush back my growing paranoia and reminded myself that everything was going to be okay. The cop strolled up to our window. My driver rolled it down. Only two minutes before, we had been hot-boxing this car.

“Do you know how fast you were going?” the cop asked my driver.

“Nope.” His answer was long and drawn out, or at least it sounded that way to me.

“License and registration.”

“Yeaaaaah....” My host replied eyes bloodshot, “I don’t have a driver’s license.”

“Let me see the registration then.” The cop replied.

“Yeah, I don’t have any registration.”

I was silent, but in my head I was screaming “WHAT THE FUCK, WHY DID YOU PICK ME UP?” Still, I hadn’t done anything wrong so I just sat there in silence as the cop ordered my driver out of the car.

“Did you steal this car!?” The cop demanded of him.

“Nah, man. It’s my sister’s baby’s daddy’s car.” There was no hint of irony in his voice.

The cop then pulled him further away, so I was left only hearing bits and pieces of their conversation. I watched him take a sobriety test and pass apparently. I watched them get on a cell phone and call up the sister’s baby’s daddy to confirm that this was not a stolen car. I watched the cop take down his information and take a photo of him. I knew two things.

**A.** We smelled like weed.

**B.** If we were in Texas and not California, we would be getting a full cavity search by now.

After a moment (or an eternity, I was too high to tell) the cop came over and said his first words to me.

“Do you have a driver’s license?”

“Uh, yeah.” I replied.

“Well.” He said, “You are going to have to drive this car away. He doesn’t have a driver’s license so I can’t legally let him drive away.”

My stoned brain processed what I was being told, “Listen man, I’m not going where he’s going. I’m just with him for another 30 miles.”

“Look.” the officer told me, “I don’t care if you switch drivers the moment you are out of sight - I just can’t legally let him drive away. As long as you haven’t taken anything that would impair your ability to drive. Like alcohol... or anything else.”

There was a long pause. *Too* long a pause.

“No.” I said. “I’ll do it.”

I moved to the driver’s seat and the guy who had picked me up got to the passenger seat, holding his own ticket for driving without a license that was much bigger than the out of bounds camping ticket that I had gotten.

“Okay” I said, “I guess I’m driving now, where are the keys?”

“Naw man,” He said, “You just turn the ignition.”

Sure enough, the car started to life. Now when you pull away after being pulled over by a cop, the cop pulls out too and follows you for a bit. I was driving for about three minutes with that cop right behind me, stoned out of my gourd and knowing that the cop knew I was stoned. However we turned down a different small highway soon. It was then that my companion looked behind the seat at the bong.

“Shit!” He exclaimed, “Is that where I put that!?”

Then he reached over and took a fresh rip from it. I did the driving until we parted ways. I made it to San Fran and paid off my ticket. Who knows what ever happened to that guy.

Moral of the story? Give as little information to police as possible.

## Chapter 19

### The Pursuit of Comfort

Another thing that prevents many people who would want to live a more simple Dirtbag-style life is the pursuit of comfort. People are so obsessed with obtaining maximum comfort at all times that it actually prevents them from living a full and complete life. People try to find the closest parking spot to avoid walking a few extra yards, or they spend extra money (trading an hour of their life) for the most comfortable shave.

This is despite the near universal knowledge that many amazing human accomplishments were done by being extremely uncomfortable. The early explorers, either Polynesians or the Vikings or anyone who set out on a boat to find new lands, went through extreme amounts of discomfort. When Tenzig Norgay and Edmond Hillary reached the top of the Mt. Everest, they did because they went through immense suffering to reach their goal. A top athlete does not just show up to a basketball or football game and play. He's been in a weight room and studying film, suffering so that he can become great.

Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein spent months and years in cramped laboratories and unpleasant conditions, going through many amounts of old books. They were suffering so they could achieve something greater. Despite the clear link between discomfort and achievement that is there for everyone to see, people spend inordinate amounts of time and energy focused on having maximum comfort.

Think about it for a moment - is being comfortable really that high on your list of life priorities? You spend all of your time indoors, getting the exact temperature that you want, suffering through as little discomfort as possible and the next thing you know, you are dead and surprised that you are unsatisfied with what you didn't do with your life. If you can break

through that mental barrier of needing comfort, you can find a real, authentic life of adventure of accomplishment instead.

Going through struggles not only allows you greater achievement but also brings you greater periods of joy as well. Consider four people sitting in a room. There is a fire going and everyone is chatting and drinking tea. Now suppose that one of those people just spent four days biking through freezing cold wind and rain and come directly out of the cold to sit with his friends by the fire.

Which of those four do you suppose enjoys the warmth of the fire the most, and appreciates the taste of the tea and the pleasant company of other people the most? For the three, it might just be another normal night in and for the other it is heaven. You cannot truly know how great water is unless you have been thirsty or how great food is unless you have been hungry. People who fear going on a true adventure because of their fear of discomfort should know that suffering is only terrible in the moment but that it actually is a key to bringing so much more joy and appreciation into your life as a whole.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Sleeping in Strange Places

In a decade of travel I've managed to sleep in a thousand strange places. Our modern society insists so much that you always have a job and pay rent that they even criminalize sleeping outdoors in many places. So when you are on a real Dirtbag trip, it becomes a good habit to sleep where nobody is going to look. In the third world nobody cares where you sleep, but for safety reasons it is often advisable to do the same thing.

For both reasons I've slept in some truly strange places. The instinct of climbers is to climb. So the top of buildings was always the first place I'd try to go. On our massive hitch to South America, we did that exact thing and woke up to discover we were on top of the town jail. When we made it to South America my tent was promptly destroyed by a Patagonian storm and I found a cave to move into. I wrote on the outside, "Kevin the Dirtbag." People even left food there to ditch weight for their long hike out.

When I was on a bike tour in Spain, I was at the end of a hard day and discovered a three story, crumbling manor that was totally abandoned. It pre-dated electricity and in fact had never been wired for it. Up on the third story was scrawled in large graffiti "Casa De Dracula." At night I discovered why - bat noise was constant around the manor.

In all those years of sleeping in weird places while traveling (because 95% of the time I was just in a climbing campground) I was never once woken up and told to move along or even bothered.

## Chapter 20

### The Magic of Campfires

You never get lonely on the road. Most people probably envision a life of travel as somehow a solitary existence. Perhaps that view was made popular because of the book and movie “Into the Wild” where Chris McCandless dies alone in a school bus in Alaska. However Dirtbagging, especially in the main areas is much more “party” than “lonely.” The best areas are the ones away from cellphone reception, when the sun goes down people are all looking for something to do. That’s where an ancient tradition comes into modern life and a magic cure for loneliness happens: campfires.

Something about a campfire makes people social; people stare into it and are mesmerized by the flames. It brings out the storyteller in everyone. This may have even helped our early ancestors evolve into us. Since man first harnessed fire hundreds of thousands of years ago campfires have been not only a source of heat but also protection against predators and the unknown. The early ideas of magic, mysticism and religion were formed around those early stone aged campfires. Countless friendships and courtships of the past were formed around campfires. The last century was the first time in a hundred thousand years that human beings, in mass, stopped gathering around campfires and with it, we lost a part of ourselves.

Today the same sort of magic happens in every campground where it gets cold at night. People share warmth and wood and it is not uncommon for total strangers to come up and ask to share your campfire and instantly become friends. This is in such stark contrast to the world at large, where social media has increasingly made people more distant from one another and ironically less social.

As a full time outdoor athlete, you'll find yourself around countless campfires. The return to the way things were increases friendships and bonds between people. It reactivates that primitive part of our brain where we connect with others as a means to beat back the night.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Dirtbag Moral Lessons

Beau and I were hitching up to Homer, an Alaskan town partly founded by hippies in the 1960s. We had been standing there for about half an hour, which in Alaska is longer than we had waited so far. As another car drove by us two hippie girls, attractive and young with dreadlocks, tattoos and an artsy vibe appeared, appeared straight out of the woods. They also were hitchhiking to Homer and with good etiquette they walked down the road a few hundred feet so that any car with two empty seats would see us first.

“How much you want to bet someone drives by us and picks up them.” I said to Beau. He laughed and nodded.

Sure enough, not more than two minutes later a car drove by us and stopped for them.

“Told you.”

However it was not even another two minutes after that a car swerved off the road, tires screeching. A head popped out the back window and a heavy Filipino accent spoke to us.

“Hey, come on in.”

Excited for the ride and more excited with the possibility to catching up to the hippy chicks, Beau and I jumped straight in the back seat. Perhaps we should have been a little more diligent before jumping on in, but that didn't cross our mind as we squeezed in the back seat with the man who greeted us.

“This here is Dave.” The excited Filipino man pointed at the driver, an older white man with a thick gray mustache. “He's the Big Dawg, he'll get you where you're goin'.”

Dave on cue let out a howl like a wolf and we sped off down the road. It took us all of about thirty seconds to smell the alcohol and for Dave's driving to become a little on swervy side. \*Click\* went Beau's seatbelt. Up to that point I had rarely seen him wear one. In the

front passenger seat sat the third person in the car, Catalina, a stunningly beautiful eastern European girl. All three of them had been working in a fish processing plant like us and like us were on a break between jobs. The pair of older men (who were both married we later found out) were driving Catalina 200 miles to Sitka in order to take her to dinner.

After a little conversation about our shared job and a little tight gripping of the side rails as Dave swerved around the road we told them about the two hippie girls we had seen and how someone had driven by us and picked up them. Not more than five minutes later those we saw those same two girls were on the side of the road with their thumbs out. The whole car let out some sort of victory cry as we drove by them.

“Hey, good looking girls.” the Filipino man said to us, “Maybe we should drop you off and pick them up.”

He looked up at Catalina and instantly regretted saying it. Both of the older men were also quite ugly and Catalina looked like a catalog model.

Rodrigo, our backseat passenger leaned up towards Catalina.

“Hey Catalina, do you want to stay in the United States? We can live in the city or in the mountains?”

He turned towards us and without lowering his voice at all said, “Don’t tell my wife I said this, eh?”

I’m not sure that there were any future circumstances that would have been possible, but with a nod I agreed. Big Dawg Dave screeched around a corner, blurry eyes seeming to have a hard time adjusting to the road ahead. To our Filipino friend, this seemed like a good time to smoke some weed and he produced a pipe and the car got quickly hot-boxed. Amazingly this did not improve the driving of Big Dawg.

Catalina nervously grabbed the steering wheel as we started to drift off the road. She was pretty sober and it was at least a small comfort that she was up there.

“Hey Catalina.” Dave said “I’m kind of, uhhh, sleepy, do you want to drive?”

“No, I can’t” She said in her beautifully accented English, “I don’t know how.”

All the comfort of having her in the front seat went out the window. The turn off to Homer could not have come soon enough and at the fork that split between Homer and Sitka, which was in the middle of nowhere, we happily jumped out of the car.

It seemed almost an instant later that a large truck with a camper stopped for us. There were two men in the front seats and they pointed a thumb to the back.

“You are going to have to get in the back.”

We went back there and to our surprise in the camper there were the two cute dread locked hippies with their sign that said “Homer” on it.

“Going to Homer?” one of them asked.

Moral of the Story: Always make sure your ride is sober before getting in a car.

## Chapter 21

### Traveling with an Open Mind

Normally you will end up meeting someone (or someones) to travel with. If you are on the road, people are just naturally drawn together. We are tribal by nature and small tribes tend to form on the road, as you are drawn together for temporary or extended adventures. Whoever you end up meeting, it is important to keep an open mind while traveling.

One of the great advantages that Dirtbags and those on extended trips have is flexibility. So it's almost a duty to use that flexibility. When you are only on a week-long or two week-long agenda, you tend to have a focused list of where to go and exactly what to do. There are definitely plus sides to that, but when you are out for months at a time, you have far more options.

So it's best to use those options. Listen to what plans other people have. Ask about where people have been. Other people on the road will always be the best resource. If you keep your mind sufficiently open about where to go you can end up chaining a bunch of shorter trips together into a grand adventure.

One of the things that make an adventure an adventure is the stepping out into the unknown, the uncertainty of results. If you go on any trip with too much of a plan, a set agenda in stone it strips some of the adventure out of the trip and experience. So even though it's good to have an overall plan and goals for your trip, you need a certain degree of flexibility as well.

So be aware of the other potential places in easy travel range of where you are. Just having conversations with the other people in camp will give you almost endless possibilities for travel. There are many people who travel just by sticking out their thumb and seeing what will happen. At the same time people have often heard of places that you have not.

Even just hanging out in a main Dirtbag area almost certainly means that you will hear about the next place to go. Ask people where they have been or what the best place they have been is and then go there. You can rinse and repeat that process endlessly, you can keep in mind far off and exotic places and just throw out the idea to as many people as possible and eventually it'll stick to one of them. This is one of the most fun ways to travel and a luxury that people with only two weeks of vacation a year simply don't have, it is reserved only for Dirtbags.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### Oops, I'm on a Bike Tour

It started out just another climbing trip. I had bought a ticket to Spain for January way back in the summer. It had just felt like time to get out of the country and when I searched for tickets out of the country, Spain was the cheapest one with good weather in the winter. That was about the maximum thought that I put into an actual agenda. I flew into Málaga in the south of Spain and three months later I was going to fly out of Barcelona in the far north. I had found a \$150 flight from there to Oakland. Málaga is near the Strait of Gibraltar and Barcelona is a thousand kilometers north. I didn't really have a plan yet as to how I was going to get up those 1000 kilometers yet, but I was certain that I could just Dirtbag my way up there as cheap as possible.

An unfortunate thing happened to me before I flew to Spain, which is that I suffered a mildly injured shoulder. I delayed my flight a month to let it heal. That month meant I could climb a little easier stuff and rather than cancel my trip I just flew there anyway.

Transiting from Málaga to Barcelona was not the only thing I hadn't planned about that trip. I really just had an initial destination, El Chorro. I had just told a friend I was planning on going to Spain and they told me "go to El Chorro" and that was the totality of information I was going off. I didn't even really know the major climbing areas in Spain. If you want to travel with an open mind, that's one thing to remember: you can always find out when you get there.

While I knew I would get to Barcelona somehow, I would never have guessed how it ended up happening. It all started with an American couple that showed up in El Chorro on a tandem bike and climbing tour. As chance would have it, they were biking up to Barcelona. Destiny would interfere in their trip and therefore mine in an unexpected way. Charlie, the male of the couple, would break his leg climbing. His shinbone was shattered in four places.

Their trip changed drastically in that instant. Charlie had to fly home for surgery. Isabel, his girlfriend, however wanted to continue her travels in Spain via the old exotic method: Rental Car. Their only problem was what to do with the massive tandem bike they had been traveling on was far too large for any tiny European rental car and they had already paid for it to be shipped out of Barcelona. To ship it home from where they were was going to be hundreds of dollars.

Enter Kevin, King of the Dirtbags. With an injured shoulder and an open mind. It was Charlie who first brought up the idea of me riding their bike to Barcelona. At first I told them that I'd think about it, if I could find someone to come with me. Charlie noted that the tandem was perfectly reasonable to ride solo, if you didn't mind looking goofy.

So I gave it a 10 minute test ride. It was fine. I packed my stuff into their bike luggage rack, gave Isabela my backpack to meet up again in Barcelona and off I went the next day. I hadn't planned on being on a bike tour at all, but I was open to any possibilities that might happen on my trip. I had randomly shared my love of bikes with the pair, and talked about how I wanted to go on a bike tour and destiny intervened.

Destiny also intervened in the start of my bike tour. I had been on it for not more than a couple of hours when it started to drizzle. Then started to rain. Then started to storm. That was how I started my journey north, alone on a tandem getting stormed on. It did not set the mood for the whole trip though. I was also used to it, I had dealt with so much bad weather in my life that you fade it out, and only a month before I had been working in Portland in January delivering food on a bicycle for Uber Eats. So I was as used to riding a bike in cold rain as any human being could be.

So the coldest rain that southern Spain can bring was a not my concern. Charlie and Isabela had given me a tip to use an app called Warmshowers where people host bike

tourers. A Spanish couple, rock climbers by coincidence, let me shelter from the storm in Grenada. By the end of the week it cleared and was marvelous.

The amazing thing about a bike tour - especially one that had no planning whatsoever - is that you really are free to craft your own route. I wound through hills and mountains. I coasted for 10 miles down into a Canyon. I spent the night with a Belgian couple who lived in a modernized cave in central Spain. Going on an improvisational adventure just draws in likeminded people. So it was in that trip.

After two and a half weeks of biking I stopped in a climbing area in central Spain. It more or less marked my halfway point of the bike trip, and my shoulder was feeling a little better from the rest. I pulled into the town Cahuilla, which has an awesome mile long castle wall that lines the top of a cliff. Who did I run into there? Isabela. She, by coincidence had also decided to stop and check out this same place, after touring southern Spain in a car.

I spent ten days there, but I had a deadline to get to Barcelona. I cut out to the beach and then back to the mountains. When I wasn't being hosted by benevolent strangers I tended to sleep in one of the century old abandoned houses that are everywhere in Spain. It was on the very last day of my tour that I saw the most unlikely sight I could have imagined. There was an older man, alone on a tandem bike pedaling in the opposite direction. I stopped my own bike to stare, but he simply smiled and waved and cycled on.

## Chapter 22

### “Don’t Spend Money Challenge”

Here is a good challenge in order to prep your for life on the road. Go to a grocery store and buy all the food that you will need for the next couple days, and then try to go two days without spending any money at all. It might be harder than you think, as we are so preprogrammed to be consumers. Once you do it for two days, see if you can do it for a week. Pre-plan out everything that you need for a week and buy it ahead of time. Then don’t spend any money *at all* for that week and just live on what you already have.

Don’t buy coffee at your favorite shop, make it at home. Don’t go out to eat and don’t go shopping just for the point of shopping. Take that time and energy and just sink it into something else. Go to the climbing gym, do some art, practice music. At first it may seem difficult to go even a single day without spending money, but pretty soon you’ll find that not only is it easy, but it frees up your life from both physical and metaphorical clutter. The more you get used to not spending money, the easier and more fun it becomes and incidentally the easier it is to save up money for that next trip.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### The World Calls me “Pepe”

“My name is Pedro.” The Chilean Trucker told me, “But the world calls me ... Pepe.”

I was happy to have a truck pull over right as the Atacama Desert was starting. It likely meant a long ride right up to the border of Peru and indeed Pepe was going right up there. The first thing he told me was that he had a present for me. He handed me a Spanish/English dictionary and a Lonely Planet South America guidebook in English. I had seen the Lonely Planet almost everywhere in South America. It was a very common guidebook for the aimless traveler types, who are not traveling like Dirtbags with a purpose but rather just *going* to South America in order to be there or check it off a bucket list. For me I was excited to have the maps that went along with it, as I had been questing north to Lima where my flight was in three weeks. I was curious as to why a Chilean trucker who didn't speak English had a Lonely Planet book meant for backpackers.

“There is a story behind these books.” Pepe told me. “Two years ago I picked up a Swiss woman who was hitchhiking south here in Chile, near this very spot. These were her books. She became my girlfriend and lived with me in my truck for two years.”

Pepe started the truck and looked wistfully out the window. “Now she is in Canada. She told me to give these books to the first foreigner I saw hitchhiking here and that is you.”

I ended up spending two days with Pepe. At first it was almost unbelievable that this working class trucker could have seduced a foreign traveler. However Pepe had a lot of depth to him, he talked philosophy, life, the past and the future. I could see how Pepe had appealed to the mysterious European Dirtbag girl. He was intelligent, thoughtful and patient lacking any of the typical machismo of so many Chilean men. Although Pepe had an ex-wife as well as a kid, all of his stories began with “mi ex-novia.”

The Swiss woman had been on nearly an identical trip to Dan and me, traveling all the way to Chile by land from the US. She had kayaked around the Darién Gap, hitched through Colombia as a woman by herself and ended up in Chile with Pepe. They had an arrangement so that when her wanderlust compelled her to go to see a mountain in Brazil or another part of South America, he would call up his trucking company and get an assignment out to where she wanted to go. He had longed for a future with her and wanted to buy a truck together. However like all nomads and adventurers, she eventually felt that inescapable call of wanderlust and ended up back up north.

That adventuring had obviously rubbed off on him as he was planning a trip by himself out to Brazil. I hope that one day she finds her way back to South America, and that Pepe further embraces his own nomadic spirit.

## Chapter 23

### Becoming Good at Anything

In the biography of Thomas Edison they mention that he spent time homeless as he was attempting to invent the light-bulb. For many that statement is weird and it is also inaccurate. What Thomas Edison really did was spend time Dirtbagging.

He gave up everything normal in his life in order to focus on his passion for invention. When he woke up, he woke up physically in his lab. He had nothing to do during that day except for inventing. You are free of distractions and have nothing else to do other than become good at what you are doing.

You find this biographical trend in the stories of many successful people. Many professional athletes, before they were rich and famous spent time literally living in gyms. Many professional musicians literally have slept under pianos or spent their early years living out of a music van with four other dudes. Many comedians were “homeless” at one point, living out of their cars. The media likes to frame these times as some sort of desperate situation but to rock climbers looking at it, it’s all very familiar. They were just Dirtbagging.

Virtually every professional rock climber has spent at least some time Dirtbagging. This isn’t necessarily because they enjoy living in a van or being dirty but because it’s simply the easiest way to become good at rock climbing. Consider that if you were a person who liked to play guitar and you were in an empty room with just a guitar. Eventually you are going to become good at playing guitar. We’ve long known that immersion is the best way to get good at learning a language. Well that’s not just true of a language but true of everything. If you totally immerse yourself in an activity, you will eventually become good at it.

In fact it’s really difficult to become good at anything when all your time is being taken up by a 40 hour a week job which you come home exhausted from. The reason that Thomas

Edison lived in his lab is that he knew a 40 hour a week job would hold him back from real accomplishment. It's amazing that people who live conventional lives might scoff at Dirtbags as somehow wasting time, but really it's they who are living a lifestyle that is a huge waste of time and potential.

## Chapter 24

### A Yearlong Plan

Many people have some vague long term life plan. It normally involves working their whole life and then something they want to do when they retire. However do you have a plan for what you want to do in the next 12 months? Does it vary significantly from what you did last year?

Dirtbags normally do. They know where they'd like to go, what they plan on climbing (or whatever) and how they'll get their next income. One of the reasons that the idea sounds so scary to so many people is that they really haven't developed much in the way of planning skills. The normal path in life doesn't teach you how to plan your life. In high school everything is structured for you, college is only mildly less so. Instead they are just in the normal grind of life. When they picture Dirtbags as aimless drifters, it's because they have no idea what *they* are really doing with their lives and project it on to other people.

Just living in the same city and grinding through your life isn't some display of the ability to plan. Anybody can do that. That's what you do when you lack planning skills. When those same people become unhappy or depressed, they double down on their life choices consistently. Perhaps it's one of the qualities that lends itself towards being depressed.

If you are an unhappy person and think that you'll snap out of it by doing more of the same, or making minor changes to your life you are not going to change anything. Instead formulate a plan for what you want to do in the next year. Where would you like to go and what you want to do when you get there?

Then make that happen. You may have to sacrifice a bit of your normal life to achieve those yearlong goals, but that normality that you are sacrificing is part of what's making you unhappy to start with. It really isn't even the risk that you think to go on the road. Anybody can

return to a normal life. Our society is set up to facilitate one, so returning to a job/apartment/daily routine is not hard, if it turns out that living on the road is not for you.

However once you start achieving goals that you set for yourself a year ago, and following a plan of where to go and what to do, it's unlikely that you'll want to return to the daily grind of "just living" or "just barely getting by."

What you start with is just thinking about a destination. It could be anywhere, but the options in the "Where to be a Dirtbag" chapter of this book are a good start. If there is some other place in the world that you have always wanted to go, buy a ticket there. Do it today and start to plan your life around that trip, rather than trying to fit a trip into your life.

## Chapter 25

### Worst Case Scenarios

If you are going to go on the road, one thing you can't be is someone who worries about worst case scenarios. For some hard to fathom reason people like to apply worst case scenarios to the life a Dirtbag that they don't apply to their own life.

A person once commented about hitchhiking, "What if you just got snatched by someone from the side of the road?"

This is not an uncommon concern that people have. Think about it for a moment though. If that was a legitimate concern while hitchhiking, it would be a concern anytime that you were walking anywhere close to a road. Nothing about hitchhiking makes it more likely that you'll be snatched than doing anything else.

Any worse case scenario that can happen while traveling can happen in your regular life. The craziest thing is that the people most likely to say this are people who live in cities, which are the most *dangerous* places. You are far more likely to have some incident of random violence happen to you in the city than in a climbing campground, which is one of the *safest* places you can be. You are more likely to be in a car wreck, more likely to be in an accident, more likely to have ill fall upon you.

If the worst case scenario is a good reason to not travel or live a traveling lifestyle, it's a good reason to not live your life at all. If you were really afraid of these sorts of things happening and applied it to your own life than you wouldn't be able to even go outside. It's time that people stopped living their lives based on "what might happen" and instead live them based on what they want to happen.

The reality is that nature and the outdoors are less likely to kill you than other people and that the areas that people travel to and between are some of the safest places in the world.

People only apply a worst case scenario because it is unfamiliar to them and therefore scary, not because it is based on any sort of reality whatsoever. We live in the safest time in the history of the world, and thus traveling is the safest it's ever been as well. The places that people travel to enjoy the outdoors have always been safer than cities on top of that. So the idea that something dangerous will happen there just makes no sense whatsoever. A worst case scenario can always happen. We could be struck by an asteroid. We could get a super flu, or die in a disaster. None of that is a good reason to not do the things that you want to do in life.

## TALES FROM THE ROAD

### When I Ran out of Money

It was the first time that I had run low on money. When I think about my stretch of Dirtbagging, I oftentimes think of this as the first stretch of Dirtbagging that I had, like the first chapter of a book. I was still just kind of figuring it all out. The money that I had lived off of came from two sources, working in a fishery in Alaska and then unemployment. The unemployment was for 26 weeks, half a year, but I had saved most of that and made it last for another year and a half. So it had been two years since I had worked and I was down to \$200.

Shit, I thought, I guess it's time to leave Mexico. Of course I was in Mexico. Where else would I be? When you are a Dirtbag it matters more where you are, but I also had to decide where I was going. It was February and down to my last \$200 and thinking that I needed a break from rock climbing I made the only decision that made sense to me at the time. I decided to go to Mardi Gras.

Some friends gave me a ride across the border, back to Laredo, Texas and I stuck out my thumb. Now I had allotted myself two weeks in order to get to New Orleans. In the end it only took me two days and two rides. The first was with an ex-boxer in his mid-50s by the name of Claudie. Now I had a general rule to not hitch into major cities, but Claudie was going all the way to Houston where he lived. Like so many Americans he had been down in Mexico for dental work, which was worth the 500 mile drive from his house.

During our drive together we bonded, over boxing - which I had done a bit of myself - traveling and a general philosophy about how to live. So much so that he invited me to spend the night in his house and when we got there he left me alone with his teenage children so he

could go play a Facebook game (for years following I'd get Facebook requests from him to join the game.) The next day he sent me on my way.

I could never have guessed that I'd end up with another 500 mile ride that day, from a real life pot smoking super redneck from Mississippi who was going right past New Orleans. Once again we bonded, so much so that he offered to get me a job with the construction company he worked for and even to go deep sea fishing with him. In the end I didn't think that I could handle staying in New Orleans for two weeks, so he dropped me off in a town called Slidell just short of New Orleans and told me to call him in the morning. Going 1000 miles in a row was extremely good luck, but the first stroke of bad luck hit me of my Mardi Gras trip, which was that he had written down the wrong number and it was a disconnected number. So the idea of working and rebuilding a cash supply was out and I was still two weeks shy of Mardi Gras.

I wasn't sure at all what to do with the two weeks ahead of me, so I went to a library and took a look at a map. My eye was struck by the very obvious feature close to me that cut through Louisiana. I decided in an instant I'd spend these two weeks hitching up the Mississippi River and just seeing what I would see. So I set off. A couple quick rides brought me to quiet intersection with not much traffic just outside of the town of Hammond.

This is where the bad luck turned worse. There was no traffic on the road and I stepped away from my backpack for a moment to take a piss, in that moment the only car that had driven by since I had been there came along and snatched my bag and I turned to see all of my possessions (minus luckily, my expensive trad rack, which I had stashed outside Moab, Utah) floated away with it.

For a moment I was devastated. I had no tent, no sleeping, bag, nothing. In a situation that seems desperate, you can really only move forward. I started to chase the car onto the highway, but almost immediately lost sight of it. It seemed like it was all bad luck, but these

things go in swings. Just as I was about to despair and no less than a minute after my stuff got snatched a super old Oldsmobile pulled up with an ever older woman in it.

“Hey there, Honey,” came the voice of a thick accent of the south. “My name is Miss Jeanette and I’m 78 years old. I never picked up a hitchhiker before, but you look like you need some help or something.”

I explained to Miss Jeanette that all my stuff got snatched.

She nodded, “Yeah we got a lot of thieves in Louisiana, but this ain’t no problem that Wal-Mart can’t solve.”

Miss Jeanette wasted no time in driving to the nearest Wal-Mart, buying me a new backpack and sleeping bag and dropping me off at the nearest police station, in case they had somehow come across my backpack (spoiler alert: they had not.)

It was amazingly good luck and she was a wonderful person. In my mind Mardi Gras was not something I really wanted to do anymore, so I decided I was just going to hitch right back to where I really belonged, Moab.

## Chapter 26

### What do You Want Your Life to be About?

When someone asks a small child what they want to be what they grow up, the question for some unfathomable reason is inevitably tied to what they want to do for work. From an early age, the very idea of what you want to “be” is actually “how do you want to make money?” Our jobs are not our being.

It is possible that you are a rare person who ends up with a job that is both enjoyable and fulfilling, something that is worth focusing your life around. However, most people end up with jobs that are simply a way to pay rent and our modern addiction to owning things. Thus most people end up hating or being resentful towards work, because the money that they are earning is ultimately pointless and the time spent there wasted and the things that are being consumed and thrown away. Internally we know this even if we don't recognize it consciously, thus why people end up hating work and dreading the start of every Monday.

However the question of “what do you want to be?” really shouldn't be tied up with how you want to sell your labor to an employer at all. “A rock climber” or “a surfer” or a “good decent person” are all answers that make a lot more sense. From an early age in our society, propaganda starts tying up our value as human beings in connection with working. Even concepts like “contributing to society” gets tied up with working. As though the only way we can contribute to the betterment of society is through some pointless job.

In fact they often lead to bitterness and resentment on the part of the people, who are not using their money towards any sort of goal, but just to sustain their own existence. From any early age we are taught how to sit still. We are conditioned to respond to school bells. A school day is seven hours long, even though that is not necessarily the optimal length of time for learning. However seven hours simulates a work day, and again prepares us for a having

a job rather than actually focus on learning and teaching. Recess and art classes are limited and seen only as rewards for work, simulating your future with only two weeks of vacation. They give an endless choice of job options, but never present you with any alternative ways to live.

Next, children whose only life experiences is the very artificial environment of school, where everything in their life is taken care of, where you are told what to do and where to go and put on a strict schedule and thrust into the world. Not having any experience other than school, they are encouraged to go to college and to take on a tremendous amount of debt.

Is there any sane reason that you could think of to loan \$50,000 or \$100,000 to an 18 year old? No? Then why is the government engaged in such nonsense? Not only that, but student loans are the only type of loan that you are not allowed to go bankrupt from. While you as an individual would never loan an irresponsible 18 year old \$50,000, there is a very real incentive for the government to do it, even if the person who gets the loans doesn't end up with any sort of useful degree. You can get a \$50,000 loan for a degree in Literary Poetry the same as one in Engineering.

This forces people into the workplace and forces people to participate in a system that they might not want to normally all because they took a loan when they were 18 years old. This forces people into taking jobs that they would otherwise not want to do or even be that well suited for, and why so many people end up with jobs that they hate.

While an 18 year old is expected to be mature enough to make decisions about the rest of their life, or able to do something drastic like join the military there is some sort of stigma that going on a road trip for someone the same age is acting irresponsibly. This makes no sense. Taking on thousands of dollars in debt is irresponsible to the extreme. On a road trip you can actually learn far more responsibility about managing a life than in college or the military, where once again things are largely taken care of for you.

Road tripping right out of high school by comparison gives you time to figure yourself out. It also teaches you extreme budgeting skills. Dirtbagging shows you how to live with frugality, simplicity, and living within ones means. By contrast college is a time of excess and where you become saddled with crushing debt. Given those two options, which one really seems like the mature choice as a way to start a life?

Even if you eventually settle down and become a relatively standard person, the lessons you can learn traveling and on road trips will be nothing but a positive influence on you for the rest of your life.

That's it!

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