



How to Live in Your Car

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Updated: June 26, 2019

Living in a car isn't something that many people would recommend. However, if by either circumstance or choice you don't have a home property, living in your car might be the only reasonable choice, especially if you don't feel safe at a local shelter. Unfortunately, in many places, [sleeping in your car](#) is not only frowned upon, but also illegal. Luckily, there is some helpful information on how to get by until something better comes along. It's important that you choose the right car, find the right parking spots, and find appropriate and cost-cutting spots to access basic amenities such as showers.

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Part
1

At the Start

1 Find a suitable car. You can only live in your car successfully if your car works. If you have any lead time and see the writing on the wall ahead of time, get a van; ideally a windowless delivery van of some sort: you will have room under your platform bunk for storage, you can install a rooftop skylight/hatch for air, a rooftop rack for storage and even look out when the skylight is open. An anonymous looking white Chevy van, or Holden panel van in Australia makes concealment a lot easier. You're going to need a new or "newish" car or be a good mechanic to live in an older car. If you have an old car keep in mind that you're liable to break down at an inopportune moment if you don't stay on top of maintenance.

2 Before you start living in your car, use your permanent address to:

- Rent a [post office box](#) or a Private Mailbox (PMB). Although PMBs tend to be more expensive, you can receive packages at them and some services will let you use an address format which makes it appear to be an apartment; this can be useful when someone requires a physical address.
- Sign up for a [gym membership](#), or, if a gym is too expensive, a more affordable alternative is (depending on your location) to enroll at a local community college where you'll then be able to use their gym facilities.
- Renew any paperwork that will require an address to process soon.
- Put valuables in a safe deposit box at a bank.

If you have friends or family who can't (or refuse to) help you with your living situation, or you refuse to ask them for help, think about at least asking them if you can use their address.

3 Keep your personal identification, driver's license, car insurance current at all times. Have it readily available for police inspection.

4 Buy a steering column lock and use it! Why so essential? Because if your vehicle gets stolen, your home is stolen, you may never see it again and then you really are in trouble! It's not just your property like it would be to someone with a home or an apartment - it's a matter of your survival. Buy one now! You can buy one for about \$20.

Part 2

Finding Safe and Inconspicuous Places to Park

1 Find a safe and inconspicuous place to [park](#). First, check with any friends or relatives too see if they will let you park on their property. If not, check to see if there are any organizations or businesses in your area (or a nearby area) that designates parking lots specifically for people in situations like yours; for example, Walmart allows people to camp overnight in their parking lots. It's not only legal, but the organization might screen the people who use the lot, or even designate a women-only lot.^[1] If there are no such lots available, and you live in an urban area, look for streets with no sidewalks, no overlooking windows, and adjacent to woods; the area should be sparse enough to avoid nosy onlookers but populated enough that the car does not stand out.^[2] Parking lots of big-box retailers (especially those that are open 24 hours and have restrooms, such as Walmart)

are great to clean up in and have security, as long as you spend a couple of dollars there and don't park in one place too often. Parking lots however can be noisy, particularly in the morning as trucks arrive carrying food and goods. ^[3]

- Church car parks are often quiet during weekdays. If you check around, you may find a church that is less used than others. This could be a good place to park, and you may be able to ask for assistance at the church. You might even attend the church to gain rapport, but wait a while before telling others about your situation, and tell only those who seem trustworthy and willing to help. ^[4]
- Industrial estates and business parks are often noisy by day, but very quiet at night. Small ones close to residential areas are best. They have to be quiet at night. You may encounter security in some places like this, but if you are honest, saying you are just sleeping the night in your car, they usually won't bother you. Their main role is to protect the property.
- University car parks. This is okay if you are a student, but not so good if you are not associated with the university. You may be required to get a parking permit. ^[5]
- Camping grounds are another option, although they usually have time limits and some are almost as expensive as a hotel room. Some offer a shower for a nominal fee. National Forests have some free camping with a limit of 14 days.
- Yacht harbors are notoriously 'free zones'—given the nature of fishermen and boats, so marinas offer a lot of services, like hot showers and transient vehicles. If the season is high, larger boats from out of state show up and stay for months along with their respective crews, all of whom are 'transients' providing excellent cover for you and your vehicle. They don't know or care, and if they find out they still don't care, being a 'little wild' themselves. Hang around on the weekend and meet someone who wants their boat washed and waxed—that'll do it, from there on in you'll have a gate/shower key and legitimacy.
- If there's no restroom, having a creek nearby helps for rinsing purposes. Know how to [safely defecate outdoors](#) and [make a poop tube](#). Five gallon bucket with a lid and [lye](#) for odour can also work.
- A free [hospital](#) parking lot is another option. If approached by a guard, you can say that you're waiting to visit a sick relative. ^[6] However, note that in Australia, due to past murders of nurses, you may attract police attention by parking in a hospital car park. You may be asked to move on by security. ^[4]
- If you can establish rapport with the manager of a retail store or restaurant, they may not give you problems about staying overnight, especially if they see your presence as a form of overnight security.
- Try a hotel parking lot. Hotels and motels along the interstate allow cars to park until 11:00 a.m. the next day (checkout time). As long as your seat reclines fully, no one will notice you. However, you'll need to

keep moving on.

- Once you find a spot, try to arrive late at night, and leave before 7am. This will draw as little attention as possible to yourself.

2 Get earplugs. Due to noise, you might find that you will need earplugs to sleep. Earplugs will block a lot of background noise to a level that is bearable. Earplugs are good for blocking out traffic, birds, animals, talking and background music. They will not block out very loud noise or close noise, such as someone tapping on your car.

Part
3

Maintaining Hygiene

1 Find a place to shower. The most logical place would appear to be a gym. This will help you keep your sanity and give you a purpose to your morning. **Don't settle for the first gym you find.** If you look around, you may find nearly deserted gyms in which you can shower and fully clean yourself without embarrassment. Remember: the people who can least afford to sport the disheveled look of a homeless person are those who are homeless, so try not to look the part! Don't "let yourself go", as once descent starts, it is hard to pull out. Maintaining a well-kept appearance can only help you maintain a positive self-image during a time when it is being seriously challenged.

- Gyms can be an expensive option. Many gyms range in cost from \$35 a month to a more typical cost of \$55 a week. This is pretty expensive just for a shower. Many councils, churches and support organisations have free showers. It can be a false economy to use a gym just for showers, particularly as there are many free ways to keep in shape without a gym.^[7] Try to remember the flip flops or water shoes as not to get a foot fungus and let the towel dry out in the car.
- Community or Recreation centers that have gyms and showers are a cheaper option than the nationwide chains. Many Rec or Community centers yearly memberships cost about the same as the monthly memberships at a national gym. You may not be able to store your items as safely in these places though.
- The next best choice is to check into an affordable caravan park one or two days a week. These usually range from about \$18-\$26 a night in Australia, possible more in the USA. You will have a spot to park your car, you can do laundry (usually an extra fee), fill up on water, have a shower and even pitch a tent

if you have one. They usually have powered sites, so you can recharge your electrical devices or run a fan or heater.^[8]

- Another option, though possibly more expensive, is to book into a cheap **motel or hostel** once or twice a week and clean up thoroughly there (if you can afford it).
- Swimming pools have showers, depending on whether they have private stalls or are set up gang style, they may provide a discreet place to shower.

Another option to consider- when you can't shower, use unscented baby wipes to clean up, or take a "bum shower" in a public restroom where you feel comfortable doing so. You also could learn local establishments that have single-person restrooms. Use them to washing you hair or face. Bring a towel to dry your head and the sink area, and be quick. Alternate between establishments.

- At a truck stop, you can ask around for a shower coupon, if you feel safe allowing people to know that you're without a place to stay. Truck stops are good to sleep at too. Truck Stops can be noisy at night though, so ear plugs are recommended.^[3]
- Some toll roads, especially state turnpikes, have large rest areas with free showers for truckers. Since these are usually open 24 hours, these plazas are also good places to sleep.
- Sometimes you can take a single class for a nominal price, thus becoming a legitimate member of the college community, with access to their gym, library, WiFi, employment office and other resources (in addition to learning something).

Part 4

Staying Under the Radar

1 Be discreet. Keeping your situation under wraps minimizes the embarrassment and helps avoid becoming a target for police officers and criminals alike.

- Rotate among several parking locations to avoid getting noticed.
- When you move around in the parked car, move slowly to avoid rocking the car.
- When it's sunny in the daytime, use a sunshade for the windshield.
- You may find that you need and want more privacy than windows offer. There are a few cheap ways to gain this privacy. Reflective window shades in your back and front window help. Similarly fold up shades

on the side windows are good. You can also buy some cheap cloth and either stuff them in the windows, tape them in, or hold them in place by magnets.^[9] Black cloth is best for privacy and blocking out light.

- If you can afford it, and local laws allow, and you don't mind driving with it, get your windows tinted as dark as legally possible. This along with the front sunshade and dark cloth or towels can provide a lot of privacy. If you hang a towel or cloth on an untinted window, it screams homeless person. You hang the same on a tinted window it'll be impossible to see inside and won't draw attention.
- Keep the windows cracked open while you sleep, not wide enough for someone to reach in, but enough to allow fresh air and reduce condensation on the windows.

Part 5

Finding the Essentials

1 Get the things you'll need. The basic essentials for living in a car are a **blanket**, a **pillow**, and a **mattress** or some other padding. Due to the angles involved in the seating setup, you may develop dull **back pain** from the cramped quarters. Should this happen, be sure to have pain medication on hand. Once you have your sleeping gear, you'll want a blanket to place over the back seat, and draped over the two front seats. This will block light and people's views.

- A cheap cooler will help make life easier. The main thing the cooler needs is to be waterproof. Cold food will cause condensation, while ice will melt. You don't want that water inside of your car. A cooler will help keep your perishable food cool. It will work most efficiently when full, so add bottles of cold water to it as you take out food. If you choose to buy an electric cooler, it will need good ventilation to work. For this reason, it will not work well in your car's boot. It is best placed within the car when running. Make sure it is only running when the engine runs, or use a low voltage cut out device, as explained below. Make sure the cooling vent grille is not touching anything as it exhausts waste heat and may set some things on fire.
- One essential item, if you can afford it is a Porta-Potty, a chemical toilet. These devices can really make living in a car bearable. They can be purchased for under \$100 new these days. If you can't afford a Porta-Potty or don't have room for one, you can pee into wide necked bottles like Gatorade bottles, or make an improvised bucket style toilet.^[10]

2 Buy a combo backup battery/air compressor to jump start your car on your own. Have a spare tire and at least one can of tire sealant. Be sure the sealant is of the type that can be removed.

3 Find alternate ways of generating electricity. A cigarette lighter converter is one option. These are useful for powering low consuming devices (100 watts), but if you plan on using your vehicle for cooking, then you'll need to draw power more directly from your battery or you'll blow the fuse. Running electric cooking appliances from your car though is fairly impractical without an expensive dual battery and inverter system. There are small 12 volt water heaters and skillets, but these generally are not very efficient. You will also need a much more expensive inverter if you plan to run things that use mains voltage. You may need to idle the vehicle while drawing this power if you don't have a dual battery system, however even then, car alternators are not designed for such use and may not be able to produce the current you need.

- A good buy for any car dweller is a low voltage cut out device.^[11] This device protects your car's battery by cutting off the electricity once the battery reaches a voltage where it can still start the car, but can't really run plug in devices much more. These usually retail for about \$25-\$40. They are a very good investment for a car dweller, as continual flattening of your battery will damage it, resulting in a costly replacement, and inconvenience of not being able to start the car.
- An alternative to electric cooking devices is to use gas for cooking, but do not use this inside the vehicle for safety reasons. There are many dangers associated with cooking inside your car: unstable surfaces, fire hazards, burns from hot metal or spilled liquids, carbon monoxide build up, smells. Cooking is for outside of the car. If you live in a van with a stable set up for cooking, then cooking inside is okay, provided there is ventilation.

4 Have something portable to store your items. Get bags you can fill with your [soaps](#), [clothes](#), [cell phone](#), etc. Keeping things in order will save you a lot of hassle. A vehicle may seem like a small space, but losing things can be extremely easy. Also, keeping things neat inside the car will draw less attention from people passing by who happen to look in the windows. Hiding your bedding might be a good idea (consider the trunk). If there is not room in the car for a weeks worth of clothes and supplies, try to leave them at a friends for safekeeping and then you can have a reason to come over, and they may give you a shower and a place to hang out. When you do your laundry, be sure to get them bone dry, as you do not want damp clothes to mildew or smell bad in the car. When you're not in the car, leave windows cracked and dryer sheets scattered about to keep the interior smelling decent. Wash your sheets once a month, or else you risk smelling like a homeless person, which will blow your cover and get you treated like a homeless person.

Keep dirty clothes separate in plastic bags so they do not smell up all your clothing.

5

- 6 Get a good quality flashlight.** A 3 or 4 battery Maglite flashlight serves two purposes: lighting and security. It is large enough to act as a metal baton to defend yourself, should the need arise.

Part 6

Eating

- 1 Evaluate your food options.** Peanut butter, tuna and crackers are great staples. Have a box for food so it does not get smashed. Gallons of water are a necessity for a lot of things. The amount of food you can keep at any one time will be limited by the lack of refrigeration. **Fast food** is expensive when you're living off it. With old fashioned (large flake) rolled oats, powdered milk, bottled water, plastic cups, and chocolate protein powder, you can ensure that you always have a nutritious snack to fall back on.^[12]

Part 7

Keeping Buoyant

- 1 Stay positive.** Keep reminding yourself that the situation is only temporary. Spend each day hitting the pavement and **looking for jobs**. Use the local **library** and bookstore not only to **search for jobs**, but also to become more knowledgeable in ways that will help you get through this and find a job. Search the Internet for free community voicemail services, and/or get a prepaid cell phone so employers can call you. To build your funds, consider food stamps, food banks and soup kitchens. Most importantly, talk to people like social workers and religious organization workers who will sympathize and understand, and try to help.

Community Q&A

Question

What if you plan on staying in a car permanently instead of temporarily?

Community Answer

You may have to rent a storage unit for your possessions, as well as a P.O. box so you can receive mail, and you will need to find somewhere to safely park your car, as well as somewhere to bathe regularly.

Question

I may need to start living in my car, but I live in Florida. How can I keep cool and have my windows rolled up?

Community Answer

You'll need to block the windows to keep out the sun and park in the shade when at all possible. I would also invest in a small cooler and keep it stocked with ice.

Question

What should I use as a physical address when living in my car?

Community Answer

The UPS Store will rent you a mailbox with a physical address with 2 forms of ID.

Question

How do I live in my car and live rent free?

Community Answer

Kit your car or camper out as the article says, and park near a gym where you won't get bothered. I heard about a woman who did this in LA and saved up \$72,000 in 18 months, she pretty much lived at the gym.

Question

Where can I stay?

Community Answer

Consider pulling your back seats down and your front passenger's seat, if possible. This will make much more space for you.

Question

How many nights should I staying at the same supermarket parking lot that is open 24/7 before moving to a different location?

Community Answer

I wouldn't stay in one place for longer than 24 hours, though if you move your car out of the lot for a few hours at a time, you might be able to stretch that a little.

Question

Would this be suitable for two adults?

Community Answer

Yes. It's much better to have a companion for safety and to break the monotonous boredom at times. Like the old but true saying goes, "Two heads are better than one."

Question

What should you say when family members and friends ask you where you're staying?

Community Answer

There's no shame in living in a car. Tell them that the situation is only temporary, and you'll be back on your feet soon. Tell them the truth. These are your family members and friends we're talking about. If they really care about you, then they'll understand.

Question

How can I survive sleeping in the car if it is really cold outside and the windows are rolled down and I don't have a blanket with me?

Community Answer

Use a sleeping bag. You can get one that is comfortable as far down as 30°F cheaply at Walmart. Obviously it gets much colder in a lot of places so you can get a warmer, more expensive one, wrap a blanket over the bag, or, probably the best solution, dress warmly inside the bag. Some kind of thermal underwear would be best as you don't want to be overly bulked up in there, especially as you'll be in a sleeping bag in a car and already struggling to move and stay comfortable. Also remember to have something to cover your head with. A warm hat and scarf are a good start, and a hoodie can be good too. Then drape a coat over your face to keep it warm. If possible, hang something over the open windows, like a towel or old thermal drapes from a thrift store.

Question

We live in our van in Arizona and don't have much money. Is there a place we can stay and get help?

Community Answer

Slab City can be very resourceful. It is a community of van dwellers and travelers who are well-connected to the larger community.

Tips

- Remember, you are not alone and you have a vehicle. Lots of people have survived and even thrived while sleeping in cars.^[14]
- Personal safety should always be your number-one priority. Keep your keys near (but not in) the ignition so you can drive off on a moment's notice. Knives used for food preparation and tire irons can be used as weapons. Pepper spray is another option. You may want to learn your state's gun laws and purchase a [handgun or other firearm](#) if you do not already own one. Criminals seek out people who appear vulnerable, or travel alone. Sometimes the sound of a cocked gun will be sufficient enough to deter a potential mugger. However, be aware that if police become aware that you have a gun, they may shoot you for possessing a weapon. Police generally do not regard homeless people well and there has been many unfortunate cases of shootings of homeless people (even unarmed ones) by police.^[13]
- Never park near a school or any other educational building. Someone is sure to call the police.
- Tint your windows for privacy; tinting works better than using barriers (blankets etc.) because it enables you to see out while others cannot see in. This could be helpful when trying to live unnoticed. Barriers also attract attention and advertise what you are doing, while tinted windows are very common on many cars.

- Sleeping will likely be a challenge at first because there is a good chance that your vehicle is not large enough for you to fully stretch out your body. Find a position where you can comfortably sleep with your legs bent or against your chest. Alternatively, you can try sitting up in the back seat and propping a pillow against the wall of the car.
- If you are spending the night in your car and you have been drinking alcohol, do not have the keys in the ignition. If it is winter and you need to run the car for heat, move over to the passenger or back seat. Otherwise, you could get a DUI/DWI just for being in your car.
- Use the air-conditioner as a micro tumble dryer. Maybe you have a wet garment you've just washed and need it urgently. Place it over the air-conditioner vent on the dashboard that blows up against the windshield. Turn the car on and turn the air-conditioner to hot and watch it dry out completely in a couple minutes.
- Pay attention to your instincts. If a parking spot feels weird for any reason, find yourself a new one.
- Make sure you have vehicle documentation and insurance. Without them, your problems will increase.
- Get an automobile association membership. This will help you if you drain your battery, or break down.

Warnings

- Stay sober at all times. A clear mind is your best safety and security tool. Be smart, courteous and truthful and you will not be a threat.
- If you are sleeping in the car on a regular basis, do as few other things in the car as possible. Don't eat, read, or anything else that will cause you to spend more time than necessary in the car. The more time you spend in it, the more smells will accumulate.
- **Don't drink alcohol.** Don't even bring any alcohol into your car. If cops find you with alcohol in your blood or in your car, you could get in serious trouble, even if you're not driving at the time.
- Never sleep in the driver seat if you can avoid it. Your body will quickly associate that seat with sleeping, creating risks when you are driving - especially when you're tired. Recline the passenger seat or lie down in the back if there is room.
- Be careful who you tell that you're living in a car. If they're not likely to provide assistance, then don't bother, because you might end up endangering yourself.
- Be aware that having a gun in the car carries its risks. If you are startled awake and point the gun at the wrong person (i.e. a cop tapping on the window), you can wind up being shot yourself.

- If you have been homeless for a while, you may not have money for car insurance. Be aware that you can be considered a vagrant. Your car may be impounded.
- Always ensure adequate air-flow in the car's cabin. Make sure you don't shut off the air-flow through the vents, and don't use a car cover.
- Your car is a weapon if you stay inside it. Remember that. If a police officer tells you to do anything, follow directions exactly as told, or they are authorized to use deadly force against you, if you are still inside the car. Never move any body part until told to do so.
- Avoid driving the car. While it seems harmless, police do not take kindly to marginalized people. A danger is that they may write a report about you to a government office in the hope that they'll cancel your license.

Things You'll Need

- Car with insurance and license
- Blankets and pillows
- Towels and wash cloths
- Soap and shampoo
- Disinfectant and/or antibiotic ointment
- Water
- Gas
- Food
- Gym membership (you will stay clean and work off stress)
- Automobile association membership (if your car insurance doesn't include Roadside Assistance)

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