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Survival Guide to Homelessness

No matter where you go, there you are.

Thursday, November 11, 2004

Finding a Parking Place

Choosing the right parking place is an essential survival skill. Choosing the wrong one will draw the attention of residents, business owners, and police, and you will be moved on early. There is enough work involved in setting up for the night that moving on costs you at least an hour, and it is an unpleasant hour, one in which you have to listen to a self righteous jerk with a badge and a stick tell you how you ought to be living.

Don't get me wrong. I like police when they're chasing criminals. Somehow, though, they become something different when they are preventing me from attending to my most basic biological needs. Somehow, when they are standing between me and sleep they seem less than heroic.

A good parking space is difficult to find. It needs to be isolated, but your car can't stand out. It needs to be near other cars, but away from the prying eyes of property owners and tenants. It needs to be well lit, and yet your car should be unnoticeable. Ideally your spot should be shaded from the morning sun. Such places exist, but usually you accept some flaws.

Residential Areas

A residential area is never ideal, but it is the most reliable supplier of an acceptable spot. The advantage, your car never looks out of place. If police cruise by they won't be wondering what a car is doing parked there. The disadvantage, lots of eyes. You want to park so that you are not in front of anyone's front door. Along a fence line is good, particularly a tall fence line. That shelters you from view on one side. Best is a place just on the cusp between a residential and a commercial zone. You want to be removed from the houses, so the residents don't notice or care about you, but you want the car to look natural in the place you've parked.

It is best to be under a streetlamp. A well lit area allows you to have the dome light on in the car without light shining out through your car cover, so you can read or write without fear. Light also deters thieves. Darkness has no real advantages. It may allow you to get into the car unobserved more easily, but this is really trading a full nighttime of increased danger for a few seconds of lower exposure. You can find the right moment to enter the car in the bright light.

Business Areas and Parking Lots

First let's clear one thing up, paying for parking is unnecessary and wasteful, so if you are thinking of one of those pay to park parking structures, think some more. Pay parking lots are regularly patrolled by three kinds of people you'd like to avoid, cops, security guards, and thieves. It is way too high profile, and frequently they are locked overnight. You don't ever want to be locked in anywhere. The overriding quality you are looking for in a parking place is flexibility on entrance and exit.

Don't park where traffic will prevent you from getting into or out of your car safely. Don't park on busy streets. On those few occasions when I did park on a busy street I couldn't shake the fear that someone might sideswipe my parked car. It happens. You don't want it to happen while you are in the vehicle.

Don't park where people will be arriving in large numbers at certain times of day or night because it will make it harder for you to get out unobserved.

Never park near a grade school or a high school. People take child safety very seriously, and rightly or wrongly the homeless are going to be perceived as a threat.

Most of the time supermarket or department store parking lots are no good. Your vehicle sticks out in an empty lot. Walmart, though, allows RV's to park overnight in their lots. I'm told that some Walmarts even have utility hookups for the RV's. I have never tried this, because I was unaware of the Walmart policy, but where

My Profile

You have a right to live. You have a right to be. You have these rights regardless of money, health, social status, or class. You have these rights, man, woman, or child. These rights can never be taken away from you, they can only be infringed. When someone violates your rights, remember, it is not your fault.

You were wronged.

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Out Campaign

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Homelessness Links

- ◆ [Homeless By Choice \(freesleeping tutorial blog\)](#)
- ◆ [Homeless Search Engine](#)
- ◆ [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#)
- ◆ [Squat.net](#)
- ◆ [OneBag.com](#)

RV's go will probably be safe for you in a car. I would park near any RV's that were there ahead of me, and I wouldn't concern myself with hiding my car living ways from their owners. This is one of those exceptional situations where you can relax a little.

Hotel and motel parking lots will do in a pinch. This is a good choice if for some reason you've lost your car cover. The cops won't bother you and a lot of hotels and motels will tolerate you. When approached by hotel staff, just tell them you are only looking for a place to sleep that night. Most of the time they will look the other way.

Service stations are pretty good for a one night stint also, especially those that think of themselves as a freeway rest stop. You can generally sleep till morning without anyone disturbing you.

Gathering Places

RV's and campers and truckers tend to find lonely stretches of road and congregate. These can often be found near beaches, near lakes, just off the highway, and in other more or less remote places. Where you find such a congregation, you can park with safety. Watch the crowd. It knows more than individuals do. The favorite in a horse race wins about 33% of the time, but the very best handicappers in the world pick the winner 17% of the time. Crowds know. These are places that are ignored by law enforcement, yet offer no particular temptations to criminals.

Campgrounds

Yeah, campgrounds work, I suppose. Lots of people use them. Personally I hate camping. It's cold. In a car, you are well above the ground. In a tent you are on the ground, and even with a pad it's a powerful heat sink. In a car, the wind can't touch you. The wind will take your tent and put it in the next county. Your car is impervious to the rain. Your tent keeps some of the rain out, I guess, unless, of course, you pitched it in a dry creek bed. Yeah. You want to camp? Camp. It isn't for me.

Many campgrounds even require that you pay for all this luxury.

Campgrounds are also separated from all the places you do business, usually by quite a distance. Cold, uncomfortable, often at a cost of money, and in an inconvenient location, well, they must have something to recommend them, but I am having trouble thinking what it is. You are still exposed, even moreso really. Now instead of just thieves and cops you've got paranoid marijuana growers, bears, mountain lions, and the occasional (though admittedly very rare) serial killer to worry about. On the plus side, you can have a fire, but you will probably have to have brought some wood. In my experience, wood that will burn easily is rare at a campground.

Rest Stops

Freeway rest stops are good, but they are crowded, the restrooms are unsanitary, and they have posted rules about how long you can be there. In California the rule is usually six hours, because some bureaucrat thought it would be funny to make sure no one got a full night's sleep. Irony creeps in everywhere, even at rest stops.

The good news is no one has ever enforced the time limit on me. I haven't used them a lot, but when I have, I've usually been there eight or ten hours without a problem.

Rotate Your Sites

It is a good idea to have three to ten good parking places scouted out, and rotate from one to the next. It is a bad idea to park in the same place three nights in a row. You should scatter your sites through several neighboring cities if you are in a big county like Los Angeles, so that you don't get too well known to one police department. Speaking of that, county land is often less patrolled or controlled than city land is. If you know of a group of streets that have no city claims to them, check those out for good places to park.

It's a bad idea to have a regular pattern, like always being in the same place on Tuesdays. Think about it. You might have been observed, and a complaint may have been made, but the police failed to catch you. If the complaint contains an observation of a pattern, they'll get you on the next cycle, the next Tuesday. Sound paranoid? Police have told me they were waiting for me.

If you are homeless long enough, you will break most of these rules from time to time. That's fine. Sometimes there will be some advantage, some exception to the rule. Sometimes you will just be too tired or too lazy to do things right. Sometimes you will pay a price for that, but that is part of this. Some things you just have to

Human Rights Links

- ◆ [The Bill of Rights](#)
- ◆ [Univ. Decl. of Human Rights](#)
- ◆ [The Work Less Party](#)
- ◆ [Idealist.org](#)
- ◆ [Amnesty International](#)

Legal and Advocacy Resource Links

- ◆ [Flex Your Rights ~ Strategy v Police](#)
- ◆ [Nolo ~ Law for All](#)
- ◆ [LexisOne ~ DIY Research](#)
- ◆ [FindLaw ~ Cases & Codes](#)
- ◆ [The ACLU](#)
- ◆ [Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

Funding Links

- ◆ [FAFSA ~ Student Aid](#)
- ◆ [Students.gov](#)
- ◆ [GovBenefits.gov](#)
- ◆ [GovLoans.gov](#)
- ◆ [CFDA Fed Domestic Assistance](#)

Favorite Blogs

- ◆ [The Jumpseat Diaries](#)
- ◆ [Which Surprised Her](#)
- ◆ [SquarePeg](#)
- ◆ [Alice on the Run](#)



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learn the hard way.

Be alert. Choose parking carefully. Stay safe.

posted by Mobile Homemaker @ 1:42 PM



102 COMMENTS:

At 10:33 AM, Marke said...

Absolutely! Keep 'em coming! Out of the last five or so posts, this is the one I've been waiting to read. It's back to that format of the original posts ... the "this is how you do this" type of instructive post. That's what I come here every day to check up on.

At 10:50 AM, Marke said...

Anyway, why do you say you're getting zero feedback? I see comments on every single post ... an average of 4.5 comments per post, actually. I realize some of these are you, but hey, people are reading and people are talking!

At 10:52 AM, Mobile Homemaker said...

I suppose I exaggerated for effect. I got about 300 unique hits yesterday, but no comments. I like hearing from you all.

At 11:55 AM, hotness said...

I've found your series very interesting, it reminds me of travels with Lisbeth.

You've been writing good stuff, some things I'd like to hear more about as well:

- Employment and keeping a job
- Camping (why not do it more?)
- Why government programs /charities work (or don't)
- Your thoughts on panhandling

At 12:44 PM, Gudlyf said...

I just discovered your blog a couple of weeks ago, and I think it's one of the most interesting of the blogs I frequently read. You definitely know how to write and keep things to the point while at the same time adding in some of your own experiences.

I too would like to see more information on your thoughts on camping out -- why not get a nice tent and live on a campground? I know of whole families who live on campgrounds the entire summer for vacation, and as long as you keep clean you should never stick out.

Also, what are your thoughts on "party crashing" -- happening by free meals at large weddings or wakes where there are many people hardly anyone knows?

I imagine most homeless people don't regularly have access to the internet and may never know of your writings, even if you publish them in book form. How would you get your word out to those who could desperately use your help?

At 1:49 PM, T. Bradley Dean said...

Yeah, keep it coming. Very thought provoking.

You've got 51 people reading at Bloglines:

<http://www.bloglines.com/userdir?siteid=671314>

At 1:50 PM,  **Dean said...**

What do you think about the Walmart parking lots? They are very friendly towards campers, are well lit, have toilet facilities and you can usually find some hot food for under \$2.

At 3:21 PM,  **zovirl said...**

RSS aggregators are a great way to make sure I don't miss any articles, but obviously don't make it easy to leave feedback :)

I agree with Marke's comment, I love your "how to" articles. Please keep writing!

At 12:38 PM,  **Ethan32 said...**

Hey, I love all the "How to..." articles too. It's a whole lot of really neat information that I hope never to need. But I really get a lot out of the philosophical essays as well. Your take on homelessness is unlike anyone's that I have ever heard, and I think that anyone who listens to you and hears you will benefit from your thoughts whether or not they agree with you. I never considered an upside to homelessness, but after reading your blog I recognize that my mortgage and associated house-dwelling expenses are a chain around my ankle to the tune of about 60 hours a week. I am not going to throw off my clothes and live naked in the woods with this epiphany, I can't, I have a family and responsibilities and we have all come to the conclusion that we like our roof. But I can look at homelessness and the homeless with a new perspective because of your ideas. Please keep both types of essays coming. Perhaps you could set up a "Practical Homelessness" table of contents and a "Homeless Philosophy" table of contents. Both are important.

At 12:24 AM,  **c said...**

I do love this page. I've never been homeless (unless you want to count being snowed in at an airport for around 24 hours) but it does give an interesting perspective on things.

Your talk on parking made me think a good article would be on the selection of a vehicle. The reason I say this is because your articles made me think about one of my favourite automobiles: my ten year old Jeep Grand Cherokee and how well it would work as a mobile dwelling.

First of all, its not expensive to purchase, especially if you're employed. Most lots around here have 94-95 Jeep Grand Cherokees at around 4k. The rear seat folds down with just about enough space for someone or two to lie down comfortably. The rear windows are tinted so reduces the likelihood of being seen. With a soft pad and maybe a sleeping bag, you could be quite comfortable. There are even relatively inexpensive car camping kits which fit over the back door, which would allow you to blend in when parking in camping sites.

The jeep would also allow you to pick more remote sites for hiding out. Where I live, in Utah, even in the urban areas, you're no more than 30 minutes away from mountainous wilderness where you can be alone and secure. And since camping is common here, no one is going to think twice about a jeep with a camping kit. If you're in the LA area, I know that makes the remote areas even further away, but I

would think they are close enough to be a semi-decent option.

Plus, with the jeep, there's quite a bit of room for storage so you could literally have your house on your back. I've seen inexpensive portable toilets and shower kits which would extend the idea of the jeep as a portable house.

I'm not trying to be a jeep commercial but it seems like a practical choice for mobile living on a tight budget. The only drawback I would see is the very limited gas mileage.

At 2:03 AM,  Zen Angel said...

Just wanted to say that I am enjoying your blog quite a bit. Keep up the good work.

I was homeless twice in my life, and agree with you on the rest areas. I once lived for two months, parking nightly at a rest area called Starvation Creek. Oh, the irony.....

At 10:19 AM,  zovirl said...

Here is a second vote for an article on what kind of car to choose. I was thinking about this blog driving home the other day and decided I wouldn't want to live in my Honda Civic. The most obvious choice is a van...I assume this means a van is a bad choice. Anyway, I would be interested to read your thoughts on the topic.

At 8:19 PM,  Jeff said...

Hello, first of all I wanted to comment on what a great site you have with lots of useful information for those that either need it or will need it one day.

I had a couple of ideas. On the entertainment. Magazines and newspapers? I thought a great place to find those would be at bus stations. People reading them while waiting and tossing them as they board.

Another Idea I had is about parking. Would a used car lot work during the night, or on the days they are closed? Not sure about the logistics on that. Just a thought.

Thanks, Jeff

At 9:50 PM,  Mobile Homemaker said...

Hi Jeff,

Used car lots don't sound like a great idea to me, only because I don't like a lot of surveillance. If it is a dealer lot, it would probably be impossible due to security. If it is a for-sale-by-owner lot, I suppose it would work, but you'd have people checking out your car. That doesn't work for me. In general, parking lots have a large number of disadvantages. I always favored street parking. There are always exceptions. If there is an advantage that outweighs the risks, set aside my advice.

Your ideas for finding free papers and magazines work fine. Don't steal them from coffee shops, though, or you're likely to wear out your welcome.

At 8:52 AM,  Gudlyf said...

I dunno about your reasons for not choosing a campsite as a "home". Your reasons and tone sound more like you just don't have much experience with the subject

and put too much of your own preference into your answer, so you shrug it off to stereotypical answers. In your book, I'd rather see more research put into that aspect of homelessness because I know for a fact that there are lots of campsites close enough to civilization to get to what you need quickly. You also don't get into using a towable camper to sleep in -- not everyone who camps has to use a tent. There are also alternative fuel heaters one can use in these campers/tents instead of relying only on a fire. And campsites aren't always in the thick of woods where animals are a threat, so I guess I just don't see your explanation as very satisfying.

At 9:46 AM,  Mobile Homemaker said...

I think you are Gudlyf. I have not provided a very satisfying answer on the campsite prospect. This is because I have never been a wilderness survival type of person, so my experiences, limited as they are, with camping have been exceedingly uncomfortable.

There are a lot of experts on camping out there, and I would be playing catch up in a field that doesn't interest me much to spend a lot of effort researching this possibility. I have a lot of expertise to offer. I'll leave it to other experts to cover camping.

I really do my best to expose my bias in my writing. I am glad you can see that my bias against camping is a personal preference.

At 8:04 PM,  mattytee said...

Great information!

I have been reading all your posts and can't wait to read more. I have to say, you have a very clear writing style and I think you should pitch publishers on your book. I for one would buy it.

I noticed someone asking about a vehicle to do this in, so I had to share what I think is the ideal one: a VW camper bus. They have a bed, closet, table, and storage built in. They are cheap to buy and to maintain -- with the aid of a well-known book (called "the idiot book") you can do most of the work yourself. They get great gas mileage. Plus you are instantly the member of a community. If you broke down in a Jeep, no one would look twice. In a VW, you have help in a trice. Dig it!

At 3:13 PM,  Woolfey said...

One of the things that didn't hurt me was the older nice condition pickup we used to tow with. In a previous life I would have wanted to restore it and make it perfect.. or at least mine. When I did have to talk to the blue guys about something the conversation would get round to the truck. Running gear, and questions about older safety stuff... (my safety stuff is still in nice shape..) My wife and I were very lucky to get an older rig in really nice shape. We tried to look like we were off to a rod run or some sort of thing when we were moving a lot. My newer truck might not be so good for that Its a 1985, my old one was a 1971. We were extremely lucky with parking right up till our present situation.. Now we are separated from our freedom machine. Hopefully spring will change things.

At 7:55 AM,  monica said...

Thank you for your "how to survive" articles. This is my first time experiencing this. I own an SUV. I just checked out of a motel for one week but I will not have money for an efficiency until my unemployment kicks this week. But somehow I still feel secure and blessed that I have my SUV because with that I know that I will always have shelter. I had thought about Walmart also because it open 24hrs and