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HOW TO TRAVEL
THE WORLD
FOR FREE



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HOW TO TRAVEL THE WORLD FOR FREE

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*One Man, 150 Days,
Eleven Countries, No Money!*

MICHAEL WIGGE



Skyhorse Publishing

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ABOUT THE BOOK

My life has been quite good so far. For the past ten years I have been visiting places and people I desperately wanted to see, and on the way, I ended up going hunting with the Yanomami Indian tribe deep in the Amazon forest; a year later I found myself arguing with the Palestinian vice leader about political issues in the West Bank just before I lost a dramatic sumo fight with a sumo wrestler in Tokyo. My strategy has been easy: go on a crazy adventure, film it, and sell it to pay for the next one.

After visiting so many cities and countries, I set my sights on going to Antarctica—pretty much the most secluded and maybe the most beautiful place on Earth, and my dream to see for years. But the trip was too expensive—the flight, cruise ship, and additional expenses would easily add up to \$15,000.

So there was only one way to fulfill this rather difficult dream without inviting a financial disaster: traveling for FREE!

It took me almost a full year to plan the route, set up contacts, develop ideas how to survive without money, and get free food, free travel, and accommodations. During that year, I learned about Dumpster diving, using bartering to get what I needed, and everything there is to know about getting free rides on ships, trains, cars, and planes. I was really excited about this trip, but my family and friends definitely were not:

Neighbor: “I always like helping you, but don’t call me from Timbuktu to get you back!”

Friend: “I really appreciate your crazy antics, especially when you shook Angelina Jolie’s hand for several minutes without giving it back to her, but don’t expect her to give you food during your trip!”

Other friends: “You’re weird.”

Family: “Why haven’t you turned out to be normal and just worked for the bank and wore a suit?”

Is it really possible to travel from Berlin to Antarctica without a single cent in your pocket? Read on and find out!



EVEN BASIC NEEDS
AREN'T FREE

Berlin  Antwerp

It is the 21st of June, which means it is officially the summer solstice, and the longest day of the year. I can actually feel this all over my body. For more than three hours, I have been standing at a freeway exit trying to continue my journey toward Cologne. Thinking of the 25,000 miles I still have yet to cover, it's hard to imagine that five months from now I will actually set foot in Antarctica—*the end of the world*, as my friends say—without having a single penny in my pocket.

It may be the longest day of the year, but it also feels like the hottest one, and that, plus the heavy bag on my back, make the sweat pour down my overheated body like a nasty waterfall. The sun is laughing at me; the cars that pass by also, somehow, snicker with amusement—I'm hitchhiking with a sign on my back that reads THE END OF THE WORLD! so that probably has something to do with it. But none of this bothers me since my mind is already far, far away in Antarctica.

At some point, what I count as the 2,420th car whooshes past me. You see, I have noted that eleven cars drive past me about every minute, which totals to 2,420 cars in exactly 220 minutes—amazing how the mind can amuse itself in the heat. If one is optimistic enough to believe what *Lonely Planet* says about Germany being a hitchhiker-friendly country, then one will likely wait for as long as I have been waiting.

Discouraged and soaked with my own perspiration, my Antarctic visions completely dashed, I am just about to give up and call it a day when a red van pulls up. The driver's side window rolls down and a grumbling voice calls out, "Need a ride?"

Arndt and Marius are returning from a convention of Leftists in Berlin. I now sit in the backseat telling them about my crazy plan of reaching Antarctica without a single cent in my pocket. However, as I talk, I realize that I am in desperate need of relief—after being in the sun all day, you'd think that I would be severely dehydrated, not needing to relieve excess liquids, but my bladder is calling and Marius is kind enough to make a pit stop in my honor. I run as fast as I can to

the public toilet, only to be blocked by a gate with a sign that reads: 50 CENTS.

Before starting this trip, I had thought of all the possible scenarios that might require money and how to get around them, but I have to admit that this is one I didn't take into consideration at all. Something like this should be free anyway, shouldn't it? Desperate, I try charming the toilet attendant—not as easy a task as it may sound. I tell her that I have no money, that this is an emergency, and if she could just find it in her heart to let me pass through just this once, *just this one time*, my appreciation would be boundless.

“Get a job,” is her response.

Knowing that there is no way to convince her, I instead find a few nice bushes around the corner. When I get back to the van, I tell Arndt and Marius about my little . . . situation. They are both fired up after that Leftist convention and promptly compare my problem to that of society's class struggles. “You wouldn't find anything like this in socialism!” rants Marius. He's probably right, actually. Maybe socialism isn't so bad after all . . .

Finally, we reach the first stop on my trip: Cologne, the city in which I lived and worked for six years. From here, the plan is to travel to Belgium, where a container ship is waiting to take me across to Canada. Since the ship won't set sail for five days, I can make use of this time to visit some old friends. However, I'm not completely without ulterior motives: I'm hoping to have a free place to crash for the next few nights.

My friend Hardy lives with his girlfriend in a perfectly pleasant garden bungalow near the edge of the city, and when I ring his doorbell, I am greeted warmly and immediately offered a comfy couch to stay on—an offer I swiftly accept. As I tell him about my first day, my stomach starts to audibly growl, but Hardy's refrigerator is as empty as my stomach.

We both start wondering where we can get something to eat at this late hour. Now, luckily, some supermarkets in Cologne are still

open in the late evening, which is a simple solution if you have money. However, I'm not traveling with any whatsoever, and don't want to ask too much of Hardy's hospitality, so I have another idea: *Dumpster diving it is, then.*

A humble act of foraging, which apparently originated in the United States, Dumpster diving is new to Germany and involves getting—quite literally—down and dirty as you search for food in a supermarket's Dumpsters. The food is often perfectly edible, but isn't sellable either due to its expiration date or its not-entirely-appetizing appearance.

So I take the local train downtown, which is free for me but which still requires a ticket. (Like in many German cities, public transportation in Cologne allows students and workers with a monthly ticket to take another person along on their pass free of charge, but only after seven in the evening.) Since most stores in the city are closed by now, it will be the perfect time for my . . . shopping expedition. I set off for the largest supermarket near the city's park, almost more curious than hungry to see if Dumpster diving is possible here in Cologne.

Tiptoeing like a burglar and armed with just a flashlight and some plastic bags, I sneak around the building and stand in front of the gate by the supermarket's courtyard. From there I can see the Dumpsters, and, motivated by my growling tummy, I somehow manage to climb over the six-foot-tall fence. I flash the light into the first Dumpster and I nearly die of terror: the beam lands directly onto the face of a man.

"Hey, wait your turn!" he snaps.

I eventually learn that this man is named Peter and that he studies social work in Cologne. For years now he has been looking for food in this manner—not because of a shortage of money but because of his ideological refusal of consumption.

"*Freeganism* comes from the word *free* and means free of cost—much in the same way that veganism and vegan relate," explains Peter as he picks out his culinary treasures. "There's a great Freegan scene

here in Cologne. We meet regularly and cook together.” Peter gets by with 200 euros a month, which is mainly for health insurance. He gets his food from Dumpsters and lives in a construction trailer.

After filling his backpack, Peter lets me have my way with the Dumpster. As I fill my bags with yogurt, sausage, bread, cheese, milk, and even some gummy bears, Peter explains to me that, unlike in other countries, Dumpster diving is actually illegal in Germany. “Even garbage has an owner in this country,” he says, “so legally and technically, what we are engaged in here is good old-fashioned *theft*. A few years ago, a woman in Cologne was sentenced to do social work, all because she took yogurt from a supermarket Dumpster.”

It turns out to be a lucky night for Peter and me, meaning we don't get caught. Even Hardy is astonished when I surprise him with two plastic bags full of food.

The next day, I decide it's time to go to work. I stand in the city's busiest pedestrian area holding a rather enticing handmade sign reading: A BUTLER FOR A TRAIN TICKET. In order to make my offer more attractive, I'm dressed up as a proper English butler with a bow tie, white shirt with starched collar, button-down vest, black trousers, and white gloves, all of which I purchased from a second-hand shop (for just fifteen euros!) before leaving Berlin. Who could resist my impeccable butlership?

I expected more of a reaction—any kind of reaction—from the people of Cologne, but the residents appear to be no longer easily amused, thanks to all the hidden-camera antics and wacky street performers that have begun to take root in the city. After an hour with no success, I decide to take control of the situation and address the passersby directly.

“A train ticket to Belgium in exchange for the best butler in the world!” I confidently exclaim to an old lady who crosses my path, bowing slightly to demonstrate my charm.

“I am in no mood for a circus today!” she retorts, adding a few arm gestures for emphasis.

The embarrassing confrontations continue until I approach one of the more interesting-looking citizens of Cologne, a man I soon learn is named Harold, who is forty-nine years old, but eternally young at heart. On his suntanned skin he wears a white, open, laced-up vest tucked into tight pants, a look that is finished off neatly with a pair of snakeskin boots. His thinning blond hair is long and partly covered by a headband. He likes my idea, and for the rest of the day, books me as his personal butler.

When we arrive at his place, the first thing I see is a red Ferrari parked in front of his house—or, to put it better, in front of his property. Harold tells me that he bought the car in the nineties for 400,000 Deutschmarks (DM), the old currency of Germany. Now, I am not a car fanatic by any means, but I'm still impressed with an actual *Ferrari*.

Harold quickly thrusts a sponge and cloth into my hand saying, "Now wash the car until it's spick-and-span!" Dutifully, I start rubbing the rim to make it shine, which sends Harold into a complete panic.

"Be careful! Ferraris have been damaged from being cleaned in the wrong way! Do it gently! Never, ever on the same spot for too long!" Harold knows exactly what he wants; hopefully, I won't get sued. A butler's life must be full of incalculable risks.

Two hours later Harold takes me to his garage, which is actually a separate portion of a public parking lot. In the garage there are many, many more luxury vehicles: shiny Lamborghinis, gleaming Corvettes, majestic Cadillacs . . . am I dreaming, or have I, in fact, hooked up with the Russian Mafia?

Harold selects a Cadillac convertible from the seventies that must be at least sixteen feet long. I then chauffeur him through downtown Cologne, despite the challenge of making turns with this gigantic car. After successfully parking the Cadillac, we dine at a fancy restaurant . . . or, to be more accurate, Harold dines while I keep replenishing his wine glass. Again and again during the course of the evening, various women approach our table. Harold seems to attract a certain type of

woman—the kind who is even willing to kiss his eccentric boots for a bit of his attention.

But they look right through me. I continue pouring wine for Harold.

The remainder of my day as Harold's butler passes quite amusingly. Unfortunately, I never do find out how Harold has made his vast fortune. He tells me that he has no money, but lives only from objects of value. The twenty sports cars he has parked in his garage have already assured me of this. After finishing my duties, Harold invites me to Marbella, Spain, for the coming week, and adds a cryptic tag: "You could marry well there."

Though I'm curious to know what he means, I know it is time to press on. I politely decline his intriguing invitation and receive fifty-five euros as my pay: exactly enough money for a ticket to Antwerp, Belgium. This means that I will be able to make my free passage to Canada, something that was more difficult to figure out how to do than I had anticipated.

The European Union not only discourages but prohibits anyone's romantic notions of becoming a spontaneous sailor to get a free ride across the ocean. Insurance regulations and necessary sailor certificates pretty much make a spontaneous cargo ship ride as an unauthorized sailor very unlikely nowadays.

I know a solid man by the name of Peter Doehle whose shipping company rather enterprisingly offers a certain brand of tourists the option of traveling on a container ship. Since he considers my project quite exciting, he is allowing me to travel from Antwerp to Canada free of cost.

Before I get on the train to Belgium, I decide to save my fifty-five euros for later and don't buy a ticket. My brilliant plan is to hide in the rest-room for the entire trip. I can already visualize myself triumphantly disembarking from the train in Antwerp with the money still in my pocket, not having spent a single cent. While hiding in the toilet,

I smile and congratulate myself on my genius plan, and I hear the frantic knocking on the door—it's the conductor. I not only have to pay the normal fare but also a penalty fee to boot, meaning that I arrive in Brussels with only one euro left.

Everything up to now has been going so well, but then I tried to be too clever. As a result, I'm now stuck here in Brussels with no idea how to get to Antwerp. My backpack feels even heavier on my burdened shoulders. I start panicking but I suddenly think of a solution: I will board the next train to Antwerp and use the blind-spot trick.

Yes, the blind-spot trick.

When I board, I immediately head to the last compartment, which is only about ten by twelve feet and has only six folding seats. The bicycles are usually kept here in most of the local trains. I put my backpack in the left corner that faces the other compartments, and stand motionless in the right corner facing the same direction. Normally, the conductors only glance through the window of this compartment's door, and if they don't see anyone, they move on, not thinking to check the blind spots. Ladies and gentlemen: the blind-spot trick. I spend the rest of the journey tensely pushed up against the right corner of the compartment. Suddenly, the door opens and I panic: *busted again!* But it's not the conductor, or any sort of train official, just a waiter coming through with the coffee cart.

The young man observes me standing there scrunched up in the corner. We both stand there looking at each other for a few seconds without saying a word.

I keep looking at him. He looks right back at me. I think we're saying things with our minds, but I can't be too sure.

I nonchalantly try to act as if I'm just standing there to gaze out of the window; I even prop my chin up on my fist and manage a small smile. The young waiter pushes his cart to the other side of the compartment and proceeds to fix himself some lemonade while keeping his eyes on me—he knows exactly what's going on. I continue staring out

the window with an expression of wonder, though I'm not paying a bit of attention to the scenery.

After a few minutes, the waiter pushes the cart back out of the compartment, barely hiding a smile. I arrive in Antwerp both overjoyed by the success and utterly exhausted from holding myself in that position for almost an hour.

My next challenge is to find some food. What if I approach, say, five different shops, and simply explain to them that I am traveling to the end of the world without any money and ask if they would donate some food for my cause? How many of them will say yes? It's worth a try. So I first approach a nice café run by a young man. He thinks my adventure sounds great and offers me a coffee and a muffin. The Latin American music playing in the background only increases my anticipation for traveling throughout South America. I then go to a hotel where they let me refill my two-liter bottle without any trouble. At my next stop, a fish store, the saleswoman refuses to give me any food since her boss isn't there to make the decision. The fourth place I try is a bakery, where the employees are very generous: slices of quiche, various buns, some bread, and pastries are packed up and handed to me. The three employees have fun debating which one of them will accompany me on my trip. Finally, a fruit vendor gives me two apples. With four out of five of my requests met with success, I'm left feeling hopeful about the rest of my journey.