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About 1150 words

## **NEW ZEALAND WITHOUT MAPS**

**by**

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In 1935, Graham Greene traveled through remote Liberia with only vague maps and little idea of what he would find. Using native carriers and sketchy information, he set out on his adventure and later wrote a novel about the experience.

It seemed an appealing way to travel, so like a domesticated version of Greene, I made my travels in New Zealand a "journey without maps". Sticking out my thumb and hitchhiking, I went wherever the natives carried me. No guidebooks, only a vague idea of the noted tourist sights; my essential equipment was camping and cooking gear, warm clothing, a notebook and a camera with lots of film.

Starting in New Zealand's largest city, clean and compact Auckland, I put out my thumb on a northbound highway entry ramp. Local conventional wisdom said I would never get a lift there. However, within ten minutes I was underway with a friendly young Maori named Carl.

Carl offered a quick overview of New Zealand, and a little about his part of it. The Maoris are Pacific islanders who emigrated to New Zealand about 1,000 years ago, and named the country Aotearoa, "Land of the Long White Cloud". They are stocky, friendly people, now a numerical minority on the island.

The ride represented the essence of hitching; not only do you save money, but you get to know the people, their land, their history, their emotions. Guidebooks may try but they can not match a native guide.

In the course of that day I had only to stick my thumb out and someone would pull over and offer a lift. Even when simply strolling along, admiring the pure greens and blues of the unspoiled, lush countryside, people would stop and offer me a lift. Perhaps my 50-pound backpack gave me away.

It was beginner's luck. The next day I walked four hours in an intermittent drizzle without getting a lift. While eating a sandwich on a small rock wall, a bus to my destination pulled up. I hopped on. Sorry, Graham.

That is the big drawback of hitchhiking around New Zealand--in many places there are few people and thus fewer cars. Sometimes hours passed without a car going by.

Nonetheless, during my three months there I had dozens upon dozens of lifts; in a brand new ambulance being delivered to Christchurch from Auckland, with "Bible bashers" who pointed out passages in the Bible indicating the war with Iraq would be the start of World War III, with a salesman who offered fishing tips while we had tea at an island cafe on the trout paradise of Lake Taupo.

Veteran travelers refer to New Zealand as the "Hitchhikers' Paradise", and the exaggeration seems only slight. Since New Zealand is a beautiful place to walk, it is also an ideal place to hitch. The distances are close, the topography is diverse, the air is pure and everyone is friendly and helpful. Hitchhiking there carried no stigma; it is simply another way to get around.

Locals, whether of Pacific or European stock, will always ask about your travels and point out sights of interest along the way. Being well-traveled themselves, most Kiwis (i.e. New Zealanders) go out of their way to help other travelers. I was offered meals and overnight couch space many times along the way, and was always sent off with sincere good wishes.

Without trying to sound too wacky, there seems to be a certain "good karma" or zen thing assisting you when hitching around New Zealand. No matter how gloomy things get, you will always end up getting a lift when you need one. Just relax and enjoy the scenery.

Fellow travelers with rental cars get involved, too. Swedes, Austrians, even Americans gave me rides. (A hint -- sew your national flag on your backpack.) But at tough times the Germans were there to deliver me from a rough roadside fate.

On one of the country's most isolated roads (known to travelers as the "Hitchhikers' Graveyard") there is a desolate, 150-mile stretch through the Haast Pass where perhaps 20 people live (OK, maybe 40 people). There is little traffic, and hitchers had been known to get stuck there for days.

Sounded like a challenge. A fisherman took me the first 50 miles along and I spent the rest of the day kicking rocks along the road. Just as daylight waned, four Germans in a camper passed by as I sat wearily on a rock and carried me through the beautiful but deserted pass. I camped in a lovely spot by a river.

The next morning, still remote, I spent a couple hours helping some bicyclists repair one of their bikes, but lost a lot of travel time myself. When you are in the middle of nowhere in New Zealand, you are really in the middle of nowhere.

But not to worry. Soon another carload of Germans passed by and shoe-horned me in for the afternoon, getting me out of the graveyard run.

My favorite ride of all, though, came a few days later. It was late afternoon and I was plodding along in the middle of nowhere - just me and hundreds of New Zealand's famous sheep, with green pastures ascending into low mountains, and streams flowing in ribbons all around. Searching for a good place to pitch the tent, I heard a vehicle approaching on the winding, hilly road.

Hearing a vehicle while hitching is perhaps the traveler's equivalent to a blind date - it holds promise but you won't know for sure until you see it.

A silvery milk tanker pulled up and I climbed up and in. The driver was quiet at first but gradually he opened up and spoke with considerable knowledge about the region. Along the way we stopped at several small dairy farms well off the highway to pick up the day's milk. We talked with the folks who represent the backbone of rural New Zealand, and I had a rare glimpse into an isolated but congenial part of New Zealand's culture.

My advice, then, for hitching in New Zealand is as follows. If you don't get a lift while standing, start walking. Drivers are much more likely to stop if they see you walking. In the remote areas (plenty of them around) you

will get lifts, but it might take a while. Women are relatively safe but should go with a partner. Get a sturdy pair of hiking boots and a good raincoat -- it rains all the time. For those on a budget, economy accommodations and campgrounds are abundant and easy to find.

Take a small map but be assured New Zealand is much better marked than 1935 Liberia. Be prepared to meet generous, friendly people and see incredible--no, staggeringly beautiful scenery. Finally, don't worry about the extra weight and expense of a guide book. Your thumb and the natives will always point you in the right direction.

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