

How to Live in Your Car

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...

Part 1 of 7:

At the Start



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:

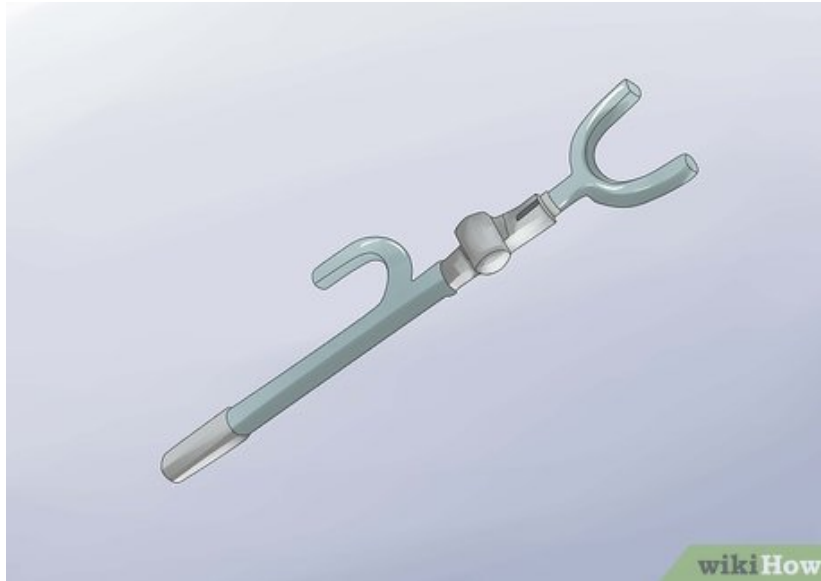
1. Rent a post office box or a Private Mailbox (PMB). Although PMBs tend to be more expensive, you can receive packages at them and some services will let you use an address format which makes it appear to be an apartment; this can be useful when someone requires a physical address.
2. Sign up for a 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.
3. Renew any paperwork that will require an address to process soon.
4. Put valuables in a safe deposit box at a bank.
5. 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 of 7:

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]

1. 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]
2. 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.
3. 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]
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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]
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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 some one tapping on your car.

Part 3 of 7:

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.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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]
4. 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).
5. 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.

6. 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]
7. 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.
8. 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 of 7:

Staying Under the Radar



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

1. Rotate among several parking locations to avoid getting noticed.
2. When you move around in the parked car, move slowly to avoid rocking the car.
3. When it's sunny in the daytime, use a sunshade for the windshield.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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 of 7:

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.

1. 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.
2. 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.

1. 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.
2. 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.



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.

5.



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

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 of 7:

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 of 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.

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