**Hitchhiking in Italy: The Worst Travel Decision I’ve Ever Made (Shocker, I know!)**

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<https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/the-worst-travel-decision-ive-ever-made-hitchhiking-92844036472.html>

There I was, age 19, exactly 24 hours after setting out on a three-month tour of Europe, walking along the narrow shoulder of a busy freeway on the outskirts of Naples — then considered the most dangerous major city in Western Europe — bent under the weight of my backpack and the near-paralyzing fear that I would not live to see the sunrise. It was the middle of the night. My friend Angie and I had just been unceremoniously dumped from the cab of a transport truck onto the side of a busy exit ramp and left to fend for ourselves.

From the start, it had been one of those episodes that, if it had gone another way, would have been the sort of headline-making story fellow travelers shake their heads at in an “obviously, this is what happens when you’re an idiot” way and parents brandish as a dire warning to children setting out to travel for the first time.

In my own defense, the one good thing I can say about the worst travel day of my life is that I got all of my stupid out in 24 hours.

It was May 1994, and after living and working in England for six months on a [working holiday visa](http://www.visabureau.com/uk/youth-mobility.aspx?s_cid=29000121&r_url=http://www.seasonworkers.com/workpermitsandvisas/unitedkingdom/workingholidayvisa.aspx), my friend Angie and I decided to spend the summer backpacking around Western Europe. We had in our possession overly stuffed backpacks, one tent, and a copy of Lonely Planet’s guide to Western Europe (the first edition having just been released a few months earlier).

We planned to give new meaning to its “on a shoestring” tagline with about $1,500 in traveler’s checks between us, plus one emergency credit card each with an individual spending limit of $1,000. Instead of planning out a route, we opted to meet at [Gatwick](http://www.gatwickairport.com/) airport, find the cheapest flight, and buy a one-way ticket, which, after 36 hours of hanging out in the terminal, is exactly what we did — to Corfu, Greece.

It was one of those unbelievably cheap package deals that are popular in England; in addition to the flight, the price included our accommodations for a week. Food and drink were extra, the expectation being that lodgers would imbibe on the premises at inflated prices and make up for the room price. Suffice it to say, our landlord was woefully disappointed. Having spent the plane ride hammering out a three-month financial plan that would allow us to get by on a $25/day budget, we spent the week subsisting on loaves of bread and hunks of cheese from the supermarket, along with oversized bottles of wine that cost less than a dollar (at age 19, my knowledge of wine mainly consisted of knowing it contained alcohol). By day three, our host refused to acknowledge our presence.

It was this determination to adhere to our budget that led us to take the overnight ferry from Corfu to Bari, Italy, and opt to hitchhike to Naples instead of training it. At the time, Naples was notorious for its high crime rate, and even though Lonely Planet had differentiated itself from other more mainstream travel guides with its knack for giving practical, street-smart counsel, we felt ourselves savvy enough travelers that its wisdom need not apply to us. Instead, we ignored its prescient advice that hitchhiking in southern Italy was not a smart plan, especially for women, particularly blondes. Angie had long blond hair that hung in ringlets down to her waist.

After an eight-hour ferry ride — during which we “slept” bundled up against the freezing cold on the deck, not wanting to spend the extra cash on a bunk or a seat — we disembarked in the port town of Bari and made our way through the sunny, postcard-perfect town square, where men were drinking espresso. Taking the advice of a sweet, rather confused young Italian man in a suit with stumbling English, we walked a mile out to the freeway that led to Naples, stuck out our thumbs, and were promptly picked up by two young men in T-shirts and jeans, driving a small, two-door car that reeked of their cologne. Looking harmless enough, they spoke no English but merely smiled and nodded as they swiftly drove us off to … I have no idea. But it was not Naples, which was a three-hour drive across the ankle of the Italian “boot.” Or even in that direction. It was into a field somewhere, where they got out of the car, unzipped their pants, and turned to us with greedy grins, making gestures about what they wanted us to do that needed no translation.

Fear not, reader. Either they were more hopeful than serious, or Angie and I, with our unwieldy backpacks and unwashed faces, made a more fearsome duo than we were aware of, because in short order we managed to get both ourselves and our packs out of the car with great speed and no real interference. Surmising from our panicked expressions that we were not, in fact, interested in the kind of ride they were, they got back in the car without a glance in our direction and drove off, leaving us to wander down a dirt road until we eventually encountered a gas station.

You might think this experience alone would have been enough to send us, two suburban teenagers with scant travel experience between us, back to Bari in search of a train ticket. But no — as it turned out, we had not gotten all our stupid out yet. Instead, after hanging out on the edges of the gas station for an hour or so, calmed by the bright Mediterranean sun and cold bottles of Coke, we accepted the offer of a seemingly nice-looking truck driver who assured us that he would take us swiftly and directly to Naples. He did not. Instead, he stopped on the side of the highway every 30 minutes, professing that his partner behind us, whom he was constantly radioing, was having some sort of mechanical issue, and would perhaps one of us like to get out and ride with him instead? We would not. Nevertheless, each time we stopped, the partner, rail thin with curly hair and a greasy beard, would come up to the door and plead his case through the window with smiles and hand gestures. We stayed put. The hours ticked by. Angie tied her hair up and stuffed it carefully under a baseball cap.

The road signs on the freeway were all in Italian. Were we going to Naples? We were assured that we were. We were assured that we were almost there. With every increasingly frequent stop, the knot in our stomachs grew even tighter. At one point, we held hands in a clumsy effort to convince the driver that we were lesbians and not interested. Finally, finally, this last point sunk in, and he began to take on a cold, dismissive tone. By now we’d reached the outskirts of Naples, and quite suddenly he stopped alongside the divider of an exit ramp, oblivious to the cars zooming by, angrily blaring their horns. We were given one last option: get out on the corner of this busy exit ramp in the dark — it was after midnight — in a city where driving laws were famously optional, or continue on to some sort of trucker park an hour beyond the city, where we could spend the night in the cab. There was room for one of us in the other cab, we were assured. It would be quite safe. We got out.

Things are a bit of a blur after that. Cars hurtled by us as we trudged along a narrow shoulder not more than six feet wide. On and on we walked, wondering which exit we should take and whether it would lead us to a safe haven or a crime-filled neighborhood run by the gangs we had been warned against.

No one slowed to pick us up, including any number of police cars that zipped by. I don’t know how long we walked. I only know that we did so in silence and that I was consumed by the thought that not a single person we knew had any idea where we were, and we had no way to tell them. In hindsight, from the cozy vantage point of our über-connected world, this always strikes me as the strangest aspect of the whole day. Eventually, shortly after dawn, we found a gas station that was open. After some pathetic attempts at directions and because we could see no other way out, we got in yet another car. In a third-time’s-the-charm sort of way, this one was driven by a priest who quickly dropped us off at the main hostel in town, where we hovered close to the front entrance in a state of mild shock. The next day, we bought train tickets to Rome and used our emergency credit cards to purchase three-month Eurail passes — which in those days allowed unrestricted access to all trains, including overnight rides, across pre-EU Europe, for $795. If this is the part of the story that brings tears to your eyes, I will understand.

I would like to tell you that this was the last time I ever made a stupid decision while traveling; it was not. It was, however, the stupidest thing I’ve ever done on the road and the last truly stupid thing I did on that particular trip, probably because it was the sort of extended close call that leaves you shaky and shamefully grateful, instead of cocky and confident (even now, writing this down gives me a minor stomachache). Thereafter, Angie and I quickly developed a reputation among our rotating series of travel companions for possessing admirable street sense and of always walking like we knew where we were going. I have not hitchhiked since.